

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...



From Strength to strength

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

THE MAN WITH THE **ABBHEY** 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&B 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.

"It was great experience. I was on committee with the likes of Chris Kennedy and remember playing golf at a Section meeting with George Brown when I was about 17. He was absolutely great to me but I'd doubt if Chris or George would remember me."

It was at this stage, still at the age of 19, that John decided that his career needed to take a different course. The path he chose was education.

"I felt that I could have stayed at Dumbarton for a couple of years and



THE MAN WITH THE ABBEY HABIT

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 Dumbarton 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

It didn't happen and the clue to the

abject failure of golf clubs to take notice of John is revealed in the second last word of the previous paragraph.

John was only 22 and over qualified for anything other than the top job at a golf club and clubs were reluctant to put the affairs of their golf courses in the hands of someone seen as no more than a callow youth.

"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 Dumbarton 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 Abbeydale Golf Club. He attended, and still attends, every lecture put on by the Sheffield Section and had also visited BTME.

"At Harrogate 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 excellent 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 by the rest of the membership.

It didn't take John too long to win round the membership particularly in his work on a new irrigation system, bunker renovation and the masterminding of a new maintenance facility brought about by a threat to close the club down by the Health and Safety Executive (See Greenkeeper International October '97.) Oh yes, he's also proved himself to be a bit of an inventor coming up with needle hollow tines which some of the major companies now produce.

The close relationship between John and Jack is highlighted by the fact that Jack was the person on the end of the phone when John made his first call both, after his interview and after the announcement of his win.

"This has vindicated my decision to go down the education route as I've achieved a status that would have been out of my reach if I'd gone down the more orthodox route. It means a lot to

me and from Jack's point of view proves to us that we were right. I wanted to win it for him as well as the team - Craig Richards, Lee Mason, Barrie Wild, Glynn Hancock, Paul Mason and Steve Hewins - and for lots of members of the club."

On the future John is well aware of the benefits such success can bring but he is too level headed to get carried away.

"I'm the same greenkeeper now as I was before I won the competition. I'm not any different. I don't want to come across as a mercenary so unless something comes along that I really feel I couldn't turn down as far as I'm concerned things will continue the way they are at the moment.

"I want to continue my education. Myerscough College is offering a correspondence degree course which it is going to do on CD Rom the year after next and I've also applied to go on the Master Greenkeeper programme."

Jack is sure that if and when the day comes that John does decide to move on, and he confesses that the club Board were concerned that it might happen if John won the Toro, it would not mean the end of the relationship.

"John would never leave this club spiritually. He's done too much here. I'm sure that if he went anywhere else he'd always 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.

Above: John very much a double act with Jack Copeland

Below: A valiant effort; (from L-R) Back row; Andy Campbell, Peter Wisbey, Richard Whyman Front row; John Quinn, John Coleman and Allan McDougall

