

Who'd be a Greenkeeper?

by Paul Cook

Okay, I admit it. Deciding to drive to Neil's stag weekend was probably not the best decision I'd ever made! Driving there was a relaxed two and a half hours, driving back was something else altogether. It's late, very late and I'm suffering that kind of exhaustion only alcohol and sleep deprivation can bring. The prospect of a couple of hours sleep, tops, raises the question "Why? Why do I carry on being a Greenkeeper? Why not get myself something more civilised, a job that allows me to sleep until seven or eight?," oh how my body aches for sleep. My mates will all be sleeping on the plane home and they don't have to be at work until half eight, nine even. Who in their right mind wants to get up at four in the morning. Note to self "Must get another job."



New South Wales GC, Sydney Australia.
Paul (left) with Course Superintendent,
Gary Dempsey

Snippets of conversations over the weekend begin percolating my thoughts, I remember my feelings as I'd listened to the others talk about their jobs. Difficult to describe but it had been a feeling of satisfaction, almost of smugness and I don't mean that in an unkind way. Perhaps snugness might be better, a sense of belonging, belonging in the work I do.

They'd all done better than I had at school. Don't get me wrong, I'd enjoyed my school days with these same friends, having great fun, getting up to no-good - you know, the usual stuff young lads do. But I hadn't enjoyed studying - I'm not the academic type. The only thing I'd been interested in and achieved any success at, was sport - I left school with only one GCSE to my name... in PE! And now, I'm passionately interested in Greenkeeping and I'm achieving... hmmm, perhaps there's a link there don't you think?

Most of my mates had gone off to college or university and while they hadn't necessarily known what they wanted to do they did seem to have some sense of direction.

Me? Well I'd had no idea what I wanted to do... minimum GCSE's equalled minimum options. I chose to go to college to study tourism and almost from day one I knew it wasn't for me. I stuck it for a year before dropping out, only to find myself right back where I'd started, except now another year older. Not good!

Time to do some serious thinking, I bought a smart suit and went to

work for my mother as a data-input clerk while I sorted out my life. Evenings and weekends I'd be on the golf course - golf was my passion, I wasn't half bad either. My folks encouraged me to seek out what I wanted to do and go for it rather than just do something because I could. They believed everything would work out in time.

When I first saw the advertisement for an apprentice Greenkeeper, something clicked. I recalled the British Masters at Collingtree where I'd done two weeks work experience in the Pro Shop prior to the tournament and had a brilliant time. I asked the Head Greenkeeper if he needed any help for the tournament and that's how I got my first taste of Greenkeeping - and I loved it. I loved everything about it, not just being in a golfing environment but prepping bunkers until they were perfect and most of all those early morning starts. The smell of grass, sunrises, early morning mist - magic! Reading the advertisement again something stirred in me, I applied, got the job and on day one knew I'd made the right decision - I just knew this was the job for me!

Now, seven years later and driving home, I realise that as I'd thought of that first day in my first job I'd no longer been aware of my aching body, my tiredness, my throbbing head... still have another hour's driving to get home but feeling good.

It feels good too to remember how my parents had got up early to take me to the golf course, we'd shared those early mornings, ferrying me backwards and forwards every day, weekdays and weekends alike.

Buckingham Golf Club is a very mature parkland course not far from Silverstone where we lived. My apprenticeship included day release to do the NVQ course at Moulton College, Northampton, and hey-ho what do you know, here learning and studying was somehow different, it wasn't a chore or difficult. I got on well, got my spraying certificate and my boss at work gave me good reports. So there I was doing a job I loved and experiencing real success for the first time in my life.

The course lasted two years and half way through the second, a guy who'd worked at Buckingham and had seen and liked my work, rang up and offered me a job - in Austria.

The college were really helpful and fast tracked me through the final part of my course to get NVQ level II and two months later I was off to the mountains.

