

Matthew Mackenzie Volunteer Diary
Hilton Grand Vacations LPGA Tournament of Champions
Lake Nona Golf and Country Club, Orlando, Florida
26th January - 2nd February 2025



During a golf trip to Orlando at the end of September 2024 organised by former colleague Carl Cordwell, I was fortunate to play 2 rounds at the stunning Lake Nona Golf and Country Club. Carl had interned there earlier that year and had organised some games with the Golf Course Superintendent Taylor Allbut. Taylor invited me to volunteer for the upcoming LPGA event at the end of January, an opportunity that I jumped at. This is a diary of my time at Lake Nona.

Day 1 – Saturday 25th January 2025

On Saturday I arrived at Orlando International Airport at around 6:30pm. I had been excited about this trip for a while and was looking forward to seeing the golf course at this time of year, as whilst it was stunning in September, I had been told by both Carl and Taylor that it is even better during their cooler season. I took an Uber from the airport to the hotel where we would be staying. I met up with fellow English volunteer Dan Rosevear from Thurlestone Golf Club in Devon. Dan had previously been an intern at Lake Nona in 2020. We grabbed some food at a local restaurant, before heading back to get some sleep ready for a 4:30 alarm on Sunday morning.

Day 2 – Sunday 26th January

We met in the hotel lobby at 5:10. Taylor was also staying at the hotel along with another English volunteer, James Chiverton from the Wisley. James had flown out the week before and was volunteering for 2 weeks. Taylor would be driving me, Dan, and James to work for the whole stay. Also staying at the hotel were 3 more volunteers; Dennis Mwiti, Sam Mthethwa and Lindo Mbokazi who are currently interns at Quail Valley Golf Club, another of the great courses I had played in September. Dennis was from Kenya and Sam and Lindo were from South Africa. They would be getting a lift from assistant superintendent Zach Doney who lived nearby.

On the journey to the golf club Taylor was explaining how the weather had been cloudy and wet for the last 10 days and that the warmer, brighter forecast was welcome. We arrived at the greenkeepers shed or 'shop' as they call it in America, at 5:30am for a 6am start. The first thing that stood out to me was the amount of machinery that they had. I had paid a brief visit to the sheds in September but hadn't seen the full extent of their machinery. It didn't really come as a surprise as I have been involved in tournament support before in the UK at Woburn for the British Masters, Wentworth for the BMW PGA and at Royal St Georges for The Open. They all had large fleets of machinery, but this was impressive for an 18-hole golf course. Apart from 4 utility vehicles and 1 John Deere fairway mower, this was all their kit. A \$4million dollar budget obviously helps! There were 33 staff on site for the week, 27 from Lake Nona and 6 volunteers.

All jobs were posted on screens both in the restroom and in the main machine storage area. Taylor would hold a meeting each morning to run through the jobs to make sure everyone was clear on what was expected. It was still dark so head torches were required. All machinery was fitted with lights as well, as most of the work this week would be carried out in the dark. My first job for the day was to roll greens and approaches. I was paired with Guillermo Canales and we would leapfrog around the course to help me get to know the way around. It was a cool morning and a hat and gloves were needed first thing, although this would be the only occasion. The weather was considerably brighter and warmer than back home. Daylight broke around 7:20am and it soon became clear the difference in the golf course from September. Once the temperatures start to drop towards the end of October the Bermuda grass becomes dormant and is cut very short before a full overseed of the course is carried out with cool season grasses. These provide better playing

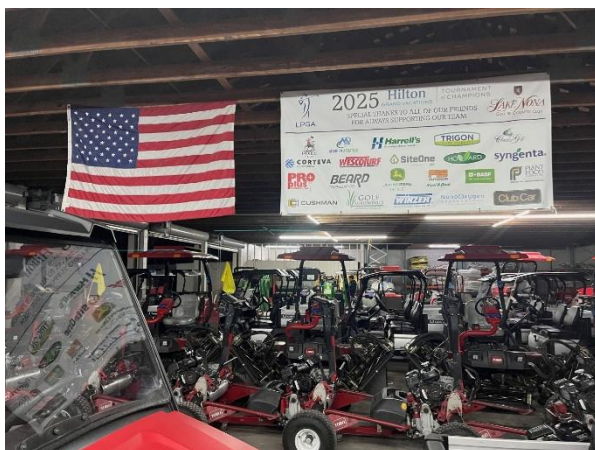
surfaces and so much more definition, especially between the fairways and the rough. Once the rolling was completed, we washed down and refuelled the rollers, and got some lunch.

