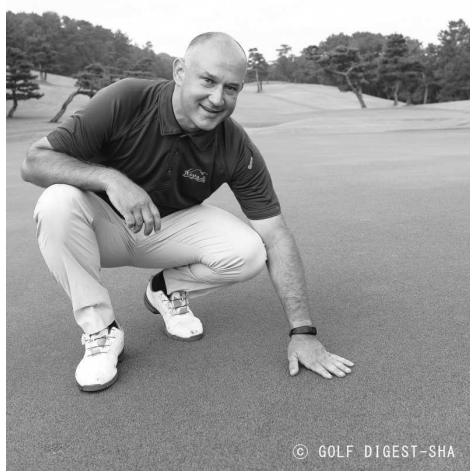


Greenkeeper with Blue Eyes

Maintaining Japan's number one korai greens*

Text by Minori Fukushima, golf writer
Photos by Norimoto Asada

This week Keya Golf Club will be the venue of the RIZAP KBC Augusta golf tournament which is an annual stop on the Japan Golf Tour. The golf course was built fifty-four years ago on a hill which commands a spectacular view of the Genkai Strait. Designed by Shiro Akaboshi, one of the legendary golf course architects in Japan, the golf course boasts something in addition to its delicious rice-in-soup called Taic-hazuke they serve at their restaurant; that is their fast and firm korai greens. On top of that, there is an American golf course superintendent who maintains this high quality turf at this historical golf course.



Andrew McDaniel

“The greens at Keya Golf Club are firm and fast. Their turf is a reflection of the greenkeeper’s and staff’s skill and passion. Grass is a living creature, so the maintenance prac-

tices will change depending on the amount of sunlight, rain, air

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flow, temperature, and many other elements of nature. In addition, the crew must perform special tasks for the tournament, as in extra mowing, additional rolling, water management, and so on. All this while perhaps they are talking with the grass every day while maintaining the turf with low mowing heights, making them firm with pinpoint watering knowing the turf is going through a very stressful week. Finally once the tournament is over, maybe they really say “Thank you” to the grass for its superb performance! The excellent greens here bring me into such a fancy. I like these greens very much though they are so difficult to play on. August 23rd, 2016.”

Ryo Ishikawa wrote this in his blog, and five days later he won the RIZAP KBC Augusta Tournament which was held here. This was after five years of his painful struggle on the PGA Tour and while he was just beginning to gain his confidence back in his golf game.

He was fascinated, encouraged, and inspired by the greens at Keya, which are taken care of by Andrew McDaniel, born in Mississippi, who is the assistant general manager/golf course superintendent. Andrew says he was unreservedly happy when he saw the comment from Ishikawa. “I know golf pros who express their appreciation to the course maintenance, but Ryo observed the grass so carefully,” Andrew says. “Last year, when Yuta Ikeda won the tournament, he gave us a little too much praise,” Andrew laughed. “During his winning speech, he said, ‘I played on some of the best tight and firm bermudagrass greens during a major U.S. tournament this year but the greens at Keya are just as good. Players are so thankful, because playing on superb greens like Keya makes the players grow and become better players.’ During the speech he also referred to me by name.”

While looking a little shy when talking about the words from his good friend Yuta Ikeda, Andrew continued by saying, “Our team works hard all year for this event so I want all players to do their best also.”

Keya has been the host for KBC Augusta (now it is called Rizap KBC Augusta) since 1983. In addition to this annual event in late August, Keya is also host for the Landic Challenge, a developmental tour, which started five years ago. This year, there was yet another tournament played at Keya, the 103rd Japan Amateur Championship held in early July.

Unfortunately, this event was canceled due to the typhoon No. 7 and the subsequent heavy rain that hit western Japan. “We were very excited because we made the course conditions exceed the level we thought we could,” Andrew says. “The greens were firm, stimp meter reading was fast, and then came the rain. We were all disappointed that we missed the top event for our nation’s amateur golfers. Yes, we had to work hard during the rain, but that is not the



“I like to get on the machines from time to time. It is a time of meditation and helps clear my head.”

point. We all missed what could have been an exciting tournament,” said Andrew.

These words are indicative of his “Player First” spirit. “We pushed the turf up to the standards for professional golfers. It’s a shame we couldn’t finish the tournament. I wish we had a clear four days and the players could have showcased their talents ...”

Although the event was canceled, many players said the greens were wonderful after their practice rounds. An official from the Japan Golf Association, expressed his surprise by saying, “I didn’t think such a fast green was possible with korai.”

