

A GOLDEN Opportunity



Reigning Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year, Andrew Pledger, gives the 2002 finalists an insight into what to expect if he or she were to win.

It wasn't until I had boarded the aeroplane to the US that it actually hit home that I had won the award of "TORO Student Greenkeeper of the Year", I had still been in shock up until then.

The prize award was an all expenses paid trip to the US and an opportunity to study at Massachusetts University.

After an emotional farewell at Gatwick Airport I boarded the plane for the nine hour flight to Hartford, via Newark. On arrival, I was welcomed by over a foot of snow and hence a longer than usual taxi ride to the motel, where I would lodge for the next seven weeks. Adding to the drama my luggage was not to arrive with me and did not finally turn up until a few days later! But, I had no time to be worrying about this. I had time for just a few hours sleep and then it was up for an early start for registration and my first lesson at the University of Massachusetts.

For the next seven weeks I attended the 'Winter School for Turf Grass Managers', during which time I studied 11 subjects including Turf Grass Management, Soil Science, Diseases and Weed Management. All of the 11 subjects were taught to the highest standard by professors and scientists in their own field. It was truly a golden opportunity to be attending such a course.

The classes demanded a lot of studying both within and outside the classroom, but I found it stimulating and hence enjoyable. I often studied together with fellow students, who were also lodging

at the same motel as myself, and this naturally gave opportunities to discuss openly what we had learnt in class.

In all, the course was attended by 53 students (Course Superintendents and Deputies), most of whom were from the US, and some from Canada.

Throughout the weeks we were assessed continually, and the marks from these assessments/tests helped form part of the final pass mark. For Turf Grass Management, Soil Science, Entomology, Turf Diseases and Weed Management we also had end of course exams/test papers.

It was seven weeks of hard studying and discussion, but as a way of relaxing I, together with a few of the other lads, took time out at weekends and evenings, to catch a few Basketball and Ice Hockey games. It was also the season for the SuperBowl so, as I am sure you can imagine this gave focus to some our time-out! I also found time to enjoy a weekend visit to Boston.

Five weeks into my studies and I was catching a plane again. This time to Florida, to attend the GCSAA Trade Show, and the President's Dinner Show. At the dinner I met with Richard Barker, BIGGA Chairman, Clive Osgood, Past Chairman, Neil Thomas, BIGGA Executive Director, Huw Morgan, MG and winner of the Toro Excellence in Greenkeeping Award, and Andy Wight, my Tutor from Oaklands College. Before the dinner we witnessed Walter Woods receive the Old Tom Morris Award, given for



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recognition of his services to the industry. I felt very privileged to have been invited to the dinner, after all I had only been part of this industry just three years, and what an opportunity! I, of course, had an enjoyable evening.

The following day I attended the Trade Show. It was enormous and extremely impressive, I only wish I had had more time to see more of it. I did, however, visit some of the major US grass seed companies, which I found particularly interesting because of the launch of a Round-up ready Bentgrass cultivar and, of course, I met with the TORO representatives, namely Andy Brown. By the end of the day I was back at the airport to catch the flight back to Hartford. It was unfortunate that the Trade Show and Dinner were scheduled during term time.

The course ended with a Graduation Dinner and Certificate Presentation. All my hard work had paid off and I graduated with high grades and a Certificate to prove it! I made a lot of friends and it was strange having to say goodbye, but I knew that I would keep in touch with them and who knows where we might meet again, in a professional way!

My next destination was Minneapolis and over the next three days my itinerary was to include a visit to the TORO Headquarters, the Shakopee Manufacturing Plant and the Tomah Production Plant.

The visit to the TORO Headquarters gave a useful and interesting insight into the research and equipment developing test work. It has certainly made me appreciate the 'behind the scenes' work conducted on each and every piece of equipment. Kris Lindstrom, from TORO, accompanied me on my visit to Shakopee. It is a manufacturing plant where they produce various parts for the TORO machines, but mainly cylinder blades and bottom blades for their cutting units. My final excursion was to the Tomah Production Plant in Wisconsin. Daniel Tinklenberg, from TORO accompanied me on this visit. Tomah is the place where most of TORO's turfgrass machines are assembled and get their distinctive paintwork applied. The image that I take away from these visits wasn't only one of machinery or a piece of equipment, but one of employee

loyalty, where everyone seemed proud to work for TORO.

