



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