Having a blast!

Andrew Stanger describes what life was like in the States as winner of the 2010 Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year Award.

When I entered the Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year competition, I didn’t give a single thought to the prize that came with it, so when it was announced that I had won, the realisation hit that I was going to spend two months in a place that I couldn’t even point to on a map!

The previous year’s winner, Rhys Norville, mentioned that it can get quite cold in Massachusetts and it might be a good idea to take some warm clothes. Little did I know that the coldest winter in 80 years was heading towards Massachusetts and no amount of warm clothes would protect me from the -28˚C temperatures and the 52” of snowfall I was about to experience.

This wasn’t my first trip into the unknown as I spent a year in the United States while participating in the Ohio State Programme. That trip taught me to expect the unexpected and this trip turned out to be no different. I had no idea how I was going to get from the airport to my hotel, which was in a different State; how long it might take or if the roads would even be suitable for driving on but I just decided to leave that to fate. Luckily for me, there were some other students heading up to Amherst to join the 22,000 waiting for us at UMASS.

When I checked into the Comfort Inn I was informed that the Australian winner had already arrived and had gone out for the evening, so I left instructions with the receptionist for him to call by and introduce himself so we could make arrangements to get to our first class the next morning. A few hours went by without a knock and after my long journey I couldn’t help but fall asleep. In the early hours the knock finally came, not knowing what day it was or where I was, I answered the door to find two very merry gentlemen that over the next eight weeks would become friends for life.

There was no time for adjustment, classes started the next morning at 8am and it was clear from the outset that we wouldn’t be stopping for breath until the graduation dinner at the end of February. Looking through my induction pack on Day One it would seem that we were going to attempt to complete the equivalent...
of our NVQ2 in just eight weeks, a tall order for anyone never mind the students who had no previous education in turf.

The first week hit everybody hard, a lot of information came flying at us in a very short space of time but it wasn’t long before things settled down and the nine hour days, with an average of three tests a day, became our routine.

With topics like Turf Grass Physiology, Turf Grass Management, Turf Grass Diseases, Weed Management, Entomology, Turf Grass ID, Calculations, Water Management, Golf Course Design & Irrigation and Arboriculture, there was plenty to keep us busy, both in the classroom and the hotel room at night. The lecturers had their work cut out, keeping a classroom of 40 men, who usually spend all day outdoors, focused, would be no easy task, but they were all fantastic. They were all specialists in their field and were only too happy to show us what they were working on and were keen to get feedback from us as to how we did things out on our own courses.

After a couple of weeks we all knew each others’ names and felt that we deserved some social time and the campus had plenty to offer. Tickets were always available for the college basketball and hockey games and by the end of term, me and ‘the Aussie’ were keen fans. They ran a competition in the interval at the hockey called ‘chuck a puck’. You could buy three foam pucks for $5 and you had to try and land your puck closest to the centre of the ice rink. As a keen cricketer, the Aussie more than fancied his chances and kindly explained to the woman selling the pucks that he would only require one! From half way up the bleachers, true to his word, Adam Shields put it within inches of the announcer’s feet and ‘chuck a puck’ again! A good blast! From half way up the bleachers, true to his word, Adam Shields put it within inches of the announcer’s feet and ‘chuck a puck’ again! A good blast! 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