

A Long Year

Murray Long reports on his time studying in the United States, his prize for winning last year's Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year Award.

After waving goodbye to my wife and daughter at Gatwick North Terminal, I departed on my trip. My first port of call was a flight to Cincinnati, where I would be catching a connecting flight to Hartford Connecticut.

On arrival at Hartford I caught the Valley Transport a local mini bus service for Connecticut and Massachusetts. We were greeted by the North American weather conditions - two feet of snow over the last 24 hours and it hadn't stopped yet. I found this really exciting, having never seen this amount of snow in London, but I think our driver had different ideas.

It took almost an hour and a half to thread our way through Massachusetts, dropping other students off at various Campus sites around an area which seemed to be completely dominated by students. We finally arrived at The Quality Inn on Route 9 Hadley, which was going to be my home for the next seven weeks.

My first day started by meeting up with some of the students I would be spending my time with. Greenkeepers are the same all over the world and it wasn't long before I negotiated a daily ride into the Campus.

The communications forwarded by the University had been excellent and soon we were all assembled in the scheduled building to begin the Winter School for Turf Grass Managers. Mary Owen, our Course Leader, greeted us and we began to go through the schedule and weekly timetable for our time at the University.

The course was taught by 11 tutors, seven of whom doctorates in their specialist field and pioneer research in America. The subjects covered were weeds, turf diseases, soil science, plant physiology, turf grass mathematics, arboriculture, irrigation, golf course design, entomology (the study of insects/turf pests), management, and general turf grass studies. All the classes were incredibly interesting and of enormous benefit. Each student had his own favourite subject and one of mine was turf grass diseases because it dealt with a large number of diseases that we never get to experience. Firstly we went through the basic principles of the diseases, what grass types it affected, what encouraged it and how it attacked the plant and spread and what group it belonged to. We would then examine these under a microscope in the Laboratory. How nice it was to see my old rival fusarium/pink snow mould up close and personal. It was important to read and study the information received as much as possible.

The lectures kept me on my toes with a series of tests, some weekly, some halfway through, with a test for everyone at the end of the course. There were around 20 students from my course staying in the Hotel and we would

get together around the swimming pool, or as it became known The Tropical Turf Lounge, for mass revision. Some of our free time would be spent watching the University Sports Teams, which included Hockey (Ice Hockey) and Basketball. All tickets were provided free of charge by Dr Patricia Vittum who taught us Entomology. Occasionally we would visit The Hanger for \$5 worth of chicken ribs and the odd beer or two.

The students ranged mainly from North East America, but included Alabama, Texas, the Czech Republic, Canada and the token Englishman.

I became friendly with a group of Canadians who were very handy for explaining the rules of Hockey. They also convinced me they were certainly better players and better drinkers than the Americans!

For the first two weeks we were pretty much the only students on campus, then the 28,000 other students came back and transformed the little town of Amherst.

I made time during two of my weekends off to meet my wife Penny in Boston and New York City, where some valuable retail therapy seemed to ease Penny's pain of me being away!

On the sixth week of my stay it was time for me to catch the plane to Atlanta for the GCSAA Conference and Show. I arrived mid-morning and quickly made my way from the hotel to the show. I visited all the different stands, stopping when something captured my interest. I eventually made my way to the BIGGA stand where I met Neil Thomas and George Brown, who were making every effort to promote the Association across the world.

Later that evening I managed to meet up with my college lecturer, Keith Harrison, who had travelled over for a week to experience the lectures. This was part of the award I had won. Later that evening I bumped into George Brown who was kind enough to give me some advice and share his experiences in the greenkeeping world. I am very grateful for George's advice.

I spent the next morning going round the stands, following up things that I had found particularly interesting. The afternoon was spent relaxing until it was time to prepare for the GCSAA Dinner/Show. This was an extravagant event, with guest speaker Greg Norman presenting The Old Tom Morris Award to Pete Dye for his services to golf.

All too soon it was time to fly back to Massachusetts and my final week. The seven weeks had passed very quickly and before I knew it I was attending the



Murray Long with his prize



Murray with his fellow students

end of course dinner, receiving my certificate and saying goodbye to some good friends.

The course is extremely highly regarded and provides a mountain of knowledge for the future. I feel honoured to have been a part of it.

I left Hartford on Sunday 23rd February, heading for my next destination - Toro Headquarters in Minneapolis. What an amazing experience it was to meet Barry Beckett and his team for a morning tour around the facility. I experienced some of the rigorous Health and Safety testing mechanisms that the Toro company put their machines through and also saw a strange use for Tennis balls! The design facilities were fantastic, using computer technology to ease problems before parts and machines are manufactured.

After lunch it was off to the parts manufacturing facility at Shakopee where I was given another great tour by operations Supervisor Dick Stonewill and shown how all the parts are made. Great investment has been made into new technology to make the plant more efficient.

The time passed very quickly and after a great meal in Minneapolis it was back to the hotel to prepare for my next day's visit to the Toro main manufacturing plant in Tomah Wisconsin.

It took three hours to reach Tomah, which gave me some time to take in the great countryside. On arrival I was introduced to Dave Betthausser, Head of Manufacturing, who took time out of his busy schedule to show me around.

