The Career Path to Success

Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year 2004 – Alex Shore

Careers are very individual things. While some people stick with one particular job, at one certain level, and are happy to do so, others find a vocation that suits them, then climb the career ladder step by step and don't stop until they hit the top.

That is certainly what Alex Shore is doing, and winning the 2004 Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year Award has helped him jump up a few rungs.

September 27 was the date of the Final held at BIGGA HOUSE and Alex, along with the seven other finalist - Kate Walls, Christopher Kerr, Robert Finnegan, Peter Kennedy, Stuart Glover, James Canham and Alastair Higgs faced an exhausting, but exhilarating day of tackling both an interview and conducting a course report of Aldwark Manor.

So how do you start an interview with the 2004 Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year? Simple in my case, ask him an obvious question.

"So Alex," I started, "how does it feel to win?"

"It really hasn't sunk in yet. I think it will take a while to believe that I won, but I'm sure by the time I get back to work it will have hit me, and the lads at the club will help bring me back down to earth," replied Alex.

That is the answer from someone who didn't dream of winning the entire competition. A modest individual, Alex, 26, knew that, with the high standard of the finalists, anyone could have won it.

"Everybody knew their stuff and were really passionate about their jobs and greenkeeping as a whole. A bunch of us were talking before the ceremony and we all agreed that it was very close, I don't think any one of us could have predicted the winner. I certainly did not expect my name to be read out."

The spirit of the eight finalists was summed up when Alex chose to take his time to shake hands of the seven other entrants and thank them before going up to receive his award.

"Everyone was very friendly, and that made for a great few days. The standard was so high, and everyone wanted to win, but the atmosphere always remained friendly and everyone helped each other out when needed," added Alex, after his celebration night out of town.

"It is a close team at Woburn, so originally that helped me fit in quickly. It's a very friendly team and everybody helps each other out. We have three courses, the new Marquess course, the Duke's and the Duchess courses. Each has their own green staff, so it's individual in that way, but then we all come together and help each other out when needed, so it is still a big team effort, and that creates a good spirit and an excellent working environment."

Another reason for Alex's attraction to the Woburn vacancy back in 1999 was that the club had similar ideas to his own about the importance of education. The club is known for placing a high emphasis on training programmes, while allowing its staff to make up their own mind whether or not to take up the opportunities out there. In fact it was the club's green staff, who were studying at Oaklands College at the same time as Alex, who recommend the position to him.

"With all employees the club make education schemes available for anyone who wants them and when they want them. So the club is always very pleased to help you in any course you want to take up, from first aid to spray training to gaining a training licence. Eddie (Bullock), the Managing Director, is always keen to help his staff into the education side of greenkeeping," stated the award winner.

As normal, Alex was both keen and quick to make the most of the opportunities made available to him. CCSNI/CoA has reported a number of times how Alex has taken up all the courses he has been offered. His last statement is backup by the passion you detect in his voice when he talks about the club he has been an Assistant at for five and half years.

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opportunities provided, and he believes it has made a big difference to him as a greenkeeper.

"I was pleased to make the most of the chances in front of me. I wanted to push myself forward and learn more. The more qualifications, certificates and, most importantly, more knowledge about your job you have the better off you are going to be. So doing my NVQ Level 3 has helped inspire me to do as much as I possibly can."

In any successful career you need to be in the right place at the right time and the 2004 Student of the Year is currently in the right place. Woburn has just hosted the European Tour's Heritage Tournament, which was won by Sweden's Henrik Stenson.

Alex played a major part in the set up of the Duke's course, but was forced to miss the final rounds due to the Toro competition at BIGGA HOUSE.

The club also held the Bovis Lend Lease European Senior Masters this year and in the past has entertained the cream of women's golf with the Weetabix British Open and has had the men's British Masters over the Duke's course for 20 years until 2003.

"I am lucky to be at a course that holds major events. To have that kind of experience is great, and not every greenkeeper is fortunate to have that kind of tournament experience. As I said, I am lucky.

"Holding major tournaments like the Heritage and British Masters, means that the club demands a high standard of work, so you have to set yourself up to that level. That, along with the fact that your colleagues are working to the same high standards, is going to have a positive effect on your work and development as a greenkeeper."

The future is looking healthy for Alex, particularly with the Toro Shield and Crystal Bowl taking pride of place on his mantle piece. Former Student Greenkeeper of the Year winners have gone on to scale the heights of the Greenkeeping and Groundcare industry, and Alex has similar ambitions.

