



Top honours to the greenkeeper whose courses never close

This year's ICI Premier Greenkeeper of the Year is 50 years old and works on municipal courses – which he is never allowed to close. David Walden scooped the award – and a trip to America – after beating off four other regional winners in the national final at Aldwark Manor.

But he very nearly missed out on this prestigious title. He hadn't thought about entering the competition, which is now in its fifth year, because he mistakingly thought it was aimed at young greenkeepers working at posh private courses.

"The East of England section hadn't entered anyone for about three years so the secretary rang me up late one Sunday night and said, 'Look, someone's got to go in for it, I'm proposing you to do it.' I said, 'OK, put my name forward, I don't care,'" said David, still gobsmacked by his success. "I never thought it would happen to an ordinary greenkeeper. But I'm glad it has because I think that it will change a lot of people's attitudes towards the competition. I'm sure a lot of people will be thinking now: if he can do it, well I can."

David, who is married with three sons, started greenkeeping 21 years ago after ten years working on a farm and four years working as a forestry and landscape operator with the Peterborough Development Corporation. When the PDC had a golf course built in 1973, they advertised for a head greenkeeper and

David Walden will be giving a talk on aeration at the Cambridgeshire College of Agriculture and Horticulture, Landbeach Road, Milton, Cambridge, on February 14. There will also be talks on John Deere Machinery, Barenbrug Seeds, Hardi Sprayers, turf maintenance and irrigation equipment. For tickets and further details call Martin Crimmins on 0223 860701.

David persuaded them he was the man for the job. During his eight years as head greenkeeper he helped build a new 18-hole course and a 12-hole pitch and putt course, and was given the title of golf course superintendent. In 1988 the PDC started winding down its operations and putting everything out to tender. Nene Valley Golf Services won the contract and took on all the old staff who wanted to join them.

David kept his title and the responsibility for the two public courses – Thorpe Wood and Orton Meadows. He has also helped build two private courses – 18-hole Elton Furz and nine-hole Eyebury, which opened last spring. All of the 18-hole courses have a staff of five including a head greenkeeper. The nine-hole course operates with two greenkeepers, one of whom, Graeme MacDonald, is the head greenkeeper.

David believes his award is a tribute to his

entire team. "I'm only as good as my staff. They've done it as much as me because there are some days I can't get out on the golf course because I'm bogged down with other things, such as keeping up with the latest legislation for this, that and the other."

But he is still very much a hands-on course manager. He says he has to be: "Everybody's on 20 days holiday a year and I've got four staff at college for 33 days a year each, so it's virtually one man off all the time, so I do have to get out there mowing etc." He savours these moments. "Sometimes it's nice to get out on a machine and let the drone of the engine outdo the drone of the telephone," he says.

This winter the staff on his public courses, which attract more than 60,000 rounds a year each, have been busy reshaping bunkers and aerating. The bunkers had to be reshaped and revetted because of the build up of sand in the adjacent mounds – nearly 2ft of pure sand in some cases. They have also been continuing their intensive aeration programme which includes hollow-coring and Verti-draining all 36 greens and then following this up six weeks later with a vibrating mole-plough. They also Verti-drain the walkways twice a year.

Even before his success in this competition, David had a busy winter planned. As chairman of BIGGA's East of England section and secretary of the local IoG section, he is heavily involved in organising their winter lecture



Pictured left: A view across David Walden's Thorpe Wood golf course. Pictured right: Roger Mossop, marketing manager for Zeneca Professional Products, with Stefan Antolik, runner-up. Thirty eight year old Stefan, head greenkeeper at Cooden Beach GC, Bexhill-on-Sea, East Sussex, wins a weekend for two in London including tickets for a West End show. Third prizewinner is 36 year old Tom Murray, head greenkeeper at Ratho Park GC, Midlothian. He wins a weekend for two at Aldwark Manor. The other two regional winners are Mark Webb, from Alresford GC, Hampshire and Paul Pearse, from Stockport GC, Cheshire.



designed Thorpe Wood looked in superb condition for both of the course visits involved in winning the ICI Premier Greenkeeper of the Year Award. After being nominated by their sections, 24 courses were inspected and the head greenkeepers/course managers interviewed. From these, five regional winners were found and their courses underwent another inspection, this time by ICI's Richard Minton and Scottish Region chairman Gordon Moir, the head greenkeeper at St Andrew's Eden course. The final hurdle on the way to the coveted title was an hour-long interview at Aldwark Manor with the candidates being quizzed by a four-man panel – Minton, Moir, ICI's (now Zeneca's) marketing manager Roger Mossop and BIGGA's executive director Neil Thomas. Points gained from this performance were added to those scored by the presentation of the course, maintenance facilities and records.