I also really appreciated that the lads from Toro, together with Jase Birch, Mike and Dan (also from Toro), took time out to show a good night in Minneapolis and we enjoyed some excellent food and a beer or two! An all-important bonding session is what some might call it!

My next port of call was to Riverside, California and it was a relief to finally be in warmer climates. The average temperature in Minneapolis was -6 degrees and never before had I attempted to wear so many layers of clothing.

On arrival at Riverside, and after checking in at The Marriot Courtyard Hotel, I was contacted by Kenne James, from Toro, who had arranged for me to visit Oak Valley Golf Course (just outside Palm Springs) and to play the course, which was in excellent condition.

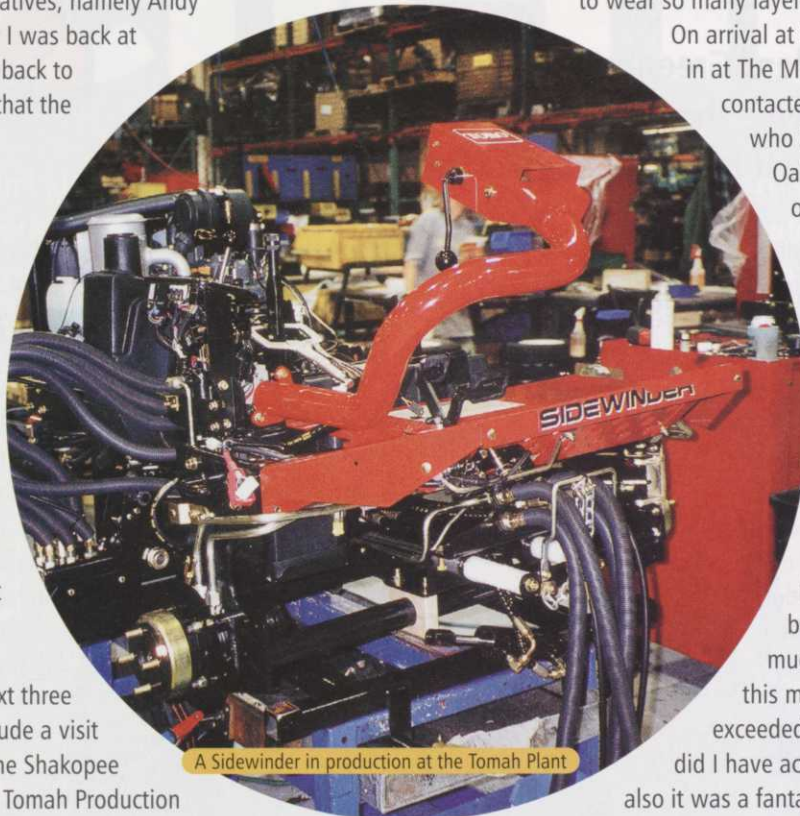
The main purpose of my visit to Riverside, however, was to visit the TORO Irrigation Plant. Here all the irrigation systems and sprinklers are designed, produced and tested.

Now that I've been back for a few months, I can look back and reflect on just how much I have gained from winning this much-desired award. The trip exceeded all my expectations. Not only did I have access to first class tutoring, but also it was a fantastic opportunity to establish an invaluable network of contacts and friends. My

confidence has increased and my profile raised, both of which I am sure will stand me in good stead for my future career progression.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Ken Richardson, Education & Training Manager at BIGGA, and everyone else at BIGGA; TORO for their continuous sponsorship of the award and Lely UK, namely Pete Mansfield and Christine Wilson, Pete's assistant, who helped organise the whole trip.

In addition, I would like to thank Richard Sheppard and Laurence Pithe, from American Golf UK Ltd, for allowing me the time away from my work at The Hertfordshire Golf Club, and lastly my friends and family who have supported me and backed my decision to change careers from Retail Management to Turf Management.



A Sidewinder in production at the Tomah Plant