Again, the professionalism of the people and the machinery showed through, with every effort being made at all times to forward the product, the manufacturing process and to build quality.

I found the paint department very fascinating with the bare parts going in through several different processes of dipping in various solutions, emerging at the end of the process dry to the touch and with every single area covered.

After lunch it was on to the assembly line where I had a chance to see some of the construction of machines we all use on a daily basis, from the frame to the last wheel nut being put on and the machine started. I was also privileged to view the Super Workman, a project the employees had undertaken for a special event. With custom paintwork, recaro seats and a mean exhaust it was more suited to Santa Pod than a Golf Course. At the end of another great day it was off to the Brits pub in Minneapolis with Barry Becket for my last evening.

The next day I travelled to Riverside California to visit the Toro irrigation facility. My first thought on landing was how lovely it was to experience some

warm weather. I would be staying in the Mission Inn, which was a beautiful old Spanish-type building set in the centre of Riverside. On arrival in my room I received a note asking me to contact Kenne James. Kenne would be explaining the in's and out's of irrigation for the next couple of days.

After a pleasant relaxing evening and a good night's sleep, 'the maddest taxi driver in the world' was soon driving me back to the Toro irrigation facility.

Not only was he driving at a speed to rival Michael Schumacher, he was turning round at the same time to tell me jokes! I was very pleased to arrive at the facility in one piece. Kenne greeted me with a cup of coffee, which I gratefully accepted to calm my nerves after my interesting journey. Kenne showed me around the facility, explaining the general set-up and showing me some of the testing that is done for new development. I was then introduced to Jeff, a new employee of Toro, who would be working in Kenne's department. We then spent several hours discussing various topics regarding sprinkler placement set up and any other irrigation questions.

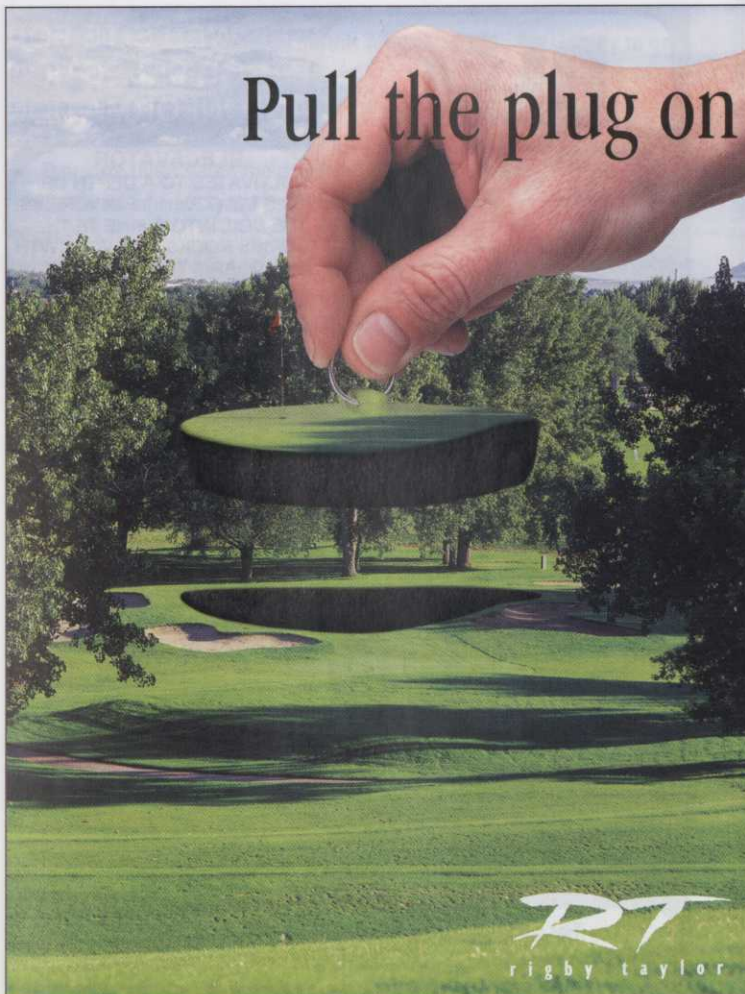
With his vast knowledge of the business Kenne was able to answer all our questions.

The next day was spent visiting Oak Valley Golf and Country Club. This was the first time I had set foot on a Golf Course for two months, the longest period away from a course since I began work at the age of 16. I found this a strange experience, having just spent the last seven weeks surrounded by three feet of snow and studying everything to do with golf courses.

The Course Superintendent took time out of his busy day to show me around his great Golf Course and explain all aspects of its construction and development. I was looking forward to seeing some of the warm season grasses and was surprised to see poa annua greens that had previously been sown to bent but had converted over to meadowgrass. Sounds like a familiar story to me, even in the States. Then it was on to the PGA course Southern California, a new development, with its clubhouse overlooking the course. This course was well set out and catered for its clients with great practice facilities and more golf buggies than I have ever seen.

I finished my trip by spending a great afternoon taking in some of the sights I would like to thank the Toro Company for their excellent hospitality and continued support of the Greenkeeping Industry.

I would also like to thank everyone at BIGGA and the staff and members at Coombe Hill Golf Club for their hard work and support while I was away.



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