
WORKING “DOWN UNDER”

By Wayne G. Horman

In the middle of February, I was asked to go to Australia and work with new Scotts distributors. The distributors were not familiar with the Scotts product line, and it was my responsibility to work with some of their sales representatives.

What a fantastic experience, working in a distant country and calling on turfgrass managers. The turfgrass managers were golf course superintendents, greenkeepers for bowling greens, and groundskeepers for ovals (athletic fields).

The only thing I knew about Australia is what I saw in Crocodile Dundee movies, which isn't a whole lot! So I got the books out and located Australia on the world atlas. Most of the other information I received about Australia came from people who had visited there previously. The general consensus was that Australia was absolutely beautiful.

Australia

First of all, some general information on the country is in order. Australia is about the size of the United States, but it only has six states and a population of just under 18 million. Most of the population is located on the east coast in the cities of Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. There are about 1,100 golf courses in all of Australia.

I spent four days in Sydney, which is located in the state of New South Wales. Sydney is the largest city in Australia, and the climate is somewhat like northern Florida, with some light frosts during the winter months.

Grasses of Australia

The golf courses in the area have bentgrass/*Poa annua* greens and Bermudagrass (or what they call Coochgrass) fairways. Some of the older golf courses have Kikuyugrass mixed in with Coochgrass. Kikuyugrass is a low growing, aggressive perennial that spreads by leafy, very thick creeping rhizomes and stolons. Kikuyugrass doesn't

require much fertilizer; in fact, it turns yellow when fertilized. It isn't a very attractive grass variety for high maintenance situations.

They do a lot of overseeding with ryegrass and some *Poa trivialis* in the fall. Remember, their fall takes place at the same time as our spring.

Golf Courses in Queensland

I spent almost two weeks in Brisbane, Queensland. Brisbane is located about 1 1/2 hours north (by plane) of Sydney and is closer to the equator. The weather is like southern Florida, and frosts are very rare. The state of Queensland is considered more of a vacation/resort area of Australia.

Queensland is a huge state. The Great Barrier Reef is located about 1,100 miles north of Brisbane, yet it is still in Queensland.

The primary grass variety on greens is 328 Bermudagrass. There are about nine or ten high profile golf courses that have bentgrass greens. It was very evident the bentgrass didn't do very well this past summer. Almost all of the courses had lost turf on greens due to high temperatures

and humidity. The idea of using bentgrass in this area doesn't seem to be practical. Most of the fairways in the area had improved varieties of Bermuda.

In general, the golf courses in the Brisbane area were some of the best in Australia. The vacation spots along the ocean are the Sunshine Coast and the Gold Coast. They both have a large number of resort golf courses that cater to vacationers from the Pacific Rim and southern Australia.

Some of the most noticeable differences between the turfgrass industry in Australia and the United States are the expectations of the golfers. I didn't visit a golf course that mowed their fairways everyday. Not one of the golf course superintendents I visited mentioned golfer concerns with green speed.

It is important to note that golfing in Australia is considerably cheaper than it is here. The higher profile resort courses charge in the \$75 range, which is only \$55 in US dollars. The private courses charge from \$700 to \$5,000 Australian dollars per year, but nowhere near what it costs here.



Mt Coulum GC, near the Sunshine Coast, the 2nd largest rock in the southern hemisphere.

Maintenance

The reduced maintenance is directly related to the number of workers, or I should say lack of workers. The highest profile 18-hole courses had only eight to ten employees, including the golf courses superintendent. They don't have any seasonal employees, since they don't really have the multiple seasons.

Almost the entire Australian labor force takes what they call a "holiday" at some point in time during the year. This holiday lasts an entire month, and sounds great for employees.

Overseeing isn't as popular in Queensland since the Bermuda doesn't go completely dormant. In the fall, they do renovation work on greens, but it mostly involves aerification and preparation of greens for the slow growing period of winter.

Superintendents have to deal with some of the same problems we deal with here in the U.S. Black layer is a growing problem in the area since most courses use effluent water for irrigation, and a large number of these courses have USGA specification putting greens. Other diseases that are most common are pythium and spring dead spot.

The issue of increasing beneficial microbial activity in sand greens isn't limited to Wisconsin. There are a number of wonder products available to purchase in Australia as well.

In Australia, kangaroos are as numerous as deer are in Wisconsin. They are wonderful to look at, but are a nuisance on the golf course. Automobiles and trucks are equipped with Roobars to buffer the impact between auto and kangaroos on the highway. Seeing kangaroos and koalas on golf courses did provide a real thrill.

