

# American

How did TPC Scottsdale prepare for the biggest spectator golf event in the world last month? BIGGA member Jason Brooks sent off his CV and found himself on the support team for the Phoenix Open in Arizona – here he describes a fascinating few months on both a personal and professional level



# dream

**I've been Assistant Head Greenkeeper at Torquay Golf Club for eight years, and through BIGGA I have met great friends from across the UK and overseas who share my passion for the profession.**

I've been on the support teams at The Open Championship and the PGA Championship - and these occasions left me wanting more, to experience an extended period of tournament preparation somewhere special. I decided I was going to make a real effort to secure a position somewhere that would add to my professional skills and open new doors for me in my career.

## The Dream Begins

My Greens Chairman was very supportive, so I sent my CV to a host of people including Carl Roth, Senior Vice President of Agronomy for the PGA Tour. He got me in touch with Jeff Plotts, Director of Golf Course Maintenance at TPC Scottsdale. We had a great chat, he confirmed he would like me to spend five months of the winter there and the dream of joining the team at the Waste Management Phoenix Open was becoming reality.

Due to visa difficulties I contacted Mike O'Keeffe who told me all about the Ohio State University (OSU) programme, and me joining this world-famous programme would allow him to complete my move to Scottsdale as an intern. Besides helping me out with the highly complex visa application process, he explained other aspects such as salary and taxes.

## Good Morning Scottsdale

There are two courses at TPC Scottsdale, the Stadium course (which has held the Phoenix Open since 1987) and the Champions course. Both have an incredible 45,000 rounds played annually. The summer temperatures are brutal, with average highs of over 40C.

The entire course is Bermuda grass until the start of October when the huge overseeding process begins to turn the course from warm season grasses to cool season grasses for the milder winter. It is a huge undertaking - the course is closed for two weeks during which the Bermuda will be verticut, scalped then the debris collected before the overseeding can begin. Apart from the greens a perennial rye grass/fine fescue 80/20 mix is used for all the other areas. The

greens mix is velvet bent, chewings fescue and poa trivialis.

This two week window is pretty small when you consider that the golfers will be out playing on the newly germinated grass, the same grass that has to be tournament standard just over 12 weeks later. The grass seed alone costs over £130,000. Factor in extra hours for staff, no playing revenue for a fortnight, a £350,000 per year irrigation water cost and numerous fertiliser applications and it's a massive outlay – but it should ensure top quality playing conditions all year round.

They use reclaimed water to irrigate both courses, this has a high sodium content so they apply calcite calcium regularly prior to irrigating to flush the build up of the sodium content out of the soil. The greens, tees and approaches are all handmowed. Topdressing is applied by pedestrian fertiliser spreaders as well as more overseeding on the greens on a weekly basis through December to help firm up and improve the surfaces.

The Bermuda grass areas not overseeded are sprayed with Diquat, a contact herbicide, this helps suppress any further growth and gives it a striking colour contrast against the dark green rye grass. All the tee and bunker surrounds are dormant Bermuda which stands out so well on television.

It is a difficult facility to manage as essentially each year there are two grow-in periods, and new grass is immediately in play following each transition. Add in the largest spectator golf event in the world held at the coldest point in the year when growth has slowed dramatically - it's enough to give the superintendents nightmares. Most golf facilities will have a down time at some point of the year but not TPC Scottsdale.

Winter weather is generally good - dry and warm during the day - however as it is a desert region temperatures plummet at night and frosts are very common. Strangely, in the morning the course can be free of any frost but as the sun starts to rise the warm air pushes the cold air down to create a frost. It happened a few times and we would have to stop mowing and wait until the sun burned it off.

Over half a million spectators pour through the gates during the tournament, and 20,000 each day of these will be at the famous 16th hole. It definitely beats setting up your course for the monthly stableford!



The entire course is Bermuda grass until the start of October when the huge overseeding process begins to turn the course from warm season grasses to cool season grasses for the milder winter

**Wet Wet Wet**

As the tournament loomed the height of cuts were gradually lowered apart from the rough which remained at three inches. The large desert areas had to be edged and more decomposed granite used where needed.

