



From Kingussie to Karrinyup

In his latest turf management leadership profile, ATM columnist Ben Gibson catches up with Lake Karrinyup Country Club superintendent Fraser Brown.

The Highlands of Scotland could not be further removed from the coastal plains of Western Australia, but for Lake Karrinyup Country Club superintendent Fraser Brown they hold an equal place in his heart as a sports turf manager. Born and bred in golf's traditional heartland, where he grew up playing the traditional sport of Shinty and barracking hard for his beloved Rangers Football Club, Brown is a proud Scotsman who now finds himself a whole world away as custodian of one of Australia's most iconic golf courses.

It has been a two-decade journey for the now 38-year-old and after cutting his teeth at his home course in Kingussie, Brown broadened his horizons, took some risks and, as you will read below in this edition's

leadership profile, has reaped the benefits. Brown's route to the top of the profession has certainly not been via a traditional route, and has provided plenty of challenges along the way, but it has equipped him with a unique skillset that has enabled him to carve out a successful and rewarding career to date.

How did you end up in turf? Did you choose turf or did it choose you? Growing up in the small town of Kingussie in the Highlands of Scotland, the local golf club was one of the focal points of the town. My family were members there and a lot of my youth was spent at the club. At the end of high school most of my friends were planning to attend university, however, I wanted to get into the workforce much earlier than that. After

graduating from high school, I was offered a seasonal position at another local club, Newtonmore Golf Club, through my cousin who was an apprentice there. This gave me a great insight to the job and confirmed it was what I wanted to do.

The start to my career wasn't through the traditional apprenticeship route. Unfortunately my home club was fully staffed and couldn't take on an apprentice, so I decided to enrol myself into a full-time greenkeeping course that required me to move to live onsite at Elmwood College in Cupar, Fife. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise. The full-time education there was excellent and not only did we learn the technical aspects, we also spent a lot of time on subjects like the history of golf and golf course architecture which gave me a



PHOTO: LKCC/GARY LISBON

Since late 2016, the iconic Lake Karrinyup Country Club in Perth has been home to course superintendent Fraser Brown

rounded view and passion for our industry that lives with me today. The other advantage was we had the time for field trips. Being based in Fife, it meant we were able to make frequent visits to St. Andrews, Kingsbarns, Ladybank, Crail and many other fantastic links courses.

At the end of my studies, I was excited to get out into the real world and use my new qualifications. I had spoken to a number of clubs in the UK but luckily a greenkeeping job came up at my home club, so I took the safe option and moved back home.

How did you end up Down Under? Again, not via a traditional route! Within a couple of years and still only 21, I had progressed to deputy head greenkeeper at Kingussie. It was a role I loved and being close to friends and family was great, but I had ambitions to continue developing my career. In 2009 I made the bold decision to accept a role at Kyiv Golf Club in Ukraine as part of their team to construct and grow in a new 18-hole Championship Course, in addition to maintaining the existing 18-hole course and practice facilities.

In hindsight, it was the most irrational but best decision I have ever made. The following two years were life-changing, both professionally and personally. The work was interesting and across the site we would have had in excess of 60 staff on a daily basis. I was part of a small, experienced Western European crew of five, with the rest of the staff being local and non-English speaking, apart from our on-course translator. The difference in language, culture, salary and experience meant it was always a lively workplace!



Brown enjoys his golf and collected the stableford trophy at the 2022 ASTMA Golf Championships

The courses were located in a small town called Makariv, which was around an hour outside of Kyiv. Our small team were the only English-speaking residents in the town so that made life very interesting to say the least! However, living and working in such a small, tight-knit group meant we shared some great times, particularly socially! I was contracted until the opening of the Championship Course which we completed on time and left behind a well-trained local maintenance crew, many of whom moved onto other eastern European golf courses or major sports stadiums.

Randomly, during my time in Kyiv, my head greenkeeper always talked about his positive experience working as part of the construction team at Kalgoorlie Golf Course in Western Australia during a break in the

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Where it all began for Brown... Kingussie Golf Club in the Highlands of Scotland

Ukrainian winter. It sounded intriguing so I decided to pursue that further and after a few emails to McMahons I was offered a role at the newly-opened course which included visa sponsorship.

