



South Africa at the Summit

Golf in South Africa is going through some turbulent times; this latest recession hitting them much earlier and harder than here in Europe. Following the 2009 South African Golf Summit at Fancourt back in April, Kevin Marks visited the Pezula Golf Estate to speak with Course Superintendent Danny Maritz.



Pezula Championship Golf Course covers some 254 hectares of pristine Southern Cape landscape on the cliff-tops at Knysna, overlooking the Knysna Lagoon and the Indian Ocean. The award-winning 18-hole, par 72 course was designed by David Dale and Ronald Fream of GolfPlan USA, and rates amongst the best and the most scenic golf courses in the world. In 2001, just a few months after it opened, the Course was awarded Best New Golf Course in South Africa and in February 2005 Complete Golfer rated it a Five Star Golf Experience.

The clubhouse facilities are in keeping with the overall five star experience and includes an elevated terrace with views to the Indian Ocean, restaurant and golf shop, while adjacent is a short game practice area, driving range and putting green.

The club has close to 500 members of whom 400 are non-resident with many from Britain, Germany and the US, who live in the region for 2-3 months a year. In total around 25,000 rounds are played a year, but

it's the Christmas and New Year holidays that are by far and away the busiest with 80% of the total rounds played during this period.

Danny Maritz is the managing director of TurfWorks, the turf maintenance contracting company responsible for the course at Pezula, a contract which the company has had for the past two years. Previous to this, he was director of golf course maintenance for 10 years at Turftech, a grounds care company based in Johannesburg.

His team, which by European standards is still large, at 30 strong, has been reduced by 14 from a year ago; a reflection of the economic situation. Rory Hopper is his first assistant and he has a head mechanic with two assistants, working from a 1,800 m² workshop, where all servicing and repair work is undertaken.

"We were the first tee to green cool season grass course in the country," he said, "when the course was constructed 11 years ago. The tees and greens are bents and the fairways are a rye/fescue mix. I know I'm biased, but the

views here are awesome; you've got ocean, mountains and the fynbos (the natural shrubland or heathland vegetation of the region); it's one of those courses where to play it once is not enough.

"From an environmental standpoint we are very limited in how we can manage the fynbos. One of the conditions of the planning consent is that we are prevented from cutting it unless it is encroaching onto the course. We are obliged to remove any invasive species, but are extremely limited when it comes to making changes to the course.

"Because of all this natural vegetation we also have plenty of wildlife and some quite large game including Grey Buck, Bush Buck, baboons and Caracal, a large wild cat. We also have one of the deadliest snakes in South Africa, the Puff Adder, so that tends to stop golfers charging into the fynbos to retrieve balls!

"We've just experienced the driest summer ever; from January to March we had just 102mm of rain compared to an average of 260mm. The Knysna river hasn't dried up for 81 years, but it did this year.

"You would expect that this would give us huge problems, especially as we don't have access to any municipal water supply. However, we've overcome this by building our own water recycling plant at the civic council's sewage farm down in Knysna and pump 1.2 million litres of water a day to irrigate the course."

When you look in the sheds at the greenkeeping facility, you immediately see an eclectic mix of equipment, but the mowing equipment is mainly orange in colour. Danny has a long association with Jacobsen equipment and the South African distributor, CSE.

"We run two LF3400 fairway mowers and they have been a revelation," he said, "they've been totally reliable and we've had no issues in the two years we've been using them. The quality of cut is excellent and no downtime.

"We hand cut the greens whenever possible and use Eclipse 122s; I've got eight of them and they were the very first off the Jacobsen production line. They feature electric reel drive and, now that we're over the teething issues, they are performing really well.

"Our trim and tees mowers are Tri-Kings. At TurfTech I used run 12 of them and they are very good machines, especially for banks as

they have three-wheel drive; the cut is excellent and I love them.

Danny has some interesting views on golf in general and in South Africa in particular. Sitting in his office, chatting over a cup of coffee after we'd toured the course he said,

"The credit crunch, recession or however you want to describe it is having a real impact here in South Africa. We simply have to continue to do a good job with less money and that has meant less staff. We've also cut back on fertilizers and chemicals and any other non-essential expenses. Being a resort course we have exceptionally high standards and have always cut our fairways every day. However, now economic circumstances dictate, and we are mowing every second day, with no discernable difference. 75% of excellence is now acceptable. And we haven't seen any appreciable difference to the quality of the course as yet, but it's going to be a real challenge.

"Maintaining the presentation standards is our major issue. I think it all started with the US Masters, many years ago. Today, when the golfer goes to a course he expects to play Augusta, or something close to it. They expect the greens to be striped and running at 12.5 on the stimp meter and the fairways at 8 or 9.

"And that presents a major problem. Your average golfer might expect this level of presentation, but he won't actually be able to cope with the greens, so he probably won't have an enjoyable experience. It's a real dilemma."

This was one of the themes raised at the Fancourt Golf Summit by Frank Thomas, a former technical director of the USGA and inventor of the graphite shaft. From his research, which included a 53-question survey returned by 18,400 golfers, it concluded that courses are too long and too difficult for the average golfer. Another interesting statistic was that 95% of all courses are designed for just 0.55% of the golfing population, i.e. the 'Scratch' golfer. In other words, over 99% of all golfers across the globe will probably have an unenjoyable round of golf because courses are designed for a massive minority!

An example of this occurred, surprisingly, at the Fancourt Summit where delegates had the opportunity to play the Links course at the resort. Over 30 competitors went round and a few thought it was awesome, but the rest wouldn't play it again. Some



people lost 12 golf balls!

In contrast, The River Club at Sandton, Johannesburg, is mowed wall to wall, under trees, the rough is short, you can always find your ball and the members there enjoy their golf.

Danny is not at all enamored with the ranking of golf courses and feels that there are some gaping holes in the system.

"One of the major issues we have here in South Africa, and especially down here on the Garden Route, is that everyone wants to be ranked No 1. You can ask any greenkeeper or superintendent and they'll all say the same. However, the whole ranking system is a total bluff, unless every adjudicator plays every course, and that doesn't happen.

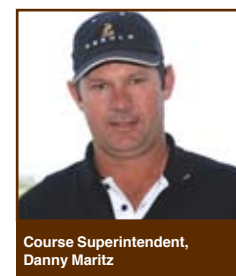
"I'm a member at a local club, which is a lovely course, but it's definitely not up to the standard of Pezula. It's ranked 15th and we're ranked at 24. They are consistently ranked in the top 30 when it comes to conditioning and we're not even in the top 50.

"What worries me is how many superintendents have lost their

jobs because of the rankings; it's playing with people's jobs. The problem is it's all subjective and there appears to be no criteria for the judging.

"What we need down here is a joined up marketing campaign to encourage the world's golfers to come. Pinnacle Point, Oubaai, Simola and Mossel Bay are all trying to get their act together and provide a 'Pay & Play' network. With the Soccer World Cup here in 2010 we have a great opportunity to showcase our facilities and it's an opportunity that we mustn't miss."

Having toured the course, with its views of mountains and ocean, it's not surprising that this is a popular and successful golf resort. The course is the centerpiece and even at '75% of excellence' it was in magnificent condition. The challenge now for Pezula and for golf in South Africa is to draw golfers in from Europe and further afield. With the Soccer World Cup in 2010 they have the perfect opportunity to showcase their product; like Danny says it's an opportunity they cannot afford to miss.



Course Superintendent,
Danny Maritz