"I really enjoy it at Woburn, there is enough variety to keep me interested and motivated. If a deputy position came up that is certainly the next step for me and it's something I'll be looking at closely. I eventually want to be a Head Greenkeeper, but I wouldn't say I am ready to be one yet, I still have a lot to learn before doing that."

More to learn, does that mean more time in the classroom for Alex?

"I've been looking in to doing a HNC or a foundation degree possibly. For now I will be concentrating on going to America and the training course I will receive from the University of Massachusetts and then I will see what happens after that.

"I would like to learn more on the scientific side of things, and it will be nice to apply my theory to practice on the Duke's course. Andy Brown (of Toro) said to us all that it is important in today's environment to also learn the business and budgeting side of golf, so that's another thing I would like to get more involved with, but that is all for the future," said the man who is clearly keeping his feet on the ground.

Past winners, such as Keith Scruton in 2003, speak highly of the eight weeks away from home is a long time. Hannah, my wife, was shocked and delighted when I told her I had won, but like me she is a bit anxious to be losing me for that amount of time.

"Finally I would like to thank all the other contestants, they helped confirm my belief in the importance of education in greenkeeping and also made the whole few days very memorable for me."
Winner Alex with runners up James and Robert.

The Runners Up

After selecting Alex Shore as the winner of the competition the panel had to make two further decisions — the two runners-up. The two 2004 Student Greenkeepers of the Year runners-up receive an all expenses paid trip to Continue to Learn and BTME and Clubhouse 2005 in January. After much deliberation Robert Finnegan and James Canham were declared the 2004 runners-up.

Robert Finnegan

Spend two minutes with Robert and his passion for greenkeeping will no doubt rub off on you, it really is infectious. He began his career as an Assistant at Navan Golf Club, before moving to Scotland to gain the training he was desperate for. Studying a HND at Elmwood College, Robert has landed himself a job at none other than the home of golf, St. Andrews, on the Old Course.

An ambitious individual Robert, 20, is determined to make the most of the opportunities that come along, and he plans to work as a greenkeeper around the world while still in his 20’s. He plans in particular to spend time working in both the US and Scandinavia.

With Euan Grant, the Head Greekeeper of St. Andrews’ Old Course, nurturing Robert’s enthusiasm and ability, the youngster should progress to be a fine greenkeeper.

James Canham

James is just 18 years of age but has knowledge beyond his years. Educated at the College of West Anglia, James is working towards his NVQ Level 2 and has clearly absorbed everything he has been taught so far.

James is an Assistant at Weston Park Golf Club and has aided in the many changes within the course. He is keen to gain more knowledge in the machinery, business and budgeting side of greenkeeping, as he believes these are becoming increasingly important factors within the industry.

Another individual who has a great passion for his job, James enjoys the challenge of putting the theory learnt in the classroom into practice on the golf course.

James plans in the future to gain as much knowledge as possible in as many areas as he can. This attitude should see him rise though the ranks of greenkeeping and he plans to be at the top within 10 years.

Despite not being crowned the Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year for 2004 the remaining five Finalists certainly did not leave empty handed.

BIGGA Education and Training Manager, Ken Richardson, and Toro’s Andy Brown emphasised at the awards ceremony that all eight entrants really were winners. A cliché maybe but one that is certainly very true in this case.

The interview panel of John Pemberton, BIGGA Chief Executive, David Walden, BIGGA Board member, Peter Mansfield and Andy Brown, both of Toro, were extremely impressed with the standard of all eight interviewees and the course reports that they produced.

It resulted in some tough and very close decisions having to be made by the panel, which highlighted just how the standard of education in greenkeeping is increasing year on year.

Christopher Kerr, studying at GOSTA, Peter Kennedy, at Reaseheath College, Stuart Glover, Greenmount College, Alastair Higgs, of Sparsholt College, and Katherine Walls, from Myerscough College, all left BIGGA HOUSE with the great experience of being in the competition final, and all that it entails, and the knowledge that they are among the top young greenkeepers in the UK and Ireland. All can look forward to very bright futures.

After the success of the 2004 Student of the Year competition and the high benchmark set by the entrants BIGGA and Toro are already eagerly awaiting the start of the 2005 competition.

The eight finalists, from left, back row, Stuart Glover, Christopher Kerr, Katherine Walls, Alastair Higgs and Peter Kennedy and, front, James Canham, Alex Shore and Robert Finnegan.