

AN IRISHMAN ABROAD

It was February 2002, and I was studying at Elmwood College, when Mike Clark and Ian Butcher asked if I wanted to go to America to work on a golf course and gain more experience. Of course I was interested, and was put in touch with agronomist Bruce Jamieson, who explained to me about a practical and academic programme offered at the University of Minnesota. It was called the Minnesota Agricultural Student Training (MAST) programme.



▲ Work goes on at Hazeltine

The MAST programme was initially set up over 50 years ago to allow Swedish agricultural students to go to the USA and expand their knowledge in agricultural practices.

In 2001, the Toro Company, based in Minneapolis, through Helmut Ullrich and Barry Beckett, started an agronomy side of the programme, initially sponsoring two German students to work on a golf course and study at the University of Minnesota. The five students on my 2003 course were from England, Ireland, Germany and South Africa.

Bruce Jamieson helped facilitate my application and all arrangements and, fortunately, The Toro Company and the University of Minnesota accepted me as a participant in the MAST programme. So I applied for and got a J-1 work visa, which was processed within two weeks in Dublin.

So it was that I flew from Gatwick to Minneapolis on April 14, to embark upon such an exciting, if somewhat daunting, opportunity. Helmut and Barry met me in the USA, and accompanied me to the university campus for the MAST orientation session, which provided me with all the information I needed to live and work in the USA.

They told me I was to be placed at Midland Hills Country Club, located in St. Paul, the sister city to Minneapolis, and otherwise known in the USA as the Twin Cities area. Later, I met Course Superintendent Scott Austin, who introduced me to the other course staff and gave me a tour of the course and facilities. Scott had also made accommodation arrangements for me that were less than a mile from the course.

He asked what aspects of practical experience I felt I needed to improve upon, to maintain and run a successful golf course operation. He wanted to take time to make sure I would gain all the experience I could, and placed me

on every major project that occurred on the course. He also charged me with the responsibility of leading crew projects. After a couple of weeks in the USA I figured that owning a car was a must! I found a nice vehicle and settled in very well at Midland Hills, developing many friendships with the staff and members.

During the practical training period the university requires students to keep track of all aspects of their training and gives participants full monthly reports to keep both the University and students up to date. This is while also giving an opportunity to iron-out any problems that may occur during the training period. There is also lots of information to prepare students for the next academic programme, giving time to select classes for the spring term. There was a wide range of classes to choose from. I chose 'Turf grass Diseases', 'Economics' and 'Meteorology'.

Luckily for me, my time in the Twin Cities coincided with two major events held at nearby courses. The first was the PGA Championship at Hazeltine National, the other the Solheim Cup, at Interlachen Country Club. Both clubs have a lot of history when it comes to hosting high profile tournaments!

I attended both events. They taught me a lot about tournament preparation and the conditions needed for world-class events. Hazeltine National was hit with about six inches of rain on the Friday night of the tournament, which saw every bunker and low spot completely full of water. But I never saw water disappear so fast in the morning! I think every bunker pump in the Twin Cities was at Hazeltine that morning, along with the local fire department trucks that also helped with the pumping frenzy.

Amazingly, all was OK when the first paring stepped on to the tee on Saturday morning!

Following Christmas back in Ireland, I returned to the University of Minnesota. The classes were very interesting and the professors covered the subjects in great detail. The Turf Grass Diseases class was extremely interesting and included a lot of reading and taking part in practical laboratory assignments.

The University has a large agricultural and horticultural department with many valuable reference materials. All participants may work a maximum of 20 hours a week to earn spending money, and I continued to work at Midland Hills through the winter. This in itself was a unique experience – as it rarely rises above minus 15 degrees C in the winter!

On one day in particular, I think the thermometer in my car read minus 27 degrees C as I drove to work! A unique experience, but well worth it.

