

New Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year, Andrew Pledger, swapped the world of retail management for the life of a greenkeeper, and is delighted that he did.

Supermarket Swap

It takes a lot of guts to throw up a successful career and go back to square one in a job about which you know the bare minimum for a significant pay cut.

That's what Andrew Pledger did, and what's more he announced his desire to make the radical step to his wife when they had just returned from honeymoon. But for both Andrew and his wife, Karen, this bold step paid off, less than two years later, when he was announced as the Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year winner for 2001.

Andrew had been working his way through the managerial ranks of Sainsbury's when he got the urge to find a job in the golf industry and having looked at both the general management and the greenkeeping sides of the business decided that greenkeeping offered the better long term prospects.

He had started with Sainsbury's as a butcher but his talents were soon spotted and he was soon running the beers, wines and spirits department, and then the dried goods and fresh foods departments in addition to working on a special internet shopping project.

Very much on the promotion ladder it was a sudden climate change within Sainsbury's which saw pressure placed on stores to achieve that persuaded Andrew to look elsewhere.

"It became clear that you could no longer have ideas of your own and make a difference individually and I wasn't enjoying it any more," he said.

He was Sainsbury's golf event organiser for the South East region and he decided that golf was where he wanted his future to lie.

"I didn't start playing golf until I was 19 and I really fell head over heels with the game and realised that I wanted a career in the game. Given my retail management training, general management might have been an easier option for me but I believed that in greenkeeping, once you've been trained, there are opportunities

for you around the world and it was a career that you could pick up and take wherever you wanted to take it," said the 30 year-old, as we chatted, along with Karen, in the Key Room in BIGGA HOUSE the morning after his triumph.

Having made that decision the difficulty would perhaps have been finding a golf club willing to take on a 28 year-old with no greenkeeping experience to his name whatsoever but in this aspect his bravery deserved the piece of luck which came his way.

"I saw a position advertised in the local paper for an assistant at the Hertfordshire Golf Club and Karen told me to apply for it. I spoke to both sets of parents to get their opinions and told Karen that the money would be considerably lower than what I was on at the time. But she said just to do it."

They were both concerned about how Andrew's CV would look to a potential employer given that it contained little of direct relevance to the position for which he was applying and how he could convince them that he deserved an interview.

"He made a point of going to the club to present his application personally so that they could put a face to the letter when they came to read it and see the personality behind it," explained Karen, whose own well paid job was able to cushion Andrew's drop in salary.

The man to whom Andrew now owes quite a debt of gratitude is Richard Shepherd, Course Superintendent at the American Golf-owned course, who took a chance on him.

"Richard was a plumber before he became a greenkeeper so perhaps he saw something of himself in me," said Andrew, whose golf handicap, you won't be surprised to learn, has gone up since he started his new job.

He can still recall the cold and wet November day in 1999 when he took



Above: Andrew Pledger

his first steps as an assistant greenkeeper.

"When I came in I didn't really know what the job involved but I did know it was about caring for grass and not just cutting grass. The first job I did was changing holes and tee markers but it was more a case of going round with one of the guys and helping him."

Andrew was well aware that to make a success of his new career he would have to learn as much as he could as quickly as he could.

"I got the promise that I would go to college at my interview but just missed the intake for that year's day

release at Oaklands College. So I started in September of 2000 which helped quite a lot because it gave me a few months to learn about greenkeeping before beginning to learn it formally. Once I got there I was able to throw myself into it more."

And throw himself into it he has to the extent that when the application forms were sent out for the Toro Student of the Year Award Andrew's lecturer, Andy White, approached Andrew as the student they regarded as having the best chance of winning.

That confidence was well placed as Andrew impressed the regional inter

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view panel of BIGGA's Education and Training Manager, Ken Richardson; Lely (UK) General Manager Turf Products, Pete Mansfield; and BIGGA's National Board Member and Course Manager of Old Folds Manor GC, Ian Semple, and won his way to the National Final.

"I felt the interview had gone well and was confident as I'd put a lot of effort into my portfolio and it has gone forward for a City and Guilds award and I was delighted when the letter arrived saying I was through."

Having arrived at the final he revelled in meeting his seven fellow finalists as well as the Toro Award Excellence in Greenkeeping finalists and the judges.

"It was nice because it was the first time I'd been in a situation where I'd socialised with greenkeepers and been in a room with so many elements of the golf industry and meeting people like Walter Woods who is right at the top of the profession."

