



Regional Finalists: back row, left to right: Graham Brumpton, Stephen Eager, Kenneth Gilroy, Steven Stroomer and Barrie Lewis. Front row, left to right: James Billington, Mike Emptage and Abigail Crosswood



# They Think It's All Over... It Is Now!

The competition for this year's Toro Student of the Year has been fierce, as the level of entrants continually improves. Melissa Toombs witnessed a tense final at BIGGA HOUSE.

Being a student is fun. No, not because you're expected to drink copious amounts of alcohol and stay up till the early hours of the morning - although that is a lot of fun! - but because you're continually learning and having to push yourself to achieve the qualification you've longed for that, in time, will form the basis of your career.

No-one, ideally, wants to still be working on their computer at 3am, realising the essay they're writing isn't turning out quite as they'd expected, and having to resign themselves to the fact that this isn't their best assignment. 'I just didn't have time,' springs to mind as the most widely used excuse when a student is confronted with their 'less than best' work. Everyone needs a kick up the bum now and again, to be given encouragement and pointed in the right direction but, each student is responsible for their own work and time management. If you really want the qualification, you find the time and put the effort in. This year's Toro Student of the Year Regional Finalists, are a prime example of what dedication and hard work can achieve.

Eight anxious finalists visited BIGGA HOUSE on September 17 and 18, were quizzed and probed by our four judges, BIGGA Chief Executive, John Pemberton, Iain McLeod, Chairman of BIGGA's Education Committee; and Peter Mansfield and Bruce Jamieson, representing Toro, and were given the task of completing a survey of Aldwark Manor GC (evaluating nine of the holes).

After a gruelling wait, finalists: Mike Emptage, Barrie Lewis, Abigail Crosswood, Graham Brumpton, James Billington, Steven Stroomer, Stephen Eager and Kenneth Gilroy, were put out of their misery as Education and Training Manager, Ken Richardson, announced the winners.

Runners-up were Abigail Crosswood (18), from Newquay, Cornwall, and James Billington (23), from Northwich, Cheshire.

Abigail works as an Assistant Greenkeeper at Newquay GC, has completed her NVQ Level 2 at Duchy College Training Agency and has been accepted to study a foundation degree in Sports Turf Science, online. Abi was also part of the BIGGA Open Support Team at Hoylake this year.

James is Assistant Greenkeeper at Portal Premier Golf and Country Club, Tarporley, Cheshire, and has just finished his NVQ Level 3 at Reaseheath College. James and Abigail both win a trip to Harrogate Week 2007, where they will be invited to attend the Continue to Learn seminars and workshops as well as the evening banquet.

Overall winner and Toro Student of the Year for 2006 was Mike Emptage (25), from Ramsgate, Kent.

Mike, who entered the competition while working at St Augustine's GC, Ramsgate, Kent, has just finished his NVQ Level 2 at Hadlow College. Mike's amazing prize involves an eight-week trip to the USA, where, for six weeks, the University of Massachusetts will be home, as he completes a residential turf management study course. The trip also includes visits to the Toro Headquarters in Minneapolis, the Toro Irrigation Division and to the GCSAA Golf Industry Show in Anaheim, in February 2007.





National Chairman, Richard Whyman, congratulates Toro Student of the Year 2006, Mike Emptage

# Still Sinking In

2006 Toro Student of the Year winner, Mike Emptage, is still stunned by his achievement, as Melissa Toombs found out.

Toro Student of the Year has seen standards rise once more in its 17th year. Judges were left with some tough decisions to make at this year's final and all competitors were commended for their hard work.

Mike, who took golf up in his late teens and plays off 22, was working as a Chef when he realised that this was a sport and an industry that he wanted to become more involved in.

"I'd completed NVQ Level 2 in Catering and worked within the industry for four years," said this year's winner.

"You had to work loads of hours to be able to get a decent wage out of it and I'd had enough of being stuck in a hot kitchen on nice sunny days," added a still overwhelmed Mike.

So Mike made some changes. His friend was working for what is now their local council, doing grass maintenance on the verges of the road and Mike took the opportunity to get out of the kitchen and into the open air.

Mike, who is also a Coast Rescue Officer in Margate - on call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year - mowed lawns, football pitches, golf courses and cricket pitches, for three years. During this time Mike's passion for golf grew, "I really enjoyed it, the natural progression was for me to go and work at a golf club," explained Mike.

At the age of 23 Mike began to look for greenkeeping jobs. "I realised that the change of career would mean a money drop but I looked at the pros, like being able to do a NVQ and career progression in golf course management."

A major issue for Mike was being able to watch people enjoy the work he had done by playing on the course, rather than littering the area he had previously mowed.

He applied for an Assistant Greenkeeper post at St Augustine's, Ramsgate - "I'd already completed my spraying certificates through the council. I got the job and completed my NVQ," gleamed Mike.

"John Millen, from Hadlow College, was my assessor, my work is currently being verified. I was keen to do a few courses so I also completed my First Aid.

"I found out about BIGGA when I came across the magazine (GI) at the club, I phoned up and John explained that each club can arrange for their staff to become members, so I spoke to Course Manager, Robert Tranckle and he signed me up.

"I definitely want to go for my Level 3, however I'm in the process of moving clubs," explained Mike, who's just got a job as an Assistant Greenkeeper at North Foreland GC.

It was his tutor, John Millen who nominated Mike for Toro Student of the Year.

"When John explained what was involved, that's when I really started to knuckle down and do the best for myself, I had support from the rest of





Runner up, James Billington



Runner up, Abigail Crosswood

the greenstaff. When I got through to the final, I thought, this can't be right," said a modest Mike.

A father of two - Freya (13) and Georgia (4) - Mike has his hands full. At first when he told his family he'd won, they didn't believe him and he couldn't quite believe it himself having only been in the industry for a year and a half.

"They kept saying you're joking, are you serious? And then I got lots of text messages congratulating me. They were shocked at first but are over the moon now," smiled Mike. Mike will miss his family when he goes to America for two months but they are concentrating on the positive effect

the University course will have on his career - his wife Patricia is 100% behind him.

"You can't prepare yourself for winning. You just think I'm going to have a go and do my best. I was speechless when they announced the winner - it's a realisation that I can do this. It's fantastic, a wicked feather in my cap."

Looking to the future, Mike eventually wants to become a Course Manager - it won't be long now Mike, look what you've achieved in just a year and a half!



Back row, left to right: Stephen Eager, Kenneth Gilroy, Steven Stroomer, Ken Richardson, David Wood, Bruce Jamieson, John Pemberton, Ian McLeod and Peter Mansfield  
Front row, left to right: Graham Brumpton, James Billington, Mike Emptage, Abigail Crosswood and Barrie Lewis