The field for the 1998 Toro Excellence in Greenkeeping final was by common consent the strongest ever, and produced a fine Champion who, as this year’s Ambassador for Greenkeeping, will do a marvellous job in promoting the profession...

John Coleman is a man of drive, determination and talent who would stand out in any walk of life. It is our good fortune that he has chosen to make his mark in greenkeeping. He is supported by a fine golf club, Abbeydale in Sheffield, and they will benefit from John’s success with a new Toro triple mower worth around £20,000. John wins a trip to the GCSAA Conference and Show while each member of his team receives a set of BIGGA waterproofs. The other finalists each received a cheque for £100.

The Toro Student of the Year Award saw the emergence of a young woman who again will stand as a fine example of the quality of people being attracted to the profession. Sally Doherty is a university graduate who has thrown herself into her job at The Belfry with such enthusiasm that she is already a key member of the team which is preparing the Brabazon Course for the 2001 Ryder Cup. Sally wins a place on a turf science course in the United States as well as a trip to the Toro Headquarters in Minneapolis and the Toro’s irrigation Headquarters in California as well as the GCSAA Show in Orlando.

We are indeed fortunate to have two such able Champions and it says much for the success of the two competitions that people of their quality strive to succeed in them.

Toro are owned a debt of thanks for enabling the events to go on and for the hard work and commitment the people or Toro and Lely UK put into them.

THE MAN WITH THE ABBEY HABIT

New Toro Excellence in Greenkeeping Award winner John Coleman has packed a lot into his 28 years...

Take a close look at the picture of the smiling dark haired man which accompanies this feature.

Stare into the eyes and there’s a fair chance that you’ll detect the steely determination to succeed. The eyes also reveal a depth of experience which belies the rest of the relatively youthful face and hint at the story behind the picture. A tale which describes the route which culminated in John Coleman, Abbeydale Golf Club’s Course Manager, becoming the 1998 Toro Excellence in Greenkeeping Award winner.

It is a story of bloody-mindedness, hardship, confidence, prejudice and of a close and rewarding relationship between a greenkeeper and his Chairman of Green.

The first element emerged when he eschewed the chance of joining Dumbarton-based J&JB Whisky, where his father was Industrial Manager, in a job which many young men would have welcomed with open arms.

"A lot of my family automatically went into J&B and it was assumed I’d do the same, and I’d have earned decent money for a guy of my age," explained John.

"But it was partly bloody-mindedness which made me go into greenkeeping. I just wanted to do it myself. Also I was a keen golfer and like many thought I’d be able to play all the time so I started at Dumbarton Golf Club as a YTS on £27 a week. Peanuts!" recalled John, who is now 28. He’d gone into it at full tilt with a view to greenkeeping being his career but after two weeks of being put through the mill by his boss, Frank Scullion, now of Dunstable Downs GC, John began to doubt the wisdom of his decision.

"I raked all the bunkers myself and used the hand mower the rest of the day and it was walking the legs off me. I said to my dad that I was absolutely knackered and that I didn’t know if it was worth £27 a week. But my dad was clever because he said ‘Well, if you don’t think you can handle it...’ That was like the red rag to a bull and I worked hard from there on.”

A top student at Langside College he reached the National Finals of the Toro Student of the Year Competition, he admits now that he was out of his depth in the final won by David Norton - and was promoted to Deputy Head Greenkeeper. He also represented the apprentices on BIGGA’s West of Scotland Section.

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then gone down the road of trying to get experience at different golf courses, which is a good way of doing it. But I wondered how I would be able to stand out from the crowd doing it that way," explained John. "So I thought I'd try and go a bit further with my education and the three year BTEC National Diploma in Turf Science and Sportsground Management at Myerscough College was the highest level you could get at the time in greenkeeping."

It meant some drastic action. He handed in his notice at Dunbarton sacrificing a regular income, moved south without a grant and he funded his progress through a succession of bar jobs. Having made such sacrifices, and passed the Diploma, you might think a host of potential employers would have been knocking at the door to speak to this talented and ambitious young man.

"I was back living with my parents and applying for every Head Greenkeeper's job which appeared in the magazine but wasn't getting any response. It's funny but even now when I go home to Dunbarton and come downstairs in the morning I always look at the front door to see if there's any mail for me," he recalled.

While John was becoming more and more disillusioned a Chairman of Green in South Yorkshire was putting together an advert for a Head Greenkeeper's job after the previous incumbent had moved on.

Jack Copeland took his role seriously at Abbotsdale Golf Club. He attended, and still attends, every lecture put on by the Sheffield Section and had also visited BTME.

"At Harragote I heard a talk by a young man who made a huge impression on me. It was the first time I'd seen a young Course Manager and it showed me where greenkeepers were going. I knew this was the future," explained Jack.

"That was in the January and that October I was put in the position of appointing a new Head Greenkeeper." That young Course Manager was Anthony Davies, of Prestbury Golf Club, by coincidence the first winner of the Premier Greenkeeper Award which has become the Toro Excellence in Greenkeeping Award John has now won, and a Master Greenkeeper.

"I remember reading John's application and being interested, but then noticed his age and was depressed by it. But, remembering the young Course Manager at Harrogate I still chose to interview him," said Jack.

In the middle year of his course - which incidentally he would have no hesitation in recommending others - John had worked under Bill Lyon at Royal Mid Surrey in Richmond. "Bill Lyon was a major influence in John getting this job," explained Jack.

"He got a superb reference from the college highlighting his leadership qualities - despite being the youngest on the course he was a class spokesman when a dispute arose regarding some elements of college life - and another excellence reference from Bill which I decided to take up.

"We had a long conversation during which time I said that it would be a gamble taking on someone of his age. Bill said that wasn't a gamble, the real gamble would be in not taking him. He said that of all the people he'd been involved with he was the brightest. That stuck with me and encouraged me to go down the path of employing John," said Jack, whose decision was not universally applauded at the time. But, remembering the young Course

"I'm sure that if he went anywhere else it wouldn't be available to support whoever got the job."

Having won the Toro John will devote some of his incredible energy to promoting the industry and BIGGA. "I'll shout it from the roof tops that I've come through the education system that BIGGA is promoting and that it has worked.

"There are too many people coming into the profession by default and I'm willing to go into schools and, taking a leaf out of Ruud Guillet's book, try to make greenkeeping sexy and a more appealing profession to get into."

With such a fine example of modern greenkeeping promoting the cause we can expect an influx of new talent on the next few years.