

The Long Road to Success...

TORO
STUDENT
GREENKEEPER
of the year
AWARD

Scott MacCallum meets the 2002 Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year, Murray Long

The greenkeeping career of one young Buckinghamshire school leaver started in a manner that you would not necessarily find in any Career Handbook. He arrived at the nine hole course on his first day knowing that the only other member of staff, the Head Greenkeeper, was away for the week and he was on his own. He had been briefed that his first task was to cut the greens so out he went with the hand mower and began work. It started to rain, and then it rained some more. Before long it was absolutely pouring but the young novice kept going.

"I thought I'd better stick with the job and get it finished as I thought it would be terrible to come in on my first day just because of a bit of rain, but the Bar Steward came out and dragged me back inside. I was absolutely drenched," recalled Murray Long, Head Greenkeeper at Coombe Hill Golf Club, and the 2002 Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year.

What it does illustrate, as well as perhaps an example of how not best to induct a new member of staff, is the determination of Murray to succeed, no matter the circumstances, as well as his rare enthusiasm for the job.

Despite the rather damp introduction, Murray has nothing but fond memories of that first job, at Chesham & Ley Hill GC and the Head Greenkeeper, Geoff Puddefat.

"I was there for six months and it was a great experience. Everything was hands on and it was a great way to learn all the basics of the job.

"I recall Geoff telling me to reverse the tractor and trailer into the shed but to remember to move the roll bar down as it was too high for the shed. I only made that mistake once ... The shed rocked," said Murray, smiling at the memory.

Some 17 years on from that Murray is the Head Greenkeeper at one of the country's best and most respected golf clubs and is delighted to don the mantle Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year.

"I really, really wanted to win it. I was so pleased to come up here and meet all the other finalists. It was obvious they were all quality greenkeepers so I knew I would have to buckle down and try really hard to win. I'm pleased because I know that I gave my best and if my best hadn't been good enough I would have wished good luck to the person who did because the standard was so high they would have deserved it," said Murray, as he spoke the morning after the win and not with the woolly head normally associated with the winner after a long night of celebrating but in the glow of an early morning workout in the gym.

One new element, introduced for the 2002 final was a course report which the finalists had to produce on the front nine of the Aldwark Manor course, which they didn't get a chance to see before they arrived the day before the final.

"I really enjoyed the report and put an awful lot of preparation work into it. I did as much as I could before I got here, thinking about the format. I wanted to go into as much detail as I could and still be able to type it up."

Already being at Head Greenkeeper at a respected club, Murray felt additional pressure being up against fellow finalists who generally were

Deputies or Assistants.

"When my College Lecturer, Keith Harrison, of Merrist Wood, spoke to me about it and asked if I wanted to be put forward, at first I said, I wasn't sure as I was in charge of a course and didn't think it was right but he said I'd completed the NVQ course and done so to a high standard so was just as entitled to enter as anyone else.

"But I did feel under more pressure because of it. I had to produce the best and, in my mind at least, I had to be better, by a degree or so, to justify winning.

"I wanted to prove that I had the ability as a Head Greenkeeper but also that I had the ability to show what I've achieved and got out of the course."

It is another example of the desire Murray has displayed throughout his career.

After his initial six month spell at Chesham & Ley Hill he moved to an 18 hole course, Ellesborough, near Aylesbury, which coincidentally sits below a hill called Coombe Hill. Who says there is no such thing as fate?

"Seve Schmitz was the Course Manager initially and he was great to work for. He was very progressive, using computers before they were commonplace in the industry, and knew the job very well," said Murray, of the man who went on to move to Germany and become a Master Greenkeeper. "He gave me a good grounding and it was disappointing when he left to go to Germany as I'd caught his enthusiasm from him."

After Seve moved on Murray worked under David Childs and his Deputy, David Goodchild, who is now the Head Greenkeeper there, and he acknowledges what he learned from them as well.

It was at this stage where he recognised a career path and set himself a target.

