

# Maturing with Age



2005 Toro Student of the Year Winner, Alan Pierce, has learnt from his youthful experiences to become a successful Deputy, as Gareth Jones found out.

What image flickers into your mind when the word student is mentioned? A soap dodger, a tax avoider, a cider drinker, an apple polisher or a hard grafter studying in the library until the wee hours? Whatever the description that has been conjured up in the old grey matter, good or bad, no doubt the character created takes the form of a teenager, a spotty, hormone driven young gun.

The 2005 Toro Student of the Year Final went some way to dispel that young ideology as Alan Pierce won the competition by a nose, with David Newton, 47, and James Lindsay, 27, claiming the runners up prizes. While at 25 years of age Alan is not exactly preparing to draw out his pension and sizing himself up for a nice pair of comfy slippers, he, along with David and James, have gone a long way to prove that education and professional development is not just for the youth of today.

Alan, who currently plies his trade at Ham Manor Golf Club as Deputy Course Manager, has been in greenkeeping since 1995, starting at the tender age of 15, but the education side of greenkeeping has only been part of his life since 2000, when he took on his NVQ Level 2 in Amenity Horticulture. He has since gone on to tackle Level 3 Sportsturf Management and also complete factory training with Kubota and John Shaw. He is quick to point out that age should be no barrier to studying.

"I don't think age matters at all. It is easy to think that the eight finalists are all young and all from the top clubs. The fact is that they were from all over, from big private clubs to municipals, from Deputy Course Managers to Assistants. It doesn't matter what age you are, what club you work at or what position you hold, you always have the chance to learn, further your career and possibly win Awards like this," said a smiling Alan, who was shocked just to be nominated by his tutor, Dave Blackmur at Plumpton College, to enter the competition, let alone to lift the famous Toro Shield.

Alan has learnt the hard way that a youthful thirst for knowledge and keen attitude is not always a recipe for success. He took on the Deputy

Course Manager position at Wellshurst Golf Club, returning to his first ever club, at 19 and soon realised that he had not developed the key skills needed for such a role of responsibility. Working with colleagues older and more experienced than himself proved difficult, while dealing with members' problems and criticism was something Alan had not faced before.

"I was just too young. I knew the greenkeeping side of the job inside out, but I didn't have the people skills or the man management ability. I didn't understand the importance of the way you treat people, the way you talk to them and the way you portray yourself and how much of a big difference it made to your job. You are an ambassador for your club and must act accordingly.

"It is as important as the actual greenkeeping. You can be the greatest greenkeeper in the world, but if you are rude to your staff or members it is never going to work. I used to listen to members' complaints and just walk away, ignoring their reasoning. Now, with more experience under my belt, I know that is the wrong way to go about it. I'd rather admit that I'm not good at something and let someone else have a go at it, rather than stick at it and make a total mess," confessed Toro's Student of the Year.

This case of 'too much too young' is an experience that could have lost Alan to the industry forever. Winter had set in by the time he had made the decision to move on, he didn't want to move back down to an Assistant at the club and greenkeeping jobs were scarce. It resulted in a move into the oily world of a turf machinery technician.



The eight finalists





Using the mechanical skills gained from employment at Wellshurst Alan worked for John Shaw Machinery covering Kent and Sussex undertaking servicing, fault finding and repairs at golf clubs in his territory. However, it wasn't long until the pull of greenkeeping had the Greenock born man back where he belonged - on the course, this time at Royal Eastbourne as an Assistant.

"I needed to get back into greenkeeping and Eastbourne gave me that chance. It's nice to look at my CV and see things are getting better. Although I've moved sideways at points I haven't moved backwards. I was back as an Assistant at Eastbourne, but it was a much bigger club than anything I had worked at before. Plus Jim Simmons was an Assessor, so was keen on me getting qualifications, so I was still progressing, which was a bonus."

Moving forward is what Alan has done within the last six months, and it was one giant step as he went for the vacant Deputy job at Ham Manor Golf Club. Alan was ready to tackle the demons that haunted him from his previous Deputy post and, despite a competitive short list, Ham Manor grabbed their man.

"Again I'm working with people older than me. But 25 is a big difference from 19. I don't have anyone looking at me now and thinking I'm too young, I show more respect now and have the same returned to me. I have extra knowledge and skills to do the Deputy job successfully," stated the still smiling winner.

In his new position Alan is working under Jon Budd, who has been at Ham Manor for 14 years and was elevated to Course Manager after the departure of George Barr. Along with Jon and Alan is a team of five greenkeepers, three of whom have been at the club for over 10 years. The role is just what Alan needed to prove his development.

"Every day is a test. It's great for me to look back at my time at Wellshurst, at the things a Deputy had to do that I hated and the bits that scared me. Now I enjoy those elements and taking on the problems that come with responsibility. It helps that I have such great support too," said Alan, who admitted that none of his achievements would have been possible without the encouragement and loyal support of his wife, Becky, who moved both job and house when Alan signed the Ham Manor contract and will now prepare herself for eight weeks without her husband as he studies at the University of Massachusetts, USA, as part of the Toro prize.

"As a Deputy here I'm doing many jobs that would be done solely by a Course Manager at another club. They want the position to be something where the Deputy can actually play a major role in the course management day to day, rather than someone who just takes over the running when the Course Manager is away. I'm getting involved in budgets, purchasing and course design."

It's a far cry from when Alan started on the winding road of greenkeeping in 1995. Living in Scotland, the teenager needed to find a week's work placement during his final year of school. He took the opportunity to travel down and see his brother in the south east of England, who, in turn, found his visiting baby brother employment at Wellshurst GC. The week saw Alan fill up drain trenches by hand, but the Scot was hooked.

Alan had impressed and took up the club's offer of summer work. He left the position at the end of the season, before being offered a full time Assistant position four weeks later. While the club's facilities, budget and equipment could not match that of Ham Manor, it was an equally important time for the up and coming greenkeeper.

"I wouldn't be in greenkeeping if it wasn't for my original time there. Les Shrubbs, the Course Manager, was great to me. He showed so much trust, not many people would let a 16 year old out on an expensive greens mower. He encouraged me to learn as much as possible and that's why I have the mechanical side of things under my belt.

"Les gave me great advice when I needed it. When a position came up at Chartham Park he told me that if I wanted to progress I should go, that's what you have to do to develop. He made sacrifices for my growth. I still speak to him now, not as a professional but as a friend," commented Alan, with a hint of emotion in his tone.

If his time at Wellshurst had gone differently Alan would certainly not have been at BIGGA HOUSE competing for the Toro Award. It highlights how important those early days are.

"It's the only job I've ever wanted to do. But I think it is hard to get school leavers into the profession, because people don't like doing manual work anymore. It is also about keeping people in the industry. I feel Awards like this and holding training courses and social events are very important in making greenkeepers feel part of something special, which greenkeeping certainly is," concluded the 2005 Toro Student of the Year.



L-R: David Newton, Lely's Peter Mansfield, Alan Pierce and James Lindsey