“We’re very grateful that they were happy,” says Andrew. “You know, you can tell someone the green speed with a number, but on korai greens you feel the ball rolls faster. When you hit along the grain, the ball rolls really fast and our greens are firm, too.”

Andrew came to Keya in March of 2013, so it has already been five and a half years. He has lived in Japan for seventeen years and likes Japan because it is safe, people respect other people, and the level of service is so good anywhere you go in the country. “Once you get used to these traits, and then go back to the U.S, you’ll be frustrated,” he laughs. “The people here work hard. When I came to Keya, I was so impressed with the high quality of service and hospitality from clubhouse staff and caddies. Upon your arrival, during your golf, and as you leave the course everyone is greeting you, one after another, and you will be recognized and remembered even as a visitor.”

The staff at Keya consists of a little more than 100 people including caddies. The level of communication between the staff is the key component of their first-class hospitality. Susumu Nishimura, General Manager, describes Andrew as follows: “He has the Japanese spirit. In some ways he is more Japanese than ordinary Japanese. You know what I mean, ...He is like a warrior ...we tend to think that the U.S. is a country of individualism, but Andrew always keeps the organization in mind, first of all. So, I let him do what he has to do, and not worry.”

“I hear it often,” Andrew responds while smiling. “But it’s not like that everywhere in Japan. In other golf courses, you may see the president or general manager often get too involved in the course maintenance affairs. But not here, they give me my space. Think about it, don’t you think it is surprising that they hire a foreigner? Normally people are worried about staff relationship with a foreigner. Many think having a foreigner is too big of a risk.”

Company culture is made by the people who work there. Andrew is a staple part of the Keya culture. As the general manager jokes, “Well, after all we are a golf course in the country side,” then Andrew follows by saying, “Yeah, and it’s maintained by a redneck.” You can see there is a deep relationship of trust between them.

During my interview, I told Andrew a comment I heard from a local golfer, saying “Greens at Keya have been really good for the past few years. They use korai, yet the turf is tight with high density and the ball rolls smoothly.” Andrew responds. “I’m thankful. Greenkeeping is in the heart. If you don’t have a passion for growing turf, it would be hard to make it.” General Manager says, “You see, he is so like Japanese, isn’t he?”

Flying to Japan to start his career after university and already been seventeen years

Andrew McDaniel was born November 11, 1977 in Corinth, Mississippi and raised in Athens, Alabama. Did he already find his calling in the greenkeeping profession as a boy? He says he loved maintaining his yard. “Don’t know why but as soon as I was back home from school, I would go out and begin mowing the lawn. Our yard was large and it was a hard job but I wanted to keep it beautiful so I did it myself.”

He also loved sports such as baseball and basketball. Andrew’s dream was to be a Major League Baseball player, but while playing in college he soon found what it means to be vested with professional baseball skill levels. When he had to think about his alternative future, his parents gave him an idea of working



Watering is on top of the priority during the heat wave this summer. “It is either too much rain, or too little rain, no ...”

at a golf course. He entered the university where his parents graduated from, Mississippi State University. He chose the Agricultural Department to study golf and sports turf management. He explains that there must be around 90 percent of the golf course superintendents who have a college degree or some type of turfgrass certification.

“The sports turf curriculum requires a three-month and an eight-month internship program at a golf course. I applied for an internship at a golf course in Chiba prefecture. It was a US based company with an American as the superintendent. Problem was I had never been on an airplane and I knew nothing about Japan, other than it looked nice. This internship would cover my air fare, they would pay me, and I would get an unbelievable experience, so I decided to go.”

But right before the day to leave home, he became nervous of the flight, anxious about the new journey and was ready to back out. But his parents said that the ball was already rolling and it’s only three months so you’re going. “My parents probably regret that they let me go, because each job has led to different opportunities here and has kept me from seriously looking to return,” he laughs. “I’m sure they thought I would be back within a couple of years or so, as did I.”

So, he came to Japan when he was twenty-three years old and began working as a greenkeeper right away. “My room was upstairs above the maintenance office. I didn’t really know what I was doing and I was so anxious that I couldn’t



Job assignments are made during meetings in the morning and afternoon. “Korai is difficult but rewarding.”

sleep day after day. The only way I was able to manage were the great staff and people around me that helped.”

Who knows what’s next in life ...After Chiba, Andrew worked all over Japan, including Ibaraki, Aichi, back to Chiba, and Osaka. His job experience widened not only in golf course maintenance but also maintenance contracting business and landscaping projects. One impressive experience was building a new golf course. He was responsible for the whole process from seeding the grass to growing it in. It was interesting and learned a lot from this.

