

Industry Spotlight:

Karl Johnson The Hort Career Behind Game Day.

Under vibrant stadium lighting, surrounded by packed stands and audiences nationwide, the turf at FMG Stadium Waikato becomes the stage for some of sport's biggest moments. Every pass, tackle, try and wicket depends on the work happening long before the roaring crowds arrive. Behind it all is trusty Turf Manager, Karl Johnson, a man who has spent 36 years turning a passion for sport and outdoors into an international career in turf management.

Turf management and maintenance is a primary sector pathway that rarely gets talked about, despite sitting firmly within the wider horticulture sector. Karl says the connection is closer than people might think.

"We're preparing and growing turf grass so that our favourite athletes can play on it. We don't grow things for animals or people to eat, so that's probably why our work gets overlooked in the sector, but as far as tender loving care goes, it's exactly the same."

Karl currently overseas both FMG Stadium Waikato and Seddon Park in Hamilton, preparing surfaces for international and domestic rugby, cricket and major events. With



televised games reaching audiences of hundreds of thousands, and sometimes millions, the pressure is constant.

"The turf is the stage of every event we have and because it's a living, breathing thing, it's 24/7."

Turf management is a role that combines problem-solving, physical work and teamwork. During summer, Karl leads a crew of 11 staff managing everything from cricket pitches to stadium presentation. Winter drops to nine staff, but the workload remains demanding with weekend fixtures, changing weather and back-to-back events.

Karl was raised in Waimate in the South Island, where he spent time helping at his grandparents' orchard, developing an early love for the outdoors and sport. He played cricket, rugby and golf throughout his school years. This background eventually led him to an apprenticeship at the Christchurch Golf Club.

"What's great about our trade is that you're paid to learn, so I was able to earn as I went along and the three and a half year -

apprenticeship was great. I got a trade certificate, I got a qualification that can take you anywhere in the world.”

That apprenticeship has become the foundation for a career that has taken Karl to international lengths. Karl has worked in India preparing cricket venues, in Japan for rugby, and also in Dubai building cricket grounds for Emirates. He has also worked in Samoa with the Blues and Manu Samoa, while remaining proudly loyal to the Crusaders despite currently working in Chiefs territory.

The opportunities available through apprenticeships and on-job training are something Karl speaks passionately about. Over the years, he has mentored and trained many apprentices and cadets himself, including trainees currently completing qualifications under his guidance in Hamilton.

“I believe it’s part of my role to develop and train and give people opportunities.”

For students unsure about tertiary study, Karl says turf management offers another pathway into a skilled and respected industry. Much of the learning happens practically, through hands-on experience, block courses and working alongside experienced staff.

Karl says the work is best suited to people who enjoy being active, working outdoors and being part of a team. A love for sport also helps.

“When it rains, we’re rushing out there and putting covers on the -

cricket block, but then when it’s sunny, we’re watching a lot of cricket too.”

The role creates opportunities to work alongside some of New Zealand’s biggest sporting names, while contributing to world-class events like the FIFA Women’s World Cups and Cricket World Cups.

Students interested in the industry do not need to wait for the perfect opportunity to appear. Karl encourages young people to be proactive and network locally.

“I’d actually just go down to your local facility and introduce yourself and get to know people. We’re all pretty well connected.”

Connecting with others helped shape Karl’s own career journey. After completing his apprenticeship, he worked as head greenkeeper at Akaroa Golf Club and Lincoln Golf Club before becoming turf manager for New Zealand Cricket’s High Performance Centre in Lincoln. He moved to Hamilton in 2003 and has now spent more than two decades managing two of the country’s most recognised sporting venues.

“I love making Hamiltonians proud with the facilities that we present when they turn on the tv on a Friday or Saturday night and watch the Chiefs do their thing on our turf.”

Careers in the primary sector are far more diverse than many realise. Turf management blends horticulture and a passion for the outdoors into a tangible pathway that can take people worldwide while remaining close to the action.