David scored exceptionally well in all areas. And the judges praised Thorpe Wood's appearance. "The course was well presented and maintained to a very good standard," said Mossop. "The sheds on the course were tidy, organised and the machinery well maintained. The course records, filing, compliance to HSE etc were also excellent. Bearing in mind that the course our judges visited was one of his pay-and-play courses, it was a true testament to David's greenkeeping and course management. He could have nominated one of the private courses which were under less pressure."

"I think we present the course as good as a lot of people present private courses," said David proudly. "But there's a lot more maintenance work goes into it because you're always combating wear, compaction, you've always got to be changing holes and tee markers (daily in the growing season), pushing people into different areas, raking bunkers daily, and switching greens daily," he added without once sounding as if he was complaining.

As Roger Mossop says: "David's enthusiasm is infectious. Here is a man who loves his job and has the full support and backing of his employers. This co-operation had obviously been earned by the respect they had for David's work."

"The fact that David had the experience of all aspects of the duties of a golf course superintendent as well as overseeing both private and pay-and-play courses certainly helped his case."

"The other feature of David's career that impressed me was that from humble beginnings he has worked hard to obtain the necessary qualifications via day-release, night school, and even correspondence courses. This at a time when many individuals would have switched off."

"As an added bonus David is very active within BIGGA and the IoG. All in all it was a unanimous decision, David fits the bill ideally and was a deserving and comprehensive winner of the ICI Premier Greenkeeper of the Year Award."

programmes. This month (January) he is going to Elmwood College for two weeks as part of his second year of distance learning to gain an HNC in greenkeeping and golf course management. And now in February he is off to San Francisco to attend the GCSAA show. It will be the second time he has attended this exhibition as he went to the one in New Orleans in 1992.

While he is away, he won't have to worry about his staff taking the decision to close the course. It's forbidden.

"We are not allowed to close the courses. Not even if there's frost or snow. I've seen them playing in 6in deep snow. After that they usually stop coming and the course closes itself. Most people will only play in so much. Of course you always get the odd idiot..."

But they're still allowed out, even if they're going to do more damage than the £8 green fee they're paying.

"The bosses will not close it for the simple reason that once you start closing golf courses people tend to look out the window and think 'Oh they'll be closed, we won't go there'. So they always keep Thorpe Wood and Orton Meadows open because people will think 'Ah, they're always open, we'll go there'. And, if when they get here the conditions look too bad and they don't want to play, they could then be tempted to spend that £8 in the shop."

Despite this, the Peter Alliss/Dave Thomas

Could you be the next winner?

The annual search for a Premier Greenkeeper will continue with several modifications this year.

In future, the competition will be to find the Zeneca Premier Greenkeeper of the Year. The prizes for the winning head greenkeepers/course managers will remain the same, that is, a first prize of a trip to the GCSAA conference and exhibition in the USA, a second prize of a weekend for two in London and tickets for a top West End show and a third prize of a weekend for two at Aldwark Manor.

However, an additional prize of £500 will be awarded to the winning greenkeeper's team. Nominations for the competition may be from golf clubs, greenkeeping teams or individual greenkeepers and nominations must reach BIGGA headquarters by May 31 1995. Regions will then select three representatives to go forward to the final stages of the competition. Each of the three courses in each region will be

visited by a representative of Zeneca Professional Products together with a BIGGA regional representative and they will select the five finalists. The finalists will have their courses reassessed by a Zeneca representative and a member of the BIGGA Board of Management before the final interview stage at Aldwark Manor. The final will take place at Aldwark Manor on December 4 1995.

Remember, the competition is to find the greenkeeper who gets the best from his course with the facilities that he has available and aims to recognise services to the greenkeeping industry.

If you are a course manager or head greenkeeper, a member of a successful greenkeeping team or a golf club that thinks their greenkeeping team deserve recognition then *enter now*. Write to Ken Richardson, education officer, BIGGA HQ, Aldwark Manor, Aldwark, Aine, York YO6 2NF.