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Ken Richardson describes his annual trek in search of this year's Toro Student of the Year finalists.

The TORO Student of the Year Competition 2003

When I started this job in 1994, nobody told me that it might involve walking through Glasgow at 11.30 pm on a Sunday night. It was all part of life's rich experience and I soon reached my hotel for the night and the venue of the Scottish Regional Final of the Toro Student of the Year Competition.



Now in its 13th year, the Toro Student of the Year Competition aims to find the top student greenkeeper from the 3500 greenkeepers under training each year. The Regional Finals, held in Glasgow, Manchester, Cheltenham and Harpenden, aimed to select eight candidates for the National Final, which will be held, this year, at BIGGA HOUSE on September 29.

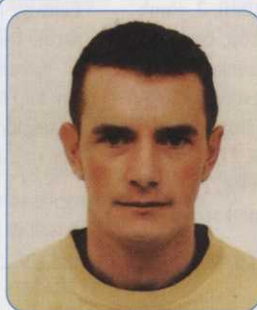
George MacDonald from Toro, Jim Paton and myself gathered together on Monday, June 30 to interview seven Scottish Student Greenkeepers. It was encouraging to see such a high standard of presentation from all seven candidates and there was little to choose between them. However, the judges had to make a decision and selected Paul Todd as the Scottish Regional Winner.

The Finalists from the North are Keith Scruton and John Talbot with Justin Waddell chosen to represent Ireland.



Keith Scruton is 29 and is the Head Greenkeeper at Colne Golf Club, where he has been since the beginning of 2003. Keith has been involved in golf course maintenance since 1989, starting with

summer work at Darwen Golf Club. Currently studying for an HND at Myerscough College, Keith has had to fit his studying around the demands of his young family. Another keen golfer, playing off 8, Keith has ambitions to manage an Open Championship venue.



Paul Todd, who is 27, is the Deputy Head Greenkeeper at Lanark Golf Club, where he has been for six years. Paul has been a greenkeeper since he was 16, starting as a summer boy. An excellent golfer, he currently plays off 1.7,

Paul feels that he has learned a great deal from his Head Greenkeeper, Jim Lyon. Currently studying Level 3 at Oatridge College, Paul has aspirations to run his own course and would like to work overseas.



John Talbot is a native of the North East and is currently the Head Greenkeeper at Ravensworth Golf Club. Currently studying for an HNC at Askham Bryan College, John wants to continue with his education and wants

to study for an MSc at Cranfield University. Another golfer, John plays off 8 and plays regularly in Competitions. John's ambitions include managing a top course in the United Kingdom.

A lengthy journey from Glasgow to York surrounded by a large group of noisy Russian teenagers and an early morning drive to Manchester Airport led to the next judging location where I was joined by Trevor Chard from Toro and Andy Campbell MG CGCS, vice Chairman of BIGGA. A long day of judging resulted in us selecting two candidates from the North plus an Irish Finalist.



Justin Waddell is a 24 years old Assistant Greenkeeper from Northern Ireland, where he works at the Fortwilliam Club. Justin has been a greenkeeper for six years, four of which have been at his current club. Justin has ambitions to become qualified to Head Greenkeeper standard by the time he is 25 and is currently studying Level 3 at Greenmount College. Justin plays golf off 16 and is an exponent of Kick Boxing.

Back in the car for another long journey saw me crossing the M6 five times in an attempt to bypass an accident at Mere, some 10 miles from Manchester Airport. I eventually reached Cheltenham, where I met up with Peter Mansfield, from Toro and Gordon Irvine MG to judge the candidates from the South West and Wales. Dylan Hughes and Bobby Vining were selected to progress to the National Final.



Dylan Hughes, as his name suggests, is a native of North Wales, and he works as the First Assistant at Pwllheli Golf Club, where he has been for seven years. Now studying for his Level 3 NVQ at Welsh College, Dylan has a range of other qualifications including an NVQ in Forestry. Dylan plays golf when he can spare the time from his project to renovate a 19th Century cottage. He wants to progress to be a Course Manager, running his own golf course.



Bobby Vining is a 23 years old Assistant Greenkeeper at Mendip Spring Golf Club, where he has worked for just under two years. A love of golf led Bobby to Mendip Spring where he has developed his skills under the supervision of his Course Manager, Ian Harrison. Currently studying NVQ 2 at Cannington College, Bobby is keen to learn about the full range of jobs on a golf course and see how greenkeepers cope in warm weather areas, where he may even be able to indulge another of his passions, American Sports.

The penultimate leg of my travels took me to Harpenden where Graeme Francis, from Toro and Ian Semple, joined me to judge the candidates from the South East and the Midlands. After a long day judging 10 candidates, we chose Martyn Gray and Robert George to progress to the National Final.



Martyn Gray is an Assistant Greenkeeper at Bramley Golf Club which is situated near to Guildford. Now 19 years old, Martyn began his involvement with greenkeeping through work experience when he was still at school. Martyn gained a National Certificate through study at Merrist Wood College where he has now completed his Level 3 NVQ. A relative newcomer to greenkeeping, he has ambitions to move quickly through the ranks to become a Course Manager.



Robert George is the Deputy to last year's TORO Student of the Year, Murray Long, at Coombe Hill Golf Club. A native of Australia, Robert decided to travel the World after a successful greenkeeping career 'Down Under'. As well as moving quickly through the ranks in the UK, Robert has got married and now has two children. He is studying his Level 3 at NEScot and hopes to become qualified this year. As well as playing golf off a handicap of 6, Robert plays National League Baseball, the highest standard in the UK.

The final leg of my journey was back home to North Yorkshire where I could recover from my tiring but, nonetheless, enjoyable week. Interviewing candidates for this competition has always given me a boost, confirming that I am contributing to the rapid increase in qualified greenkeepers. Standards continue to rise each year and the majority of greenkeepers now hold formal qualifications, present themselves very professionally at interview and have the full support of their golf clubs.

All eight candidates will assemble at BIGGA House on 28/29 September where they will again be interviewed by a panel of judges and be asked to conduct a survey of the Aldwark Manor Golf Course. The National Winner receives the Toro Scholarship which includes an eight week trip to the USA with six weeks at the University of Massachusetts and a visit to the GCSAA Conference and Show in San Diego.



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