"When the two runners-up were called my heart was thumping but, literally, a couple of seconds before Ken Richardson said my name I felt inside that I'd done it."

He is looking forward to his prize, a six week study course in Massachusetts and visits to the Toro headquarters in Minneapolis and California as well as the GCSAA Conference and Show in Orlando but feels that one of the most important elements is that his CV will now stand out from the crowd.

"Now all of a sudden it is Andy Pledger, Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year."

He was seated at the same table as last year's winner Jonathan Cleland and before the night was over they had enjoyed a long chat on what the new incumbent would expect over the next 12 months.

"He said to throw myself into it as it is such a good opportunity and said that while in America people would be interested in me as I was a foreigner and they'd be keen to know how I'd got there," explained Andrew, who is looking forward to perhaps meeting up with Karen, who may well be in the States on business during his stay.

Andrew was promoted to First Assistant a month before the final but his ultimate goal is to become a Course Manager at a 36, 54 or even 72 hole complex.

"It would be then that the skills I learned in retail management would become more useful - managing people, managing budgets and dealing with the customers and the hierarchy within the golf club.

"American Golf is such a large company - you could liken the company to a supermarket chain - there are the opportunities for me and others to move within the group."

Listening to Andrew and Karen you sense that they are delighted that their gamble has paid off. Let's leave the last word to Karen.

"I'm just so thrilled because when Andrew made this career change it was such a big decision for us to make. We'd just come back from honeymoon when Andrew decided that he didn't want to carry on retail management...and many friends and family asked why he wanted to leave such a good job to start a new career in greenkeeping which is not particularly well paid.

"I just believe there is more to life than earning a lot of money and if you find a job which you have a passion for you should go for it."



And

When BIGGA's Education and Training Manager, Ken Richardson uttered the two words "Huw" and "Morgan" around 7.15pm on Tuesday, October 30, the man who had least expected to hear them at that particular moment was Huw Morgan, Course Manager of Wildernesse Golf Club, in Kent.

The reason? Huw was so sure that he wouldn't be named Toro Award for Excellence in Greenkeeping winner for 2001 he'd even made a bet with a colleague that one of his rivals would win. Many would have tried to hide the shock and attempt to look a little bit nonchalant but the 35 year-old Welshman wouldn't have even made the final if it had been the Toro Award for Excellence in Acting.

He looked absolutely dumbstruck and it was a great credit to him that he pulled himself together enough to make a more than passable winner's speech before settling down to enjoy his dinner and let the impact of his triumph begin to penetrate.

Talking the next morning in the foyer of the Crown Hotel, Boroughbridge, which had hosted the final interviews and the presentations, it was still only beginning to sink in.

The four finalists had been brought to the centre of the room at the appropriate moment for the big announcement to be made and Huw was thinking about the bet that he'd struck with Carden Park Course Manager Andy Campbell MG, who was at the finals as one of the regional Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year judges.

"I was sure one of the other finalists was going to win so when we got to our feet all I was looking forward to taking £5 off Andy then when the words 'Huw Morgan' came out of Ken's mouth I virtual-

ly passed out. Surprised was not the word, I just could not believe it," admitted Huw, whose pessimism was born from the fact that he felt his course inspection, carried out in October and in the week after the club's course maintenance week, may count against him.

Asked what his next thought was and you get another honest answer.

"Nothing went through my head, just emptiness. It didn't sink in until I left the room after dinner and went into the bar for the first proper drink with the lads. Everything else was a blur."

The "lads" were the other three finalists Alan Purdie, Head Greenkeeper of Craig Golfing Society, who won the Scottish Final; David Murdoch MG, Course Manager of Liphook GC Huw's fellow finalist drawn from England and Wales, and Alan Strachan, Head Greenkeeper of Royal County Down GC, the Irish Champion.

"I don't know if this has happened before but the four of us sat together at the dinner rather than be spread out among the rest of the tables and that was genuine friendship. I do believe I've made three great new friends during the day and a half we were together for the final and we have promised to get together for a drink at Harrogate in January."

Huw is well aware of the doors such an Award can open and is sure that if he continues the upward path his career is taking he has the potential, and the ambition, to progress even further.

"Although I've won this Award I wouldn't class myself as being at the top of the profession, but it can be a massive step up for me in my career as long as I go with the flow and keep on doing what I've been doing for the last couple of years."