The more he talks, the more I understand that he is serious about his profession. His interest in grass is ever increasing with his challenger spirit. And then came the turning point while he was working at a company that did golf course outsource maintenance and imported golf course supplies, dealing in turfgrass and fertilizers. Michiya Takakura, the then general manager (current vice president) of Keya asked him if he’d be interested in working at Keya. “The timing was perfect. I wanted to return to my original career path and was actually thinking about going back to the U.S,” says Andrew. “I knew I wanted get back to being on a golf course and maintaining the turf. After seeing so many golf courses in Japan, I was always interested in Keya. There is no forced design in the course. The layout is excellent and you see a natural flow from hole to hole. The course can be challenging to the pros but also very enjoyable for amateurs.”

Keya was Andrew’s first experience in 2 areas; maintaining korai greens and preparing for a professional golf tournament. He thought these are two great opportunities. There was no guarantee for success but just take it one step at a time.



We’re ready for the event!

me when it’s time to get to it.”

When I asked Andrew about difficulties and tips in maintaining korai greens, he said, “Just patience. Bentgrass and bermudagrass normally respond quickly to various maintenance practices. When you do something you can see the response right away. For example, if I apply fertilizer to bentgrass or bermudagrass, you will see it respond in a way korai does not. With korai it takes time. Korai is not as aggressive and will not have an immediate response to certain applications. Since korai is so slow going, I wanted to try this, try that, and really

And of course it was not easy. Andrew says, “korai is very unique. I came here in March, and spring is the time when us greenkeepers are excited and want to try many different ideas and get to work. I realized very quickly I need to be patient with korai. After a few small mistakes, I learned I needed to hold off and let the grass tell

push the turf but that is not how it should be maintained so I felt very frustrated at times. That's when I learned I needed to be patient."

In the beginning the grass part of the job was a challenge and as is with any new move so was the relationship with people. Currently his staff includes fourteen men and seven women and they all report to Andrew. "For the first three to four years, I had to spend a lot of time just on incorporating my ideas and their ideas with each other. Now it's much better and this is another area where patience is needed. Ideas must be shared little by little; otherwise, you create friction and possibly turn others away. Now, I can clearly clarify our priorities for our maintenance goals, define what we want to do, all while making sure our team understands and supports it."

Andrew is serious in dealing with grass and dealing with people as well. He takes good care of his staff and makes sure they can work in a productive way.

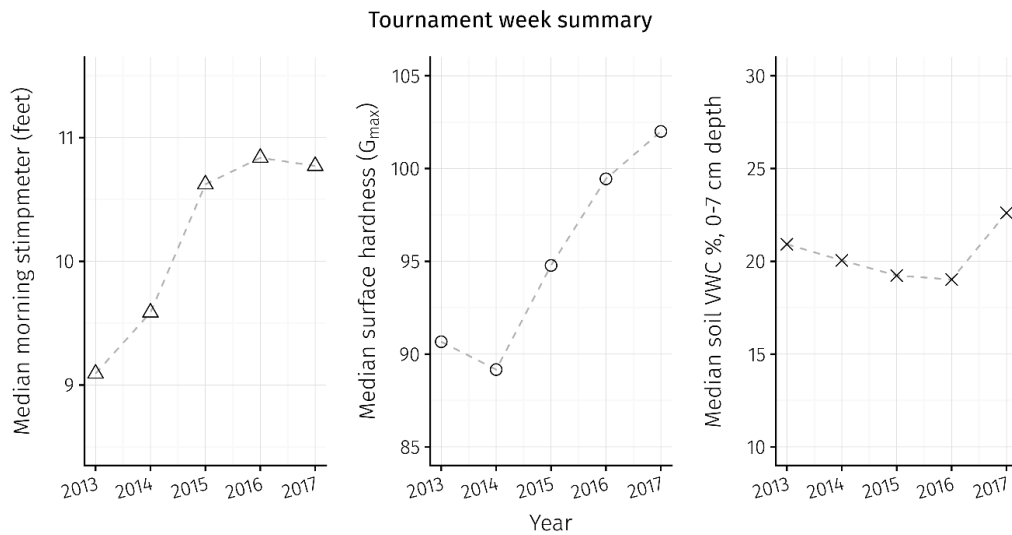
Yasuhiro Sechi, Assistant Superintendent, has thirty-three years of experience all at Keya in greenkeeping. The oldest veteran at Keya describes his "boss" as follows, "The first thing he did at Keya was to tidy our office and maintenance facility. He is a man of action, and leads by action. That's his way and he's quick too. One minute he is there, the next he's gone. If you don't see him around the office, you can guarantee to find him out on the course," Yasuhiro laughed. "He increased the mowing frequency throughout the course. Now, our greens have great density and a good reputation. When he buys equipment, he thinks about each person in the staff and how it will increase the team's efficiency. I've never felt he made our job difficult. Among others, he speaks Japanese so fluently that there is good communication."

