

A Trip of a Lifetime

Alex Shore, the 2004 Toro Student of the Year, reminisces on his prize to study in America at the University of Massachusetts for eight weeks.

When I was told I was going to be nominated for the Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year award by my college lecturer, Andy Wight, I was surprised and honoured. But hearing my name called out as the winner of this prestigious award was just out of this world.

I was overwhelmed when I received a letter from Ken Richardson to say that I had made the National Final at Aldwark Manor, Yorkshire. The final for me came after an exhausting few days of preparing for the European Tour Event, the Heritage Competition held at my club - Woburn. I quickly had to turn my attention to preparing for what would be a very memorable weekend.

The final was made up of eight finalists from all over the country. After I had met all of these extremely keen and knowledgeable young greenkeepers I realised just how hard it would be for the judging panel to pick a winner. Any one of us could have won. I'm sure all the finalists will agree that the friendships created in Yorkshire will remain with us for a long time to come.

The final involved an interview with Peter Mansfield, Andrew Brown, John Pemberton and David Walden, and writing a report on Aldwark Manor's golf course. At the end of a nerve racking day we were gathered in the hotel for the results to be announced by Ken Richardson. With the quality of the other finalists you can only imagine the surprise, shock and delight when I heard my name called out as the winner. Thanks to everyone involved in the weekend, including the other finalists, for making that weekend a truly memorable experience.

After the final there was much to do before I could leave for the States. There were forms to fill in, a visa to get and many phone calls to the 2003 winner, Keith Scruton, with all sorts of question about the weather, university and where to get a decent beer! This did a lot to calm the nerves. I was in constant contact with Christine Wilson, who is Peter Mansfield's Secretary at Lely UK. Christine was organising my once in a lifetime trip and made sure I was in the right place at the right time. Christine must have been glad when I finally left for the States and stopped phoning her.

The next thing I had to do was attend the American Embassy in London, to secure my visa. With Christmas fast approaching there was little time to spare. After a few nervous days my visa turned up on Christmas Eve with only three working days before I flew out. A visit from Peter Mansfield brought delivery of my final itinerary, complete with tickets and traveller's cheques. It was only then that it sunk in that I was really going to America.

The flight over to Washington was done in style. My Managing Director at Woburn, Eddie Bullock, had very kindly arranged for me to fly first class. I could get use to all that legroom. On arrival in Hartford I was greeted by rain and a very cold wind, the weather was going to take some getting used to. After a short taxi ride I arrived at the Quality Inn in Hadley. Just two doors down from my room in the hotel, I met Craig Weberly, the Australian Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year.

The next day, with little time to settle in, I had to catch the 6.30am bus to the University of Massachusetts for my first day of study. It was very strange, new people, getting use to the American way of studying and dealing with the time difference. We were given a quick introduction to the 74th annual winter turf school and straight into lectures.



A satisfying reward after all that hard work

After our introduction we were handed a list of reference books that they required us to buy. So it was off to the bookshop to purchase \$800 worth of reading material. They would prove invaluable throughout the course, but very heavy when it came to getting them on the plane home.

My class consisted of 44 students of different ages and backgrounds, 36 Americans, six Canadians, one Australian and me, the only Brit, all with varying degrees of experience. In the States and Canada most of the golf courses are closed over the winter due to the snow, a perfect time for greenkeepers to study.

The first few days were a massive learning curve, from doing turf calculations in feet, gallons and inches, to dealing with chemicals and insects that I had never dealt with before. However, it was still very interesting learning about the different weeds, pests and grasses and how to manage them. I found the first few days hard, being 5000 miles away from home, friends and family took a bit of getting use to. Once the homework and tests started, there was little time to miss home. Subjects such as soil science, entomology, arboriculture, turf calculations, turf management, irrigation, turf diseases, financial management, weed management and golf course design were all started in the first week.

During my second week we had all started to feel more at home. Finding our way around this massive campus took some time. In some cases it would take 25 minutes to walk from one classroom to another. The whole campus was on a massive scale and resembled a town rather than a university.

During the weeks we started project work and reading assignments. The tests were coming thick and fast with most lecturers giving a test on their previous class. This meant in order to keep up we had to form evening study groups back at the hotel and study for the exams. Most days were 8am to 5:30pm intense with lectures. We clocked up over 250 hours of lectures.

Along with our regular lecturers we were lucky enough to have some guest speakers. One of these was Bill Spence, who is the Superintendent at the Brooklyn Golf and Country Club. He spoke on how he prepared the course for the 1999 Ryder Cup. This was a good opportunity to ask questions about staging such a major competition. At Woburn we have had several major competitions but nothing on the scale of the Ryder Cup.