I finished in Kyiv in November 2010 and I was due to start in Kalgoorlie the following March, which left me free for a couple of months. Through a GM contact I was offered the chance to spend January 2011 in Bahrain to help prepare The Royal Golf Club for their first European Tour event. Mark Hooker (now Royal Auckland and Grange GC, NZ) was the superintendent and was a class act managing a huge staff and preparing the redeveloped course for the event. Again, working with new cultures was great for my growth, both professionally and personally. After the event I returned back to Scotland to pack up and depart for Kalgoorlie without really knowing what I was letting myself in for!

How did you transition to life as a greenkeeper Down Under, especially at a course as unique as Kalgoorlie? Within 18 months of arriving, I was offered and accepted the superintendent role at Kalgoorlie. It is an unbelievable course with so much potential, but at the same time it is as challenging an environment for golf course maintenance

as you will find anywhere. I inherited a fairly disjointed team and over my time there built a strong team. One of my main methods of improving the depth of the team was to pitch Kalgoorlie as a great stepping stone facility. We were hosting professional events – we held five Western Australian PGA Championships in my time – and just managing a course to that level and scale in such challenging circumstances was a great learning curve for any greenkeeper who came out.

Unfortunately, the pitch wasn't received as well within Australia as it was from overseas. We ended up taking on a number of really good greenkeepers on sponsored visas. Many of these people did their time and went on to bigger and better things, with former Kalgoorlie Golf Course employees going on to manage courses in Australia, New Zealand, England and across the Middle East.

Kalgoorlie was always a challenge – the turnover in staff due to the remote nature of the town, the climate, the native sands and the use of effluent water were just some of the challenges faced on a daily basis trying to maintain a world-class desert course with bentgrass greens. I loved my time in Kalgoorlie, but when the opportunity came up at Lake Karrinyup Country Club (LKCC) it was a case of the right job at the right time.



My son, Aleksandr, had just been born in Kalgoorlie and the plan was always to make the move before he got to school age. The opportunity to move to Perth and take on the role at a facility such as Lake Karrinyup was a privilege. The interview process was as detailed as I have experienced, but it gave the club and I a great opportunity to understand each other and what we wanted to achieve.

I am really enjoying life at such a great club and the opportunity to influence the future of an iconic Australian golf course. Life in Perth is great. It has a great feeling and the climate is certainly better than the Highlands of Scotland! Since moving down to Perth, my daughter, Viktoria, was born here.

I know you manage full-time work, family and are also studying as well! What are you studying? Yes, it can feel like a lot sometimes, but I enjoy a busy life! I am currently

undertaking the three-year HNC Golf Course Management course online through Elmwood College. In the last two years my ex-partner and I have separated and we now share custody of the children which has been very rewarding. In the past I probably did not get the work-life balance right and it meant I was not as present as I could have been, so having the chance to change that has been great. However, lunchboxes, school runs, tantrums and homework is exhausting!

I have also met a new partner, Moira, and we have been together for 18 months now and she has been such a positive influence on both me and the kids. As well as being an all-round great person, Moira is also successful in her own career while maintaining a strong work-life balance, so is always there to offer me advice when I need it.

What do you do for fun? Between work, family and my studies, I don't have a lot of free time but when I do I enjoy playing golf, cooking and travelling, but above all else following Rangers. Rangers are my football team from back home and I attended games ever since I was about seven years old. Even now I try to watch every game live, even though the time difference between Perth and Glasgow proves a challenge! In the last year I managed to make a short four-day trip to Seville, Spain to watch them play in the Europa League final. Unfortunately the result went the wrong way, but it was still a fantastic time watching my team in the sun along with my brother and friends from Scotland. A couple of months later, I was lucky enough to be back home for The Open at St. Andrews so took the opportunity to take Moira and Aleksandr to their first Rangers game at Ibrox Stadium.

In what he describes as one of the most irrational yet rewarding decisions he has ever made, Brown spent 16 months working at Kyiv Golf Club in Ukraine

Brown's first experience of greenkeeping Down Under came at Kalgoorlie Golf Course in Western Australia. He would spend almost six years there, including nearly four as superintendent

My other big passion is a traditional Scottish sport called Shinty. It is a very quick and physical ball game played with sticks. I played the sport from an early age and progressed through to being captain of the reserve team and on the verge of breaking into the first team when I ruptured my ACL. It took four years and two operations before it was finally reconstructed, but by that time I had moved abroad so I never got back to playing. The competitive nature of the club I played for was a huge influence on my life. It was quite different from the inclusive sports that are encouraged nowadays. Every game or training session was competitive and must-win. To this day I am overly competitive, even when I am playing with the kids in the back garden!