There is so much to do in the Twin Cities during winter. It gets really cold but people just get on with it. You can walk around downtown Minneapolis and actually never have to go outside, as there are structures called skyways that weave overhead through all of the buildings. It really is amazing architecture. In fact, Minneapolis has the world's largest network of overhead skyways.

The academic programme lasted five months and finished with final exams in mid-May. At that time, I bade farewell to Minneapolis/St. Paul and set off for the world-famous Baltusrol Golf Club in the state of New Jersey.

Morgan O'Sullivan reports on his American adventure which saw him working at some of America's best known golf courses

TORO Count on it.



▲ A spectacular view of Hazeltine



▲ A finely built stone bridge

Baltusrol impressed me immediately. I had read a lot about it in various magazines and it wasn't a let-down. Being mid-May, the season was just getting into full swing.

The operation at Baltusrol is like nothing I have ever seen. It consists of two championship courses, the Upper Course – which has held the US Amateur and US Women's Open – and the Lower Course, which has staged numerous US Opens and US Amateur Championships.

On my first day the superintendent of the Upper Course, Scott Bosetti, gave me a course tour and I was amazed at its condition. I clearly remember the words he used to describe the conditioning at Baltusrol. "This is a US Open course and that's what the members want everyday – not just for a week in June," he said.

And it's true; we daily continued to set up the courses to US Open standards. Director of Grounds Mark Kuhns CGCS, who was also a director of the GCSAA, knows a thing or two about championship conditions, after previously working at Oakmont, the recent venue of the US Amateur Tournament.

Luckily for me, I came to Baltusrol at a very good time. They have just completed a maintenance facility that is second to none. Also, they now have on-site housing for two Assistant Superintendents and up to 12 interns. There are presently six interns but Mark Kuhns wishes to have 12 by the time the 2005 PGA Championship is held at Baltusrol.

Baltusrol runs a really good internship programme for students from all over: from Penn State, Rutgers University, the University of Guelph (Canada), and the MAST programme from the University of Minnesota. All interns are treated as team leaders and are given the opportunity to strengthen their weak points and make their strong points even stronger.

All the superintendents were always willing to help us learn on the course. We frequently had question-and-answer sessions with the superintendents, which proved to be extremely beneficial. We were responsible for many of the projects on the course, which tested our skills, knowledge and leadership.

Baltusrol has already begun preparing for the 2005 PGA Championship, with the semi-rough adjacent to the fairways already stripped and re-turfed to

ensure uniformity for the tournament. Greens are being expanded for new pin placements, and some bunkers are being re-shaped to make them more challenging for the tour professionals in 2005.

I finished the MAST programme on October 14, and left Baltusrol to return to Minneapolis and my flight home.

All in all, I can say that the MAST programme, in association with The Toro Company, has been a really good learning experience and exposed me to so many different situations, both workwise and socially; while also working in America. I know that the host superintendent's also learn from students like me as they like to hear about our experiences growing up in our home countries, as well as learning to use some of our language expressions that they don't hear in the USA!

During my time in America I developed many friendships that will continue into the future and provide me with a network of relationships I can call upon when I need help or opinions in dealing with challenges at work.

Currently I am working at The Grove Golf Course, in Hertfordshire, under the guidance of Phil Chiverton. So I am at a top-notch facility and looking forward to continuing my education on the job as this new course becomes established.

I would thoroughly recommend to all young, aspiring greenkeepers to consider taking any similar opportunity to work in the USA, or anywhere else in the world for that matter. The experience of living and working in a different culture provides you with alternative ways of looking at things, both in and out of work settings, and certainly expands the mind when meeting new friends from other countries.

The whole experience will hopefully stand me in good stead as I move onto new opportunities within the golf industry, as I have learnt a lot that I may not otherwise have done if I had just stayed in Ireland.

Finally, I would like to thank Helmut Ullrich and Barry Beckett, from The Toro Company, as well as Toro's distributor Lely UK, and Bruce Jamieson – in fact everyone who was involved with making this learning experience possible for me.

Many thanks.