A lot of today's jobs were finishing off tasks that wouldn't be part of the day-to-day routine for the tournament days. Tasks such as strimming bunker edges, blowing out any debris, redistributing sand, strimming around the lakes, cutting the rough, edging and blowing pathways and trimming tee plates. The greens were sprayed with plant growth regulator for the second time in 3 days as they wanted growth to be a bare minimum, but the increase in sunlight and temperature had produced more growth than desired. The course had been and was still partially open to members so tasks were carried out amongst golfers. Job 2 for the day was fairway divotting with Dan and James. Green sand was used to fill divots as it blends in and is less prominent on the tv. It was good to chat with these guys and hear about their experiences of Lake Nona and learn some shortcuts around the golf course.

Lake Nona is home to several professional golfers including the likes of Ian Poulter, Graeme McDowell, Tyrell Hatton, Henrik Stenson, Lydia Ko and Annika Sorenstam. Whilst divotting the 2nd fairway we spoke to Annika Sorenstam who was practicing with her daughter. She asked if she could fill her divot box on her own personal buggy because she had run out and liked to fill divots as she goes around. While divotting the 14th fairway, Taylor called us over to the 14th green to show us a fairly large alligator in the greenside bunker. We got quite close to the gator before we scared it off into the water.

Taylor was carrying out stimp meter readings and talked us through his routine. He uses GPS so that the readings are in the same spot every year. This provides accurate and consistent data year after year. The LPGA were looking for 12 on the stimp for the tournament and the 14th was currently stimping at 12.9. The bench set height of cut for the greens was 2.3mm with the approaches set at 4mm. Taylor showed us the actual height of cut with a prism on the 14th approach and this was reading just over 2mm. The pace of the approaches was scary let alone the greens.

We finished at 4:30 and stopped off at Miller's sports bar for some food and a drink on the way back to the hotel.



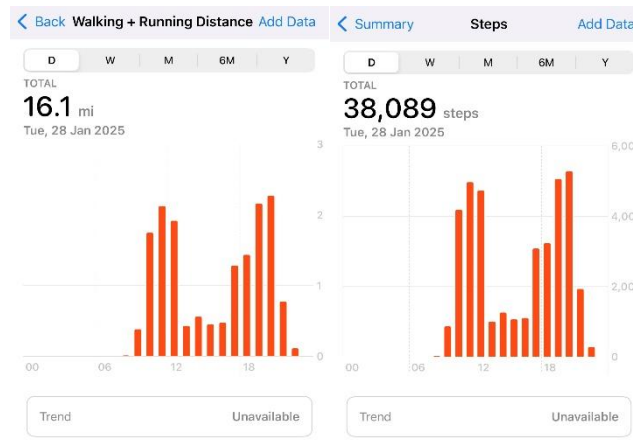
Day 3 - Monday 27th January

Monday was an earlier start at 4:30am. Job 1 for the day was to hand mow greens. There were 4 of us assigned to the job and I was given greens route 4 which included the PGA (putting green) and greens 3, 7, 11 and 15. While cutting the 15th green I was treated to a stunning sunrise across Buck Lake. Moisture readings were taken from all areas of greens and approaches each morning and any areas that needed moisture were hand watered. This included any high spots on fairways that were likely to dry out. Moisture levels were still higher than they would like so the Subair system was switched on to remove moisture from the greens. Once finished with the morning jobs we returned to the sheds to wash down the equipment and refuel ready for the next day. Lunch was provided by a food truck called Papa Diesel's BBQ and consisted of chicken, pulled pork, beef brisket, ribs, mac n cheese, and beans. There was a lot of food and it was delicious. Luckily our afternoon task wasn't too exerting! Me and Dan were tasked with trimming all tee plates on the course. The course was reasonably quiet today with only about a third of the players choosing to practice. The course was now closed to members. We finished at 5 and grabbed some food from Walmart on the way back to the hotel.