"I wanted to be a Head by the time I was 25. It might have been ambitious at that time but I felt you had to have these things to aim for," he admitted.

With that long term goal in mind he made his next career change moving to Berkhamsted Golf Club.

"It is a very good golf course under Gerald Bruce, who is a good golfer and a very nice guy. It was another good experience and I learn how to work with different soils."

If you have the feeling by now that Murray had a blinkered approach to his career which wouldn't be swayed by anything think again as his next move wasn't exactly initiated by purely professional reasoning, but it did result in him arriving at his current club.





Murray Long

"I was only at Berkhamsted a short time because I met a young lady who lived in Kingston and a job at Coombe Hill came up, with accommodation. I knew Coombe Hill was a good course and was close to Kingston," he smiled.

Buoyed by young love but also with the knowledge that it also represented a good career move he gave it a go and, at the age of 21, was lucky enough to be appointed an assistant under then Head Greenkeeper, Sandy McKechnie.

As ever Murray threw himself into the job carrying out a lot of construction work on the course picking up valuable experience in that field.

"I was under Sandy from five years working my way up to Deputy then, a year after becoming Deputy, Sandy left to go to Woking GC and the club asked me to take over the running of the course until they found another Head man."

Murray was 26 at the time and had only just missed his target of being a Head man by the time he was 25. Although, had he factored a club of Coombe Hill's stature into the equation he might have added another ten years to that original target.

"I thought to myself, 'This is it. I've got to go for it and make the most of a wonderful opportunity'."

Six months later what might have been considered a probationary period by the club ended with him being confirmed in post on a permanent basis and, five years on, he hasn't looked back.

Murray is in charge of a 12 strong team on what he describes as a "high presentation, high maintenance course".

"Being a guy of 26 and managing the staff which included some people considerably older was a little difficult at first but the guys were fantastic and I knew what they could do and where they fitted in, as individuals, into the team."



All eight finalists

The club has recently undertaken a significant change to the structure of the club which has seen Murray much more involved in the management.

"We have moved away from the traditional committee structure and I now sit on the Course Management Committee with Brian Salisbury, who is the Chairman, and a man who is very supportive and progressive in his thinking; Craig Defoy, the Club Professional and a regular on the Senior Tour, and the Club Captain of the Day, Ronnie Goldstein.

"It is just the four of us and I'm involved in every decision from the budget all the way down. Any changes I propose are taken by the Chairman of the Committee to the General Committee and it has meant that we have made so much progress this year."

Murray is keen to make sure he maximises the benefits of the main Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year prize - six weeks of study at the University of Massachusetts, a trip to the TORO factories in Minneapolis and in California and a trip to the GCSAA Exhibition in Atlanta in February 2003.

"I'm sure it is going to be a phenomenal experience. I've already spoken to last year's winner, Andy Pledger, about it. As well as taking the opportunity to meet so many new people,

I want to go and take as much as I can out of it technically and bring what I've learned back to my team at Coombe Hill. It is a once in a lifetime opportunity," enthused Murray, who admitted that it would be difficult to spend time away from his wife, Penny, and year-old daughter, Sophia.

"I will miss them incredibly, but we talked about the possibility of my winning and agreed that it was a short period of time out of our lives together and that it would be superb for my career. And Penny knows that I'd do the same for her if the positions were reversed," he said.

In the manner of an Oscar winner Murray also took time to thank those who had made it possible.

"I'd like to thank Toro, BIGGA and everyone on the judging panel for making it such a great experience. I'd recommend the competition to anybody. I'd also like to thank the club, the greenkeeping staff for supporting me, not to mention the brilliant support of my wife. Finally I'd like to thank the other finalists. I've made some good friends and, although it was a bit stressful, we all had a really good time."

The two runners-up who each received an all expenses paid trip to Continue to Learn and BTME at Harrogate next year were John Gubb who is the Deputy Course Manager at the Bedfordshire Golf Club and Graham Winter, who works at Kingsbarns Golf Links and attends Elmwood College.



John Gubb



Graham Winter



The complete cast