



First Welshman Is Youngest Ever Toro Winner

Scott MacCallum meets Rhys Norville, the 2009 Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year

The 21st Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year Competition was notable on two counts. Not only did it produce the youngest winner in the history of the event, it also saw the first ever Welsh winner.

If that hints at a remarkable young greenkeeper, then you'd be on the right lines as 21 year-old Rhys Norville is just that.

Rhys, an Assistant at Newport Golf Club, in South Wales, won his place in the seven strong final at the regional interview stage having been nominated by Coleg Gwent where he has just completed his NVQ Level II.

The final held at BIGGA HOUSE involved the completion of a course report on Aldwark Manor's golf course, and a further interview covering all aspects of greenkeeping and knowledge of BIGGA, conducted by Pete Mansfield, of Lely; Bruce Jamieson, of Toro; Jeff Mills, BIGGA's Learning and Development Sub-Committee Chairman, and Sami Collins, BIGGA's Head of Learning and Development.

After a full day for all concerned the announcement was made at 5.30pm and Rhys was congratulated by his fellow finalists – Martin Finegan, an Assistant at Waterville Golf Links and Colaiste Stiofain, in Ireland; Richard Jenkinson, who is currently working on the construction of the new G-West course, near Gleneagles and Elmwood College; Benjamin Burrill, Assistant at Ilkley

GC and Askham Bryan College; Oliver Pennington, an Assistant at La Moye GC, in Jersey, and Myerscough College; Adam Wise, an Assistant at Richmond GC, in London, and Myerscough College and Peter Leach, Deputy Course Manager at Exeter G&CC and Myerscough College.

Benjamin and Adam were the joint runners-up winning all expenses paid trips to Harrogate Week, next January.

"As we were waiting for the announcement to be made my heart was pounding. I certainly didn't expect my name to be read out as the standard of the finalists



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was so high. All the guys were great and everyone had such a lively personality. I must admit I was in a state of disbelief when it was my name that Sami read out," said Rhys, as we spoke the morning after a celebratory meal and visit to the bowling alley.

Born and bred in Newport, Gwent, Rhys caught the golfing bug from his father as a 10 year-old, joining him on visits to Tredegar Golf Club where he was a member.

"It was when I was 16 that my passion for the game really took off. I'd finished my GCSEs and was

playing golf every day and felt that golf was what I wanted to do with my life."

Strangely though, it wasn't Tiger Woods, or Ian Woosnam or Bradley Dredge who Rhys saw as his role models, but Lee Padgett, the pro at Tredegar at the time.

"As part of the Dragon Sport programme at school I'd been doing some coaching and I'd always had aspirations to teach. So I thought I could put the two together and become a teaching pro," he explained.

When Lee left to take up a post in the United States Rhys' desire to go down that particular path receded

a little, but with golf still coursing through his veins he joined the Newport Golf Club greenkeeping staff under then Course Manager, Angus MacLeod.

"Initially I viewed greenkeepers in much the same way as most golfers, as grass cutters, but I've always had an inquisitive nature and thirst to learn so I felt that joining Angus and the team, would stead me well as part of my overall plan to become a pro but I found that I really enjoyed the work."

However, he was tempted back down his original route, when Paul



Mayo, the 1987 Amateur Champion, and pro at Newport, offered him a job.

"I thought all my Christmases had come at once. I worked with Paul in the shop and did some teaching for about 10 months, but that time led me to the conclusion that I could have a better career by going down the greenkeeping route," explained Rhys, adding that BIGGA has to take a lot of credit for there being a more defined career path.

A vacancy on the Newport Greenkeeping team, now headed by Paul Handy who had been Deputy under Angus McLeod, came up and Rhys was able to relaunch a career that less than two years later saw him collecting the plaudits at BIGGA HOUSE.

"I cracked on with my NVQ Level II – I was lucky as I'd picked up quite a bit from my initial time in greenkeeping so I had some background.

Speaking with Rhys it is easy to see why the judges selected him as 2009 Toro winner. Although only recently turned 21 he talks with an intelligence and measured maturity of someone older and he possesses an extremely clear focus on his career.

"The Toro Award will give me something to concentrate on in the short term – particularly the eight week study trip to the States in January and February – but for the medium to longer term I do have some ideas.

"I'm on the Support Team for the Ryder Cup next year, which was made possible as I'm local to Celtic Manor, but I'm conscious that I only have experience of parkland golf courses and I'd really like to go and see how heathland, links and resort courses work.

"I'd also like to take a year out and experience warm weather courses somewhere like Portugal or the States then come back and get a job as a Deputy Head," he said.

"From an educational point of view I'd like to get my Level III and then start on a Foundation Degree at Myerscough. The great thing with Distance learning is that all I need is a laptop and I can travel and keep up to date with the work."

Another ambition he has is to get his current 3 handicap down to scratch. Over the last two years, with the bad weather, I'd gone up to 4 and did well to get it down to 2 at one point while he recently won the Strokeplay Championship at Tredegar Park, where he is still a member.

Outside of the golf club he was a member of the Newport Youth



Council, until recently, working with the local Council to create opportunities for young people in the town.

"We sat down as a group to discuss ideas and make proposals to Newport Council which we thought would be of benefit. I'm fortunate to come from a good background so it was good to be able to help those who perhaps didn't have the same chances as I had.

"We persuaded the Council to set up an office in the town centre so 16-25 year olds could drop in and use the internet and receive help writing CVs. There was also help for family problems and advice if people wanted to take up a sport."

Looking back, Rhys has a number of people who he credits as influences and mentors in his life.

"I have a few people who I've





LEFT PAGE
TOP: The three winners .
MIDDLE: Benjamin Burrell and
BOTTOM: Adam Wise with Pete
 Mansfield

looked up to and learned from. Initially there was Lee Padgett, at Tredegar Park, who taught me golf and who was always keen to do things the right way. There were no quick fixes and he built my swing in the proper manner – no short cuts.

“I really learned from the passion and drive that Angus MacLeod brought to greenkeeping. He wanted everything to be the best it could possibly be and I think that is a great attitude to have. He was fantastic. No short cuts and no second best. Angus is now at Belton Woods, in Lincolnshire, and I’m going to go and see him on my way home today.”

Another man Rhys who credits is Paul Worster, Course Manager at Minchinhampton GC, and BIGGA’s current Vice Chairman.

“I have attended a couple of seminars that he’s spoken at on promoting the environment and they were a big influence on me. He has been involved with ecology for years and it was brilliant to see some of the things he’d done.”

Rhys is very appreciative of BIGGA and the opportunities membership brings him.

“I really enjoy the Section events, playing golf and mixing with the other members. It is great to be able to chat with Course Managers and Golf Club Secretaries at events. He was also delighted to receive good luck messages from, among others, South Wales Section Secretary, Steve Chappell, and Regional Administrator, Jane Jones.

“I’d very much like to thank my Course Manager, Paul Handy, Rus-

sell Thomas, Secretary at Newport, and everyone at the golf club for all their help and support.”

Rhys spent much of his time following the announcement with last year’s winner Matthew Wormald, getting the low down on what to expect during his eight week trip to the States.

“Matthew was really helpful and I’m looking forward the trip and all the experiences that it will bring. My girlfriend, Becky, is very supportive and excited for me although it won’t be easy for either of us to be apart for such a long time.

“I’d like to thank BIGGA, Toro and Lely for all the work they did to organise the competition and I look forward to representing BIGGA as Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year over the next 12 months.”