Golfers in Japan tend to look down on korai greens, saying they are slow. Andrew wants to change that image. "First of all, korai is a Japanese species. I think most of the golf courses will eventually come back to this local grass. Fukuoka is very hot in summer and very difficult for bentgrass to survive. Korai is most vigorous in summer so you can do anything you like to it. If you are managing bentgrass, your most important mission is to keep the greens alive. Most will apply a lot of water, which makes the greens soft. Then you get a lot of ball marks and see all kinds of diseases from the high disease pressure. All golf courses are having such a hard time managing bentgrass. With Korai, grass and people are both happy during summer. If you manage it well in June, July and August, the grass stays in top quality condition until next spring. Then you start the process all over again. If you have a tournament, you have to spend more time perfecting the green by mowing and rolling a lot more, but that's all. It's not something that only Keya can do."

Because Andrew is proud of his greenkeeping profession, he is also concerned about the future of the Japanese greenkeepers. They are getting older, the turnover rate is high, and it is becoming more and more difficult to find peo-



Tools to measure firmness, green speed, and soil moisture.



data shown are median morning measurements during tournament week (Monday to Sunday) each year

“Dr. Micah Woods has been my friend since I worked for him as an intern in Chiba. He lives in Thailand and visits me every year to collect data. You can see how conditions have been improving for the past five years. This type of data is important to keep improving.”

ple. “Yes, lots of stress and big responsibilities, and some say their income is too low for the responsibility they have. I am very happy with this job because I chose the greenkeeping occupation out of my desire. I would like to promote our profession to young people at high schools and colleges if I have a chance. Golfers expect perfect greens as a norm. They are demanding but at Keya, members are always very polite and praise you for your good work. They always say thank you, and the clubhouse staff and caddies are also happy to see happy golfers.”

I love Japanese turfgrass, people, and Keya

Andrew is often a focus since he is a greenkeeper from a foreign turf culture, but he is always modest. He says, “I do nothing, all the hard working maintenance team does everything.” But in fact, he is always thinking how he can improve Keya. “The golf club has a glorious history ...but what was good in the old days might not always be best today. For example, I can think of slight layout changes between the greens and surrounding bunkers. I don’t think there is any need for increasing distance, but slight changes of hazards will make big differences. The changes would force the players to think more seriously about their next shot. Other than that, the clubhouse is not normally used for anything other than the golfers but could be a fascinating place for wedding ceremonies and parties where one can have a beautiful ocean view.”

Greenkeeper’s job is an early-bird job. Andrew usually comes to the course by 6:00 am, or even as early as 4:00 am when there is a tournament event. He makes it a rule to visit all the eighteen holes to see if there is anything unusual such as disease, insects, water leaks, etc. “The golf course in the early morning is really nice. It’s so quiet, no people, just perfect,” he talks with a smile. “I also like the dusk here. It’s these times I feel happy about working here. It’s the luxurious time for me and my staff to have the course to ourselves.”

Yet weather patterns are making the job more difficult. Heat waves, abnormal rain and many typhoons put him to the peak of tension, especially before and during the tournament. “We worked hard and I feel the greens are better this year than last year. I’m very much looking forward to seeing how the pros perform.”

After living at many different places, Andrew bought his house here. He likes Fukuoka. “Fukuoka is a compact city and easy to live in. It has the ocean, mountains, and the city. It has it all. My wife is from Tokyo and she also likes Fukuoka as well.”

His six-year-old son is a big fan of the local professional baseball team Softbank Hawks. The one-year-old girl makes all the family happy every day. “I wish my son is able to speak better English as he grows older. He is a native here with



“Can’t do it alone.” A shot with his staff. “I spend more time with them than with my family. People come and interview me but you recognize who does the real work, too. Greenkeeping is a team. Without a good team, you can’t have a good course.”

strong local dialect. I also miss being able to have lawn at home. Our 'yard' is too small," he laughs. "But it's a good place, so as long as I don't get fired I would like to stay here for some time."

The readers of this article have a good chance to see a greenkeeper with "blue" eyes happily strolling around the course at Keya. When you see him, you may want to say, "Hey, Andrew, I know you, you are the superintendent here!"