Snakes are a different story though. Seventeen of the top twenty most venomous snakes in the world are located in Australia. Fortunately, I didn't get up close and personal with any of these, but a man was bitten by one when I was there and died a few days later. I might have mentioned this a bit too much while visiting superintendents as many of them were very anxious to try and find some for me. It must be tough to mow a fairway with a ten foot snake in the middle of it.

The equipment available to the golf course superintendents was the same as here. The top golf courses
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The maintenance complex at the Hope Island GC Resort. The superintendent's office and shop are on the left, and storage facility on right.



Reconstruction of a green at Southport CC on the Gold Coast south of Brisbane. The grass type is 328 Bermuda which is commonly used on greens in the region. The man with the white hat is the green committee chairman!



This Kubota is set up to do almost everything at the Pacific Golf Club.

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had all the current equipment. There appeared to be more John Deere equipment than other brands. However, it costs a whole lot more to buy a piece of equipment in Australia; in some cases it is almost double what it is here.

Few universities offer turfgrass degrees. A small number offer agricultural degrees, but only one or two in all of Australia offer anything related to turfgrass.

The technical schools offer formal training programs in greenkeeping

for bowling greens, athletic fields/ovals, cricket fields and golf courses. Schooling takes about three to four years, with students attending in a couple of six week intervals every year. After their schooling is completed, they are required to fulfill a two or three year apprenticeship in their specific turfgrass field of interest.

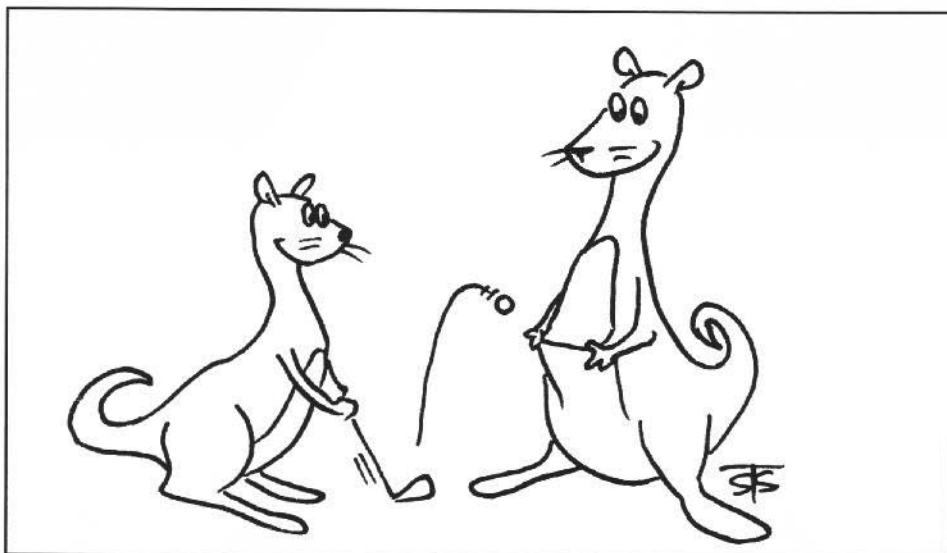
The turfgrass research we take for granted here doesn't exist there. Superintendents don't have the opportunity of attending seminars on turfgrass management. Most of the

information they get is from research done here or from our turfgrass magazines.

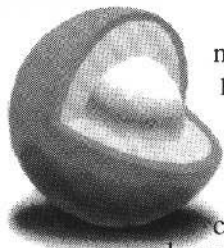
The toughest part in visiting with superintendents was determining how much nitrogen or other nutrients they use during a season. Since they use the metric system, I have to convert everything into our system of measurement. It is like learning a whole new language. One pound of nitrogen per thousand square feet is equal to five grams per meter squared. On fairways, some golf course superintendents use acreages and some use hectares as their measurement. Think about it: if you are playing golf, there isn't a 150 yard marker.

Home in a Day

The worst part of traveling to Australia was the trip there and the one returning home. Jetlag was a new experience for me. The twenty-six hours it took to get to Australia was a bit too much to handle. The return trip back didn't take as long, but crossing the International Dateline does take its toll. I saw the sunrise twice on the same day. I departed on a Thursday at 1:00 p.m. and arrived on Thursday again, but at 4:00 p.m.! 🍷



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