The pruning of bushes, shrubs and trees were carried out and player walkways were renovated and defined. I was part of a team checking bunker depths were consistent with four inches in the base and two inches on the slopes. It's a couple of weeks' work as there are 79 bunkers.

We gave the 16th special attention as it has so much media focus on it during the week. A local landscaping team was brought in to assist in renovating all the desert area between the tees and the green, adding new cacti and desert shrubs where needed.

Unfortunately we then saw record low temperatures and several frosts which really held back any growth. Then we had some of the hottest temperatures on record which meant hand watering was needed on fairways to treat hot spots, it was a balancing act due to the fact that Brandon Reese – the Course Superintendent - wanted the course to play firm and fast. As little water as possible was used as well as heavy rolling with a road roller to firm up the fairways, approaches and greens.

All was progressing well until we had nearly three inches of rain in two days before the tournament,



which is a lot by anyone's standards especially considering the average rainfall for the year is eight inches. We spent a 12 hour day on the Sunday repairing damage from the rain, there was debris everywhere and water was needing to be pumped away from any low lying areas. It had to be in good shape for Monday for a Pro Am.

## The Action Begins

My jobs for the week were mowing greens in the morning then cutting fairways in the evenings. In total we had about 65 staff working during tournament week, in our pre-tournament meeting we were told it can get a little crazy during the week as there will be a large crowd and most will be drunk!

The course was ready for the Monday Pro Am although very wet, but the weather forecast for the big week was good. The height of cuts were greens 2.875mm, tees, approaches and fairways 10mm,

## “The coliseum on the 16th is certainly different with unbelievable crowd noise and Mexican waves”

intermediate rough 1.25 inches and rough three inches. Due to the large numbers of spectators we received a police escort to the course in the afternoons from our compound which was surreal – spectators were filming us on their mobiles.

Another frost on Thursday meant start times were put back by an hour, and some rounds could not be completed as it was too dark. This delayed us getting out on the course for the evening jobs and meant more cutting in the dark. Spotters were posted at any hole that a player had marked their ball to make sure that the marker was replaced at the same spot should any mowing need to be done. Any more frost delays could have meant the tournament continuing into Monday which would have been a real headache for everyone.

Friday fortunately had no frost and play started on time with the remaining 1st rounds completed before the 2nd round started. A new

record Friday attendance was registered of 121,901. Fantastic weather and local favourite Phil Mickelson leading the tournament then swelled numbers to a new record Saturday attendance of 179,022. Cooler weather and a clash with the Superbowl on Sunday lowered crowd numbers to 58,791 giving a massive overall total of 525,821. Mickelson won despite a late challenge from Brandt Snedeker.

We did have one brief opportunity to sit in the coliseum on the 16th for the remainder of the day; it certainly is different with unbelievable crowd noise and Mexican waves!

The experience was amazing, I wish I had considered going through the OSU programme before. I really would recommend it to greenkeepers wanting to train at a top course and add important experience to their CV. If you're interested contact Mike O'Keeffe at [okeeffe.1@osu.edu](mailto:okeeffe.1@osu.edu)

I was also lucky enough to receive a scholarship from Syngenta which covered health insurance and other fees. This was a reward for my efforts, and I was very honoured to be one of the five selected for it.

