

# The Opportunity of a Lifetime

Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year,  
Matthew Wormald, describes his time  
in America, enjoying his prize





**The journey as Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year is one that will change your life, “or at least the way in which you look at grass”. Every experience on the way to becoming student of the year is a character builder and if not you should at least have learnt something from the experience.**

The realisation that the opportunity of a lifetime and the chance to join only 19 other previous winners hit me as I drove up the avenue towards Aldwark Manor on a sunny September afternoon. The next time I would drive through the gates my life was to change forever.

What happened over the next couple of days is an experience that I will never forget. The hospitality that was given to the finalists by Toro and BIGGA was nothing short of superb and helped to put everyone at ease.

As tough as the road was to becoming Student Greenkeeper of the Year, it would turn out to be nothing, compared to what lies ahead. There was still a visa to sort out, a trip to the American Embassy in London, forms to fill out and the underlying worry of what happens if they don't grant me my visa.

Having not been to America before and having 3,000 miles of ocean between me and the place I call home was something I was looking forward to, yet found very daunting.

I arrived in America on January 5, a day before my birthday, after having no sleep the night before, the five hour wait in a snow covered Detroit airport was just what I needed. The snow was something I was going to have to get used to as temperatures were constantly below zero meant it wasn't going anywhere, anytime soon. The five hour wait for my final flight to Hartford soon passed as I found comfort in California rolls and McDonalds.

The first day of turf school started at 8.30am Monday morning, with free muffins and coffee I had the first glimpse of the classroom and the people I was going to be spend the next seven weeks with. I felt that it was important to establish my position within the group from the very beginning and sitting in the right place, was a start. Too far back and you'd be in the rowdy section, too far forward and you were in the quiet section. I opted for somewhere in the middle.

The first week was somewhat slow, with the teachers allowing everyone to get used to their new surroundings and easing us into the harsh study regime that will follow.

By staying at The Comfort Inn, I was part of a large group that became

the epi-centre of most good nights out. In the first week I had classes such as Turf grass management, Soil science, Entomology, Turf grass mathematics, Turf grass physiology, Irrigation, Trees and guest speakers Bret Johnson and Ron Milenski, from The International, with many more subjects to follow in the coming weeks.

Week two saw the introduction of Weeds, a subject which, at first may sound boring but with a teacher like Randy Probstak it was far from it. A test in every lesson meant time away from the classroom couldn't be wasted.

Everyone had settled down into their own regimes and agendas by the end of week two. Been from England I was nick named "Brit" I had spent the first two weeks trying to convince the Americans that Green isn't great and that they should see a proper golf course like St Andrews during The Open. In true American style they dismissed this ideology and said I was full of "s\*\*t". It was a burden I was prepared to carry on my shoulders, as later on I was to get my revenge.

For the two months I was in America I felt it my duty to change their perception that all English people are like Hugh Grant and on the first night out I had my chance, after a long drinking session on a dark pint called "Two Sisters" (which many Americans fell by the wayside) and three ABC burgers in quick succession, I was the talk of the classroom on the Monday morning. I tried to keep nights out to the weekends as the 6 to 6 regime didn't fit well with hangovers.

Week three we were introduced to Guenwha Jung, a Professor in Turf grass pathology. He had an infectious manner which made him hard to understand and I found myself in stitches when words such as Scrotia, Hypea, Mycellium and Spores were blurted out across the classroom.

Another Professor who had equalled enthusiasm was Pat Vittum, our entomology Professor. She has dedicated 30 years to studying white grubs.

At one point we were subjected to looking at the pattern of hairs on a grub's anus under a microscope to determine which species it was, something I recommend not doing with a hangover.

My first taste of ice hockey was good fun, with my American friends telling me the rules I still had no idea what "the puck" was going on.

With free tickets to basketball, ice hockey and lacrosse, evening entertainment was good.



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At the beginning of February a trip to the Golf Industry Show in New Orleans, or as they say in America "Nawleans", with fellow Toro winner from Australia, Chris Thompson, it was a nice break from the snow. We had no time to rest, as soon as we walked into the hotel we were met by my College Tutor, Richard Barker, saying that we had no time to check in as we were off to the Toro function. The familiar faces from BIGGA of Sami Collins, John Pemberton and Peter Todd were a nice sight in the "Big Easy". It was nice to meet up with Murray Long, a previous winner of Toro Student of the year and other big names within the industry.

The GIS was suffering from the poor economic climate and the turnout on Saturday was poor. Which was good as you could get round to see everything unhindered. A first glimpse of the new GPS mower stirred mixed emotions among greenkeepers and it was interesting to hear people's opinions about.

The break from the snow was welcomed, but before we knew it we were back to the books. With deadlines approaching for assignments and project work, the social scene took a back seat. With everyone studying The Comfort Inn took on a new, quieter atmosphere. One that was back with vengeance when all deadlines were finished.

For everyone else the experience that was Umass, was over, but for me and my good friend, the Aussie, we still had one week left. A trip to

Toro headquarters in Minneapolis was next on the schedule. I am not scared of flying, but when you can touch either side of the "bean can with wings" that your going to be sitting in for the next three hours, you do start to question aviation designers and where they're going with the whole budget airlines thingy. To see what goes on behind the scene was truly an eye opener. We were fortunate enough to visit the factory at Shakopee, where every Toro part is manufactured. We visited the research department, testing areas and the factory floor. The mind boggles at what goes into making machinery, "I for one, will never whinge at the price of a machine". A final meal with Toro Marketing Manager Barry Beckett marked the end of a truly amazing experience.

My thanks go out to everyone that made the trip to America possible. Christine Wilson at Lely UK was an absolute star. I can't thank Toro enough for the opportunity that they create for Student Greenkeepers, it is an award that I hope runs for many years to come as it truly offers a life changing experience. I would also like to thank everyone from BIGGA who gets involved with the award, as I know it's a hard job interviewing everybody.

I wish this year's candidates the best of luck and look forward to meeting the finalists at Aldwark Manor in September to hand over the reigns. A word of advice for everyone, "You can never do too much".



MAIN ABOVE: Matthew with his new friend  
INSET ABOVE: Posing in his uniform  
PREVIOUS PAGE: The University of Massachusetts