Golf Club Adamstal has to be seen to be believed! This course is unique, built up a mountain with greens ranging from 500 to 900 metres above sea level. Stunningly beautiful and inspirational in the way mountains are.

A long way from home and all things familiar and with not a word of German to my name, my learning curve had suddenly gone vertical, as steep as the mountain itself. This is where I cut not only my Greenkeeping teeth but I almost had my foot cut off in a freak and rather gruesome accident involving a mower and a very narrow mountain path.

Four months later, after bone and plastic surgery, I was back at work, facing the task of visiting the site of the accident and overcoming any residual anxiety. Over the next three years I knuckled down to learn my craft, I also learned about a different culture, a different climate (six feet of snow covers the course during the winter months) I dedicated myself to being the best I could be, took pride in my work, set myself high standards and came to realise what a great profession I was in and that I loved this work. Always in beautiful surroundings, working with nature, working at dawn and dusk in the mountains, is an experience beyond description. Sights, sounds, smells, all combining into an experience that transcends thoughts and words - and all this is part of my job? What other job could possibly give me this experience? I smile to myself, remembering how this rambling had started with me asking myself why I did this work... Doh!

In the winters when the course was closed I'd take myself off to Kitzbuhel, one of Austria's most famous and vibrant ski resorts. Daytimes would find me on the ski slopes for a run or two or snowboarding and with a total lack of respect for my liver - working evenings and weekends in a bar. Female company had been scarce in the mountains, here in the bar it seemed barmen were a bit of an attraction (babe-magnets).

One winter I went to New York to do a one month course on Turf Grass management at Rutgers University - my first experience of intensive study. It required full concentration and although it was hard work I thoroughly enjoyed it and it whet my appetite for more. This year, I swapped snowboard and goggles in Austria for surfboard and shades in Australia.

Three months work at New South Wales Golf Course, only number 34 in the world's top courses! I wanted a different experience of Greenkeeping and a links course - in the southern hemisphere and suffering a drought was about as different from mountains, snow and ice as I could find. I left Austria at minus 10 degrees and arrived in drought stricken Sydney - a searing 30 degrees.

This course was in a different league to those I had so far experienced and served to confirm my intention of eventually having a job on one of the world's top courses. By the ocean and with a rustic charm, this is a superb course with facilities second to none - shortly before I arrived the 18 strong Greenkeeping team had moved into a purpose built state of the art complex.

There's something about doing a job really well, where standards and expectations are high, that I find appealing, I really do believe in that old maxim "if something's worth doing it's worth doing well". And you know what, here I was just another pair of hands, I didn't have the responsibilities of being First Assistant as I had back in Austria and it didn't matter... here I was, on the other side of the world, raking bunkers, mowing greens, being obsessive about achieving the highest standards of work and getting that same feeling, that moment of just being there doing my work as well as I know how, learning my craft, perfect!

It's seven years since I began my apprenticeship and today as Assistant Head Greenkeeper at Fohrenwald Golf Club, home of the Austrian Ladies Open, I have my foot set firmly on the management ladder.

I'm almost home now in more than one sense. Just a few more miles to go and I'll be in bed to snatch those few precious hours of sleep before the alarm calls. Just a few more weeks to go and I'll be back in the UK, going to university. I'm going to get myself a degree - Turf grass science.

Pulling up outside my flat, turning off the engine, I'm relaxed and content. I don't want any other kind of job, I know that no matter how bad I might feel in the morning, no matter how much I don't want to wake up, no matter how much I want to roll over and go back to sleep, I know that as soon as I get to work breathe in the air - whether its frosty, misty, raining or sunny - look around, pick up my golf cart and head for the golf course. I know there'll be that moment when I'll get that feeling, you know the one, the one I had on that first day, in that first job, that feeling that is beyond words, that feeling that lets me know this is the life and the job for me - the best job in the world, I wouldn't change it for anything.



The fifth hole at Adamstal GC, Austria