Day 4 - Tuesday 28th January

4:30am start again on Tuesday. All staff undertaking ride on mowing tasks were instructed not to turn in the rough. All staff were instructed not to drive in the rough as they wanted the rough to stand up as much as possible and to avoid wheel marks for the cameras. The mornings first job was to backtrack greens 11, 14 and 17. Backtracking is where you cut a line and then cut back down that line in the opposite direction to achieve a higher quality of cut and increase speed. The next task was to swap over the tee markers on the course for the ones to be used for the tournament. A Greek lunch was provided today. After lunch we were sent out to target the fresh fairway divots, before getting a call to return to the shed and backtrack the greens again as they had lost over a foot of pace since the morning cut. The second cut added that lost foot back to the pace. At the end of the day, I had walked as many steps as I did when I climbed Ben Nevis! We finished at 5pm and Taylor took the 6 volunteers to Longhorns for steak.



Day 5 - Wednesday 29th January

Wednesday was to be the longest and most difficult day of the week. It was pro-am day with 2 shotgun starts, one at 7:30am and the second at 12:30pm. The day started at 3:30am. With all prep work now completed most tasks would now be the same. Today was a practice run for the next 4 days. We were all assigned vehicles that were labelled with name, job, and route. All vehicles were lined up ready outside the shed in 2 lines, 1 for the front 9 and 1 for the back 9. My job for the next 5 days would be hand cutting greens PGA, 1 forward (leapfrog). There were 6 hand mowers out each day. This morning, I cut PGA, 2, 4 and 6 greens. Once the initial mow was completed, we waited for stimp readings before cutting any that needed a second cut to increase speed. I split greens 12 and 14 with James before heading back to clean off the mower. Playing tees and collars were hand mown every morning and approaches would be cut with ride on mowers. Bunkers would be raked every day with the bunker bike and hand raked where the bike couldn't reach. The dew would also be removed from fairways, non-playing tees, and walkways. Now the golfers had the course we had to wait until 5:30pm before we could carry out the evening prep.



Breakfast was provided by one of the tournament sponsors and table tennis was set up in the shed. After a bit of table tennis a few of us went to watch some golf by the par 3 17th green. The hospitality stand next to the green wasn't open to spectators for the pro-am so we sat in the empty stand to watch. Most of the celebrities were American so I didn't know many of them, only recognising 3 including former professional footballer Landon Donovan, actor Don Cheadle and Annika Sorenstam. At 3pm all staff were taken to drive shack (like top golf) to hit some balls and have some lunch. The evening job was to cut the greens again, this time cutting PGA, 11, 13 and 15. Whilst cutting the PGA there was the added pressure of being watched by Ian Poulter who had been practicing at the nearby professional's area. Fairways would be cut every evening and non-playing tees would also be hand mown. Fairway divotting would also take place every evening. Greens, approaches, and fairways were rolled daily. The first staff back were responsible for clearing and filling all divots on the range tee. The average stimp readings for the day were 13.3 for the front 9 and 12.9 for the back 9. We finished for the day at 9:30pm and had to be back in 6 hours' time.

Day 6 - Thursday 30th January

The 2:50am alarm was not well received this morning! The first day of the tournament. The morning task was to cut greens PGA, 3, 5 and 6. My second job for the morning was to remove the dew from the non-playing tees and walkways with 2 of the English interns Mikey and Ethan who are currently at Lake Nona. Breakfast rolls and donuts were provided by another tournament sponsor. The morning shift finished at 9am and we were not required back until 2:30pm, so all 6 of us volunteers decided to go back to the hotel to catch up on some sleep. There was a different BBQ meal for lunch when we arrived back. My evening task was to walk mow the front 9 non-playing tees with Dan. This would be our evening job for the remainder of the tournament. There was a stimp reading of 14.7 on hole 14 following the evening roll. We got back to the hotel around 8:30pm. I had a quick shower and went to sleep at around 9pm. Just after 10pm everyone was awoken by the fire alarm going off. No one was sleeping through this; it was really loud! There was a horrible burning smell in the hotel and 6 fire engines turned up very quickly. We were evacuated for about 40 minutes before being allowed to return to our rooms. There had been an issue with an air conditioning motor on the upper floor which had started to burn but there were no flames. Not the most ideal preparation for another 2:50am alarm!



