

Living the American dream

Nothing could quite prepare me for my journey from Silloth on Solway to the far side of the Atlantic Ocean and my visit to the University of Massachusetts, this as part of my organised Toro tour. After a 21 hour journey which culminated at the Spruce Motel, I was in trepidation for what might be waiting in the weeks ahead but need not have worried, for within minutes of my arrival the telephone rang and I was offered a ride to the university, a touch of hospitality that I discovered was by no means unique – Americans are so very friendly.

The motel room assigned to me was so huge I gladly shared it with Phillip Miller, a superintendent from Indian Lake Hills in Michigan, and I was soon to discover he was something of a film star, having played a 'bit' part in the film *Lethal Weapon II*. Once at the university we were joined by other students for a two-hour induction period, immediately followed by a plunge in at the deep-end as we began the intensive 11 subject course, involving a full range of golf course management skills. These included entomology; diseases; irrigation; machinery maintenance; soils and fertilisers; turf management; trees and shrubs; personnel management; golf course design; physiology and turfgrass calculations.

As one might expect, the course content was first rate, though highly intensive and with much to absorb in a short time. My favourite subject was Irrigation System Design, which proved an eye-opener, as prior to visiting America I had mistakenly thought that irrigation was just a matter of putting in a few pipes with some sprinklers at the end and away we go! Not so, as I soon learned, and I was very impressed at being taught by the man who wrote our learning manual – Professor Pira.

Golf Course Design was another favourite, made doubly interesting by the enthusiasm shown by our lecturer, Brian Silva, and spiced with a wide range of topics that made learning far more interesting than just gleaning facts from books. Brian was most gracious in his willingness to reveal all – not only his successes but also his mistakes in design.

Turfgrass Calculations were fun and more than just a little useful, though it was confusing for me to return to Imperial measurements, and the lecture on Turf Management by Dr Cooper was made fascinating by the inevitable discussions which arose thereafter.

With two weeks remaining, I decided to take the week-end off and visit the GCSAA Show in New Orleans, though on arrival I discovered the show didn't start until the day I was to leave! What was to have been a great experience turned out to be the low-point in my trip, though I now had added time to explore the city. Down by the River Mississippi and the river-walk was nice, with the French Quarter – especially Bourbon Street – having to be seen to be believed.

Following two days of sightseeing it was back to the University of Massachusetts for a



BRIAN STORY,
Toro Student
Greenkeeper of the Year,
reports on his
experience of two
months in America as
part of his
winner's award – from
high-powered university
lectures, to sharing a
motel room with
a film star...

further week before travelling to Bermuda to visit a friend, Tim Carr, who had gone there to become a policeman. It was a fun week-end, and he even managed to get me entered in a competition at the exclusive Mid-Ocean course. I also played at Castle Harbour, much impressed by the fantastic weather and temperatures of 65° in mid-February! Leaving Bermuda came as a body shock, as I returned to Massachusetts at -12° for the last week at college.

A grand dinner was a fitting end to our course, enriched by the receipt of our well-earned certificates. This was also time to say goodbye to many good friends and to enjoy two final days of reflection on all that had been achieved at the college – a tinge of sadness at its ending.

Now on to Toro headquarters at Minneapolis, marred by weather that was simply too bad to get us to the assembly plant, though we did enjoy a tour of the prototype/testing areas. I say we, because I was shown around by Barry Beckett, along with Dennis Schmidt, a superintendent at the Sun City Complex in South Africa. After a couple of days 'living it up' in the Embassy Suites Hotel it was onward again, this time for a week at Toro's Irrigation Division HQ at Riverside California. I was met at the airport by Veronica Smith, who showed me to my rental car, experience of which was an eye-opener – not only for the drive on the right problem but the lack of warning before junctions – tough stuff this bumper-to-bumper driving!

The weather was kind once again and I spent my first day sunbathing by the pool.

John Skidgle had organised a game of golf at the PGA West course at Palm Springs and we played with the superintendent – who informed me that he had 69 men employed on 36 holes! I am inclined to think that is the main difference in golf course management on the two sides of the Atlantic, with money no problem and superintendents commanding far greater respect than in the UK. The PGA course was fantastic, with views of the snow-capped Californian mountains and 70° of sunshine. I saw Bruce Forsyth outside the clubhouse and said to John Skidgle, 'Look – there's Bruce Forsyth!' His reply – 'Who is he?'

Next day I met Bob Symonds, who showed me around the Toro irrigation plant, followed by a trip with him to Orange County for the weekend. As a seal of excellence I was able to visit Disneyland on the penultimate day, with a splendid Mexican dinner enjoyed with Bob and his wife Amara capping an unbelievable trip. Of course, there had to be one more surprise – a personal limousine from the motel direct to LA Airport, leaving only a 26 hour journey to bring me back to Britain and reality.

There are so many people to thank and the hospitality of everyone in America was of the highest order. In singling out just one, the biggest of thanks must be to my sponsors, Toro, for such excellence – I hope many more greenkeepers will enjoy the benefits this award allows. Finally a big thank you to my Club, Silloth on Solway Golf Club, for granting me eight weeks off during their busy centenary year.

■ Brian Story is the course manager at Silloth on Solway Golf Club in Cumbria.