

# FROM GOLF COURSE TO BSC COURSE

By Paul Cook

**In GI last August I asked “Who’d be a Greenkeeper ... and wrote of my intention to go get myself a degree ... well here I am, writing again, this time from my en-suite room in halls of residence at Myerscough College, Preston. I’ve just sat my first year exams...**

Adjusting to college life was tough to say the least – the sudden switch from the long hours demanded by a televised tournament, straight off the plane and into the lecture room, a different lifestyle and a different culture.

Until now free time was precious and had to be maximised, life had consisted pretty much of work/sleep; work/sleep; with only the odd beer here and there ... great huh? But that’s what it took to get me here. Now I found myself having time on my hands - a totally new concept to me and one that was not the joy and wonderful situation I might once have imagined.

Gone are the days of the 5am start, now I could stay in bed all day if I wanted ... and I don’t! My body was used to physical work, lots of exercise, movement, fresh air; I was used to programmes and timetables, schedules and shifts; personal chores and errands and a pay cheque - and now suddenly here I was with nothing/no-one making any demand on my time other than two and a half days worth of lectures, with the rest of my time made up with reading and assignment work – three meals a day, a cleaner making my bed and cleaning the shower. All that was left for me to do was the mental stuff. My body hurt – muscles were missing their previous regime – my head hurt – struggling with the sudden and dramatic increase in exercise!

It all began around four years ago – having saved my hard earned cash I got onto a three-week Turf Management Course at Rutgers University, New Jersey. At the time my career as a greenkeeper in Austria was going well and this course seemed like a good thing to be doing to move me along a bit further.

Mid-Atlantic, 30,000 feet and with plenty of time to think it no longer seems such a good idea after all – I mean “What if I can’t take in what they’re saying...? What if I can’t remember...? What if they ask me a question...? What if I can’t answer...? What if I can’t learn...? What if ... What if...”

A great idea – Rutgers was a great experience! Superb course at an impressively professional establishment - got a distinction too! With all the ‘What ifs’ disappearing faster than dew in the morning sun I left knowing more and wanting more. On the flight home I decided I would do a degree course.

So, decision made – now how to make it happen. Hmmm – a quick check on the ‘credentials bank account’ reveals not a lot. One GCSE (in PE), NVQ II, a spraying certificate and a three-week course didn’t look like enough to get into University. Obviously there was only one approach to take...

Graft, graft and more graft – returning to work in Austria I set about becoming the best greenkeeper I could be – eventually becoming Deputy Course Manager on a course hosting the European Ladies’ Open. A lot of extraordinary experience there in preparing a course for a televised event. What else would add weight to my case? How about a world-class course, southern hemisphere, warm-season grasses? A three-month stint at the superb New South Wales links course, Sydney, confirmed to me that my skills and knowledge were up to working on a high end course.

Those four years, working horrendous hours and learning, learning, learning, were underpinned by my good fortune to work with some great Head Greenkeepers - each one of them pushing me on and believing in me. So, Brian Piggott, at Buckingham GC; Wayne Beasley, at Fohrenwald GC; Alex Hofingerm, at Eichenheim GC, and Gary Dempsey, at New South Wales GC Sydney – thanks guys.

Getting accepted – graft is one thing, ‘selling myself’ is something else altogether! Trying to convince others that I have what it takes to undertake the demands of a degree course - that I could make the transition from mowing grass to writing essays. To convince them I first had to convince myself! And although writing is something I enjoy writing personal descriptions for UCAS applications, grants and a bursary was, for me, an agonising time.

Gimmee the money – pleasee? This was the tricky bit. While there are many options in terms of finance available to sports turf students, my own case was somewhat unusual. Born and bred in England, I am



actually classed as an overseas student when it comes to grants/loans because I've worked abroad for several years. It's only thanks to a recent EU directive that I was granted a student loan.

I reckon I'll finish my course with £15,000 to pay off. Adding that to the money I haven't earned during the years I'm studying – well, that's just not useful thinking! I don't think in terms of "is it worth it in financial terms" ... the only 'worth it' question I ask myself is "will this experience help get me where I want to be?" and the answer always comes up – "YES".