Day 7 - Friday 31st January

This morning's mowing consisted of greens PGA, 2, 4, 6 and a second cut on 13. The 16th green had a double cut and a double roll as it was struggling for pace. The General Manager of Lake Nona paid a visit to the greenkeepers shed to pass on the feedback from players and the worldwide tv audience. It was all positive with many comments on how stunning the course looked and played. In between breakfast and lunch, we watched some golf and followed Nelly Korda from hole 13-18. The evening shift was the usual cutting of front 9 non-playing tees and range tee divots.



Day 8 - Saturday 1st February

Greens were backtracked this morning and it was my usual route of PGA, 2,4 and 6. Following breakfast we went and watched some of the golf mainly following Lynn Grant, Nelly Korda, and Lydia Ko. Lunch was provided by limes Mexican restaurant. The evening shift was to cut the front 9 non-playing tees, fill and clear the range divots plus helping to finish fairway divotting on holes 1 and 2. The greens were backtracked again this evening to speed them up for the final day. The average pace for the greens was 14.3.

Day 9 - Sunday 2nd February

The final day of the tournament. One of the hand mowers had a broken gearbox and had dumped grease all over the chipping green last night. This had to be plugged this morning. I cut greens PGA, 2, 4, 17 and a second cut on 12. Breakfast burritos were provided for the final breakfast and everyone was finished by 9am. That was it, after a long and exhausting but very enjoyable week, the work was complete. Taylor had stumbled across some HGV ultimate access passes for the hospitality areas on 9 and 18 which he shared out amongst the volunteers, and included free food and

drinks. We watched most of the groups through the front from the 9th grandstand and then the same groups from 18. We had 5 buggies parked up in front of the 18th grandstand in prime position to see the leaders finish the tournament. Nelly Korda holed a long tricky putt on 18 for birdie to try and force a playoff but A. Lim Kim sunk her birdie putt to win with a score of -20.

Following the trophy presentations, we went out onto the 18th and had our photo taken with the winner. Taylor had a wedge and putter on his buggy and we had our own little chipping and putting competition. There was the Director of Golf Course Maintenance Nick, Taylor, Zach, fellow Assistant Superintendent Armando, Crew Foreman Carlos, assistant in training Alex, Dan, James, and me. We took on A. Lim Kim's winning putt which I managed to hole at the second attempt. We also took on Nelly Korda's birdie putt but none of us could hole that. The time had come to say goodbye to this fantastic golf course and we took the buggies back to the shed for the final time. Taylor thanked me for my work and said that I would always be welcome back. Thanks, and goodbyes were exchanged with all the other staff and we left the golf club. We stopped for some food at Nona Blue, the restaurant co owned by Graeme McDowell, before heading back to the hotel for an alarm free sleep.



Day 10 – Monday 3rd February

The day had come to return home. I was sad to be leaving but was looking forward to getting home and seeing my family. Me, Dan and James went for some lunch at the local Italian restaurant Olive Garden, before James left for the airport to catch his flight home. Myself and Dan weren't flying until 9pm so had some time to fill. We went to Popstroke; Tiger Woods' crazy golf course. It has 2 18-hole courses, the red and the black. We played both before heading back to the hotel and onto the airport.



Overall, this was an amazing experience to be involved in at this great tournament, and a fantastic opportunity to work alongside and learn from such knowledgeable people. The whole week was so well organised and the attention to detail was incredible.

I would like to thank James Turner, David Goodchild, and Ellesborough Golf Club for allowing me to volunteer for this tournament, Taylor Allbut and Lake Nona Golf and Country Club for inviting me to take part, and to everyone who helped me during my time working there.

