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Overcoming Super Challenges

Jeff Austen, superintendent at El Caballo Golf Course for the past eight years, is a young, award-winning professional with plenty of work on his plate.

The El Caballo course is an 18-hole layout about 60km east of Perth, in the heart of some of the harshest and most drought-affected territory in Australia. The landscape is severe and hostile — a far cry from the more manageable terrain of Royal Perth Golf Club where Austen served his apprenticeship from 1986–1991.



Built on the side and top of a hill in the Darling Ranges, El Caballo must withstand temperatures ranging from 47 C in summer to -3 C in winter; cold snaps in 2001 produced 48 frosts.

This unique and forbidding course is characterised by 3kms of open rock drains, 12 lakes, two storage dams and 10 effluent treatment ponds, all clustered within a high-salt area that requires constant attention. About half of the water features are currently bone dry. Despite the obvious climatic and environmental hurdles facing him, Austen has somehow managed to create a course that is not only playable, but which also offers golfers the prospect of enjoying challenging golf in healthy surrounds for many years to come.

The uniqueness of the course rests squarely on its exceptional location.

“The golf course was originally built to cater for the discharge of effluent water from two sheep and cattle abattoirs (now closed),” Austen explains. “The water had high levels of salts and nutrients and proved to be very damaging to the original irrigation system. With the golf course being built on a rocky laterite and clay, this combination proved to be devastating on the local fauna and flora.”

Austen’s solution was to install sub-surface air injection units which reduced water temperatures from 30+ C to 22 C within a week.

These days the course is cleaner and more manageable than ever before. Tees of Windsor Green Couch abut fairways decked with Greenless Park Couch and Saltene (a salt tolerant variety harvested from a local creek). Two greens varieties, Saltene and Santa Anna Couch, are used according to their respective salt and frost tolerances.

The Saltene greens are cored annually, though Austen has found that he “would prefer to mini-tine every 6 weeks during the growing season if I had the staff.”

“The Santa Anna greens are scarified heavily during the growing season to reduce thatch, as it appears the salt tends to do more damage to the playing surface when thatchy.

“Fairways have only been scarified once since construction, again because of the saline conditions and the clay soil the turf grows in. I’ve found the use of a verti-drain has been extremely useful in promoting growth and reducing compaction.”

Tees, last renovated years ago, are tended as required.

Austen and his staff of five cut the greens six times per week during the growing season. Fairways and tees are mown once per week as the moderate salt levels reduce growth. The couch roughs are mown monthly, “however in winter this picks up as we encourage winter grass to grow in roughs to create some definition.”

Tees are fertilized every eight weeks, and greens are fed every three or four weeks with low-index salt fertilisers. Sparing use helps minimise disease.

The harsh conditions mean environmental sustainability is always forefront in Austen’s mind. And ongoing education as fundamental to success.

“There is so much information available that without suitable training and experience you would be doing your employer a disservice and potentially harming the industry through mismanagement of chemical and fertilizing practices.”

By John Power

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