Along with all this studying I had to quickly learn the rules of basketball and ice hockey in order to support the university teams. In the campus there was a 20,000 seater football and ice hockey stadium, along with a 10,000 capacity basketball arena. The minute men, as they were known, always put on a good show. I was able to attend these games with some of my new greenkeeper friends.

Weekends also gave us all an opportunity to catch up on washing and writing postcards home. This was also the time to phone home and speak to my wife and family. It was also time to stock up on microwave meals at the "Big Y's" supermarket. When you only have a microwave and a small fridge in your room it is difficult to produce too many culinary delights.

As part of the Toro prize Craig and I were invited to attend the GCSAA Golf Industry Show in Orlando, Florida. The show happened to fall the weekend before the end of the course, a well deserved break from studying. After a three hour flight, we arrived in Orlando for a whirlwind two days. A quick freshen up and it was off to the President's Dinner, where it was nice to meet up with some familiar faces from BIGGA and my college lecturer. The following day was spent looking round the Show, before returning to Massachusetts early on Sunday morning to complete the last few days of the course.



Class of 2005

Finally the end had arrived at UMASS; it was time for the Graduation Dinner. A few of us decided that a stretch limo was the way to travel for this occasion. It was a great relief to receive my certificate. The night was my last chance to say goodbye to everyone before the next stage of the trip. I had made some great friends and learnt tremendous amounts from my time in Massachusetts. It was not time to say goodbye to Craig, the Aussie, as he was travelling with me on the final leg of my trip.

Craig and I flew to Minneapolis to Toro HQ. This stage of the trip was done in style, staying in some very luxurious hotels. In Minneapolis we met up with John Faber - the Canadian Winner of the Award. He joined us for a trip around the Headquarters of Toro, in Lyndale.

On arrival we were given the tour of all the testing facilities. We were shown how Toro test their machinery to stand up to the stresses that us greenkeepers put their equipment through. After lunch we were taken to the Shakopee manufacturing plant. This is where many of the parts for the Toro machinery are produced. The tour showed us how complex and precise the manufacturing process is.

Robots and lasers aided skilled engineers to construct the parts. These parts are then sent to Toro's assembly plant in Tomah, Wisconsin. Many of the machines in this facility cost over a million dollars and made our workshop at Woburn look very small in scale.

The following day we were taken to Tomah, a three hour drive away. This was a very interesting day, seeing how the parts were welded together, dipped in the famous red and black colours of Toro and assembled to create the machines we all know at the 300,000sq ft factory. We had the opportunity to be the first people to sit on the machines as they came off the production line before

being shipped to their new homes all over the world.

After catching flight number six, Craig and I arrived in sunny California. Temperatures of 21°C were a welcome relief from the snowy conditions we had become used to over the last seven weeks. On this part of the trip we visited the Toro irrigation department where we were given a tour of the department and test facilities. It was interesting to see how irrigation parts and systems were designed and tested.

After a very interesting day it was time for Craig to make his long journey home. It was strange saying goodbye as we had had many adventures together.

However, the thought of spending a well deserved week's holiday in Los Angeles with my wife, Hannah, was very appealing and bought me back down to earth a little. So, after 64 days, eight flights, seven hotels, temperatures between -30°C to +21°C, and one too many burgers, I returned with enthusiasm and energy to put into practice all the knowledge I was fortunate to learn.

After my once in a lifetime trip, some people deserve a big thank you. Firstly, Andy Wight, of Oaklands College, for nominating me, Keith Scruton for all his hints and tips, Eddie Bullock, Chris Hunt and the team at Woburn Golf and Country Club for supporting me throughout. Thanks also to the team at BIGGA for giving me this fantastic opportunity and to the staff at the University of Massachusetts. Finally, to Peter Mansfield and Christine Wilson, of Lely UK, Andy Brown, of Toro Europe, Barry Beckett and Jace Bertsch, of Toro - Minneapolis, and Kenne James, of Toro - California, for all their individual involvement in the competition.

This whole experience will stay with me for many years. I feel honoured to have had this unique experience and wish good luck to all the nominees for the 2005 Competition.



The 300,000sq ft Toro Factory, Tomah



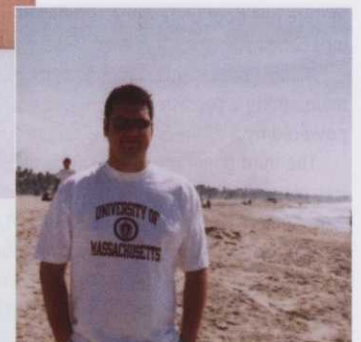
Florida - GCSAA Exhibition



Wrapping up warm was a must in Massachusetts



After completing the turf course it was off to visit Toro HQ in Minneapolis



Sun, sea and surf - at last