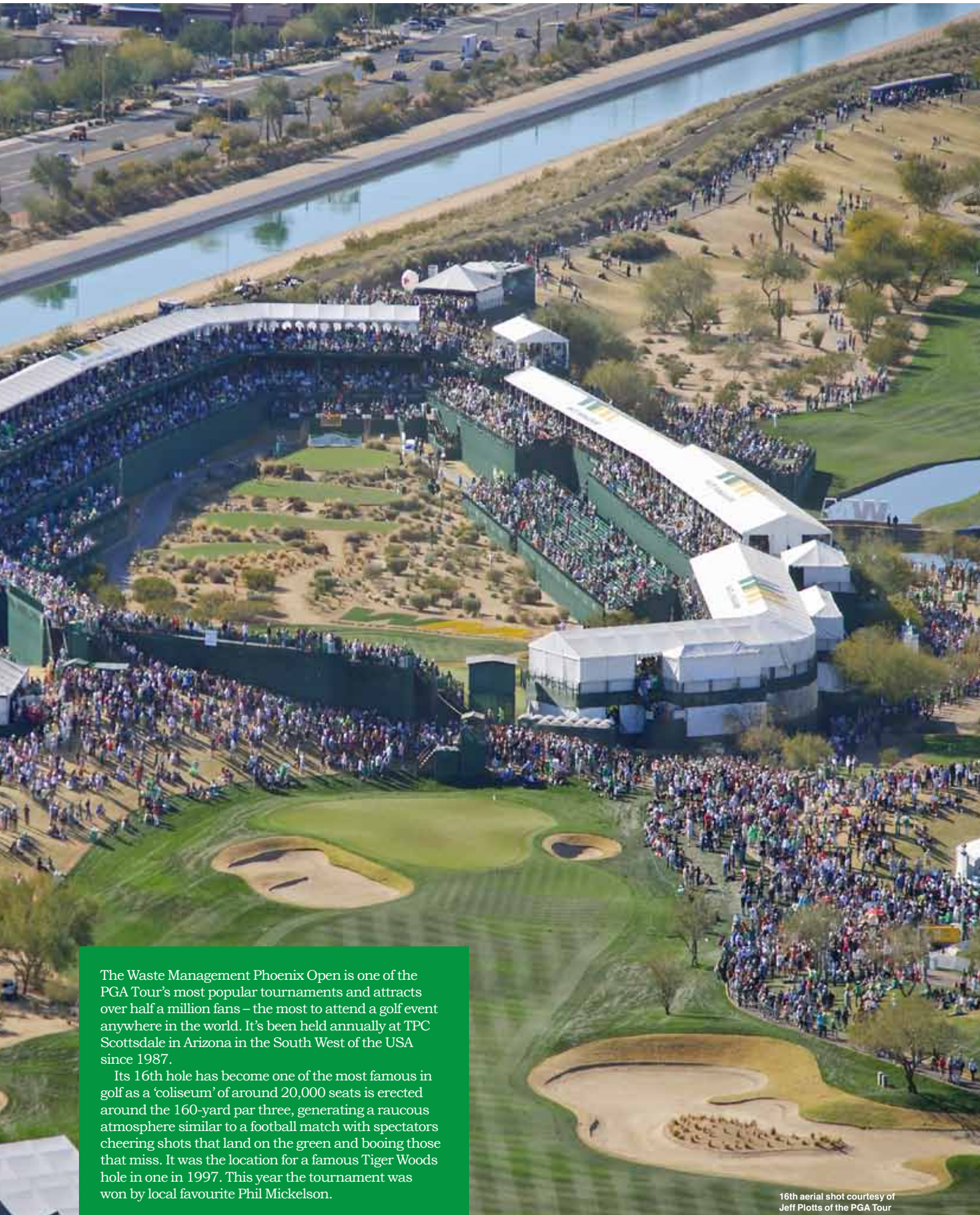
I have to thank my family Anna, Callun and Katie, who let me sacrifice my time away from them in order to fulfil an ambition. Also thank you to Mik Wells, Eddie Adams, Cal Roth, Jeff Plotts, Mike O'Keeffe and Torquay Golf Club and to Brandon and his team for making me so welcome at TPC Scottsdale.

It truly was the experience of a lifetime, all arising from sending a few emails.



The stand at the 16th





The Waste Management Phoenix Open is one of the PGA Tour's most popular tournaments and attracts over half a million fans – the most to attend a golf event anywhere in the world. It's been held annually at TPC Scottsdale in Arizona in the South West of the USA since 1987.

Its 16th hole has become one of the most famous in golf as a 'coliseum' of around 20,000 seats is erected around the 160-yard par three, generating a raucous atmosphere similar to a football match with spectators cheering shots that land on the green and booing those that miss. It was the location for a famous Tiger Woods hole in one in 1997. This year the tournament was won by local favourite Phil Mickelson.

16th aerial shot courtesy of Jeff Plotts of the PGA Tour