Learning to study and handing in that first piece of work - at first the whole learning experience was an inner demon – unsettling me far more than I had anticipated. Never much of a book-worm and many years out of school I just didn't know how to organise my thinking, how to read a reference book, review literature and form my own opinions. But I stuck with it. At times painfully slowly, I put together my first piece of course work. And the time came to hand it in - I knew that I had worked very hard to produce a good and solid piece of work and it was one of the best feelings ... awesome. Life on campus – 26 and only the tutor's older than me – and the girls are too young!

Life on campus is very entertaining. I felt quite old when I first arrived – I'd been told by my friends "oh you'll meet loads of women at college". Of course, that was the case for them – they went to Uni straight from school, they were 18 and so were the girls! For me it was just an expectation shot to pieces.

Life without a pay-cheque – this is proving one of the hardest things for me – life without a monthly pay-cheque and my bank account only going in one direction and after ten years of a regular pay-cheque and a well exercised overdraft it is for me a very strange feeling to not have that. Very quickly I had to learn to live without the luxuries and adapt to my new circumstances.

Getting a bursary- shortly after starting college we were told about the bursary awarded by the R&A - £1,500 for each year of study. Several of us submitted an application, 500 words on why we should get it and a further 500 words on how it would benefit us. Three of us from Myerscough were successful. This bursary enabled me to fund a laptop and a digital camera, it also paid for me to attend BTME at Harrogate and the BIGGA North-West Section Spring seminar. First Semester over! Crikey – I've done all that?

Looking back, reflecting on what we had covered in just those few months - "crikey, we've all come a long way in such a short space of time..." And now we're into the last semester of this first year - yes, I've had some doubts – the experience was, to begin with, a bit of an emotional roller-coaster but the delight of learning and discovering new things has been such a great experience

Placement year – being a misfit - part of the BSc course involves a year out on a placement – this provides an opportunity to gain practical experience for those who haven't yet worked in the field as it were. For those like me who already have a wide and extensive experience this is





not compulsory we can continue straight on to year two of the course. I was something of a misfit - my level of experience got in the way a bit ...places are usually for new or novice greenkeepers.

Some of the guys on my course have chosen to do the Ohio State programme, going to courses such as Valhalla for the Ryder Cup, Double Eagle Golf Club, and others chose to stay in Europe, working at prestigious venues such as The K Club, Wimbledon and Loch Lomond Golf Club. These opportunities tempted me, but with having eight years experience already I felt the need to expose my self to something I had not done before.

I've chosen instead to take this opportunity and get experience in those things of which I have no knowledge/skill. I've accepted an offer from FEGGA of a scholarship with Polaris World to get experience in construction and growing-in at one of their new courses, designed by Jack Nicklaus, and it's in Spain so it will be all warm season grasses too – another plus for me.

I wonder what it will be like giving up work a second time to return to University when the placement year is up.

Myerscough - a great course – any doubts I may have experienced in my early days were about myself - there have been no doubts at all about my choice of where and what to study. The BSc Turfgrass Science course here at Myerscough is great - with my tutor Dr Andy Owen and the other lecturers all being not only extremely knowledgeable but also

having worked in their respective industries. They bring to the course their personal experiences, demonstrating the practical application of the theory they are teaching. What's next? After the placement year we return to college for a further two years.

And then it's crunch time - back to the world of work! It would be naïve to think that a degree in and of itself will get someone a top job however, I do think that the more young people who do get themselves some higher qualification, raising the bar in terms of understanding what golf greenkeeping is all about, can only be a good thing...

I see a balance that needs to be found combining practical ability with understanding of the science and the art of application. As a Golf Course Manager of the future I expect to be forever learning... things are changing in unprecedented ways - there has never been a more important time to be aware and able to understand the implications of what is happening around us with the environment...

While I don't know what I will be doing once I've finished my degree I do know that I will have a better, broader understanding of our craft ... and passionately believe that higher education is the way forward – for the betterment of the individual and the advancement of our profession.

As we enter summer and with it my placement, to be honest, I can't wait to get back onto the course – to experience that special feeling I get when I step out onto the course, pick up my cart ... smell the grass, hear the birdsong, feel the breeze against my skin and feast my eyes on the beautiful scenery ... a feeling that is beyond words...