What is at the top of your priority list as a golf course superintendent? In a very basic overview, I consider my role the responsibility to produce conditions that the members deserve and can enjoy on a consistent basis. This is achieved by providing the best environment for my team to undertake their work and use their skills.



In the superintendent role we deal with people and the environment, so there are good days and bad days. We see the work that goes on behind the scenes and the hard work that goes into preparing the courses for play on a daily basis. It can therefore be demoralising to have to respond to sometimes unreasonable critics discussing issues that on the scale of things are minor or unachievable.

It can be challenging mentally, but something that I feel is critical is that I am the filter for that type of noise. In an industry that often underpays qualified tradespeople, we

rely on job satisfaction to keep these people motivated and if I am happy with the quality of their work, they do not deserve to have that job satisfaction taken away from them from outside unfair comments.

What sort of leadership team do you have at LKCC? How do you structure and delegate your work? How do you get it all done? I am lucky to have a great team at Lake Karrinyup. As well as the great people on the tools, I have a very experienced leadership team consisting of Jarrod Boyce (assistant superintendent),



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Brown with daughter Viktoria (left) and partner Moira with son Aleksandr (right)



Rick Raison (turf equipment manager), Nigel Fitzpatrick (irrigation technician), Daytan Milne (foreman), Rob Williams (course training coordinator) and Hayley Argiropoulos (course administration). Between them there is over 100 years of experience at Lake Karringup.

As mentioned, my role is to enable my leadership team by providing an environment that helps them to use their skills and experience to maximum effect. In terms of getting it all done, we don't! I think that is an important aspect of the culture we have in our team – even when we are happy with the conditions we provide members, we are always looking at what we could do better.

Who has influenced your career and why?

I have been lucky to have had many positive influences throughout my career, from college lecturers and bosses to people who have

worked under me. The person with the biggest influence on my career would definitely be Steve Jones, who was my superintendent in Kyiv. In his role there he was under enormous pressure. Not only did he have to manage a huge non-English speaking team and deal with a challenging environment on course, he also had the additional pressure of dealing with his managers who were all Ukrainian and worked within a typical Soviet-style structure. Despite the pressure, the way he treated me was first class. In my first 24 hours in Ukraine I was ready to get on the next plane home, but then I met Steve and he took me under his wing.

Without doubt my time in Ukraine was life-changing and without Steve's influence I could not have finished my contract there. His ability to filter that pressure from above and still treat me as he did was a great example of how I want to treat people. Steve is also an excellent

mechanic so once our time in Kyiv came to an end, I hired him at both Kalgoorlie and Lake Karringup! He is also godfather to my daughter Viktoria and gave a great reading in church!

What is the biggest mistake you have made and what did you learn from it? I have made many mistakes or bad decisions in my career, but to be honest I don't have anything in particular that stands out. Everybody makes mistakes, so it's important to make the best of the consequences but also try to understand the mistake and what led to it so you can continue learning and improving.

What do you feel are some of the biggest challenges facing the turf industry at the moment and what sort of action do you feel is needed? I think the biggest challenge facing the Australian golf industry as a whole is how we staff our golf courses in the future. We are going to find it harder and harder to attract and retain young people in the industry. In terms of trades, greenkeeping is, generally speaking, one of the lowest paying. We ask young people to complete a four-year apprenticeship on reduced wages for the right to become qualified, to then take on extra responsibility, early starts, working outside in all conditions while still earning less than the restaurant staff in the clubhouse. In the current world, young people have access to information quickly and they are more aware of their potential value than ever before. This is particularly an issue in Western Australia where young people know that there are always well-paid mining jobs for capable candidates.

Our industry is critical to the success of golf. Courses across this country are held in such high regard on a world stage and to a large extent that is down to the passionate greenkeepers who understand the nuances of their courses and their drive to push the highest standards. In my leadership team alone we have over 100 years' experience at the club, but in 20 years' time that could look very different. The impact this could have on Australian golf is potentially huge.

Finally, any advice for younger staff in the turf industry looking for their next opportunity or building their careers? My advice for younger staff would be to take control of your own career, don't wait for somebody to hand it to you. The successful people I know in our industry are self-driven. That could be as big as deciding to apply for that job to take the next step in your career or as small as asking to be trained on a piece of equipment you haven't used yet. At the end of your career, you will have people who influence your path, but ultimately how successful you have been will depend on how much you have pushed yourself. 🙏



PHOTO: IKCC/GARY LISBON

Brown relies upon an experienced leadership team to keep Lake Karringup in top condition