



Toro Student of The Year, Matt Perks, reveals all about his trip to the States, the prize for scooping the top accolade in the annual BIGGA competition

A life changing trip

The day after I had won the Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year award I was sat on the train on the way home with a big smile on my face.

I felt a huge sense of achievement that all the hard work had paid off and that a personal dream had come true. It hadn't dawned on me that all the hard work was going to be eclipsed by the level of education I was about to receive at the University of Massachusetts (Umass).

The next few months passed like a blur. In order to obtain my Visa there was a never-ending stream of form filling followed by an interview with the US Embassy in London. As well as this there was Christmas and New Year to think about besides a busy few months working on the golf course.

However, on January 3, I found myself sat in Heathrow Airport on my own ready to go. I knew partially what awaited me, but no one can really prepare you for the USA and how full on things were going to be at university. After 22 hours of travelling without any sleep I finally

arrived at the Comfort Inn, which would be my home for the next 7 weeks. I set my alarm for early next morning so that I could meet up with some fellow students on the turf management course before going straight to sleep. I wasn't disappointed as I got chatting to everyone straight away over coffee and doughnuts and managed to get a lift to the university.

The first thing that hit me was how big the campus was, it was like a small town with its own basketball and ice hockey arena, bars, restaurants and numerous high rise flats to accommodate all of the students. The place was so big it even had its own Power Station!

We were all expecting a nice and easy first day but had no such luck. After the first hour of orientation we went straight into lectures. There was so much to cover in a short amount of time that every available minute was used. There were the "core" subjects such as Entomology, Disease Pathology, Turf Grass Physiology, Turf Grass Management, Turf Grass Identification,

Weed Management, Fertiliser and Chemical Calculations, Soil Physics, Soil Chemistry and Agronomy; these were then interspersed with other smaller, but no less important, lectures on Irrigation, Arbo-riculture, Staff management, Golf Course Design and Architecture. There were also some guest lecturers from the world of golf including Bill Spence from the Brookline Country Club and a USGA agronomist Jim Skorulski.

Of course it wasn't all work, there were plenty of nights when we all went out for food and drinks, to watch Hockey matches and play Ten Pin Bowling. I quite fancied my chances at bowling but quickly realised that I had no chance, as this was one of their many national sports. So, I decided to play some of the locals at Pool, something I fared a lot better at. One night I went for three hours unbeaten before being asked to kindly step aside in order to let the others have a go.

Going to Boston for the weekend was a memorable part of the trip. Chris Swider, one of the guys on

ABOVE: Matt with the graduates outside the Toro offices
BELOW: Matt in a snowy Boston
INSET RIGHT: Umass library, the tallest in the U.S at 26 floors
MAIN RIGHT: View from the top of Umass library





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the course, was going home for the weekend, so a few of us booked a hotel and he gave us a lift. During the day we went to the New England Aquarium and did the tourist trail and at night we ventured into China town for food and drinks. It was a great weekend but before we knew it we were driving back to the Comfort Inn and Umass for another week of lectures. It felt like the course was never going to end but eventually we were in our final week and counting down the hours until we graduated. All together there were 117 2 hour lectures, plus homework and 32 exams! It was as exhausting as it sounds. The course pushed each and every one of us, including myself, to the limit of what could be achieved,

but achieve we did as every one of the 42 students passed with flying colours. We graduated on a Friday afternoon which gave us chance to say our goodbyes to those who had to travel home, and gave everyone else a chance to get ready for one last night out together.

I had another few days to kill before I travelled to Minneapolis, so I went to stay with a fellow student and hotel resident, Roger Beaulieu, at his place in Connecticut. We played golf and went for some food and a few drinks at his local bar. I met some great people that weekend and was treated like one of the locals. I've got say a big thanks to Roger as he was my taxi almost everywhere while at Umass and he treated me like one of his family and I would gladly call him a friend for life.

Monday morning came and it was time to leave New England behind and head for Minneapolis to see the Toro facilities and factories. I met up with the two Australian winners and the Canadian winner from Umass and we were shown

every inch of Toro's three main sites from the Headquarters, Research and Design and Manufacturing and Assembly. It was great to see how the products were initially conceived, designed and tested before being assembled into the machines we use every day. It was eye opening to see the work that goes into it and how all the staff take pride in what they do; it's no wonder we end up using products with such a good build quality.

Edric Funk was our guide while we were in Minneapolis. He made sure that we had everything we needed and he arranged our evenings out for food and entertainment, the best of which was on the Wednesday when we headed out into Minneapolis city centre. We went to the finest steak house to start off with and had an amazing meal, this was followed by a VIP trip to watch the local basketball team, Minneapolis Timberwolves, play Utah Jazz. We had court-side seats and at half time we went to the backstage bar and met all of the players as they came out for

the 3rd period. It truly was amazing, but that wasn't all, as after the 3rd period had ended Edric had arranged for the TV crew to come and film us and put us up on the big screen in the centre of the court! It was a close game that was won in the final second by Wolves. The arena went completely mad and it was a great end to an amazing night.

Friday soon rolled around and it was time to leave for the final leg of my trip; the Golf Industry Show in Las Vegas. To be honest it really crept up on me as I had been so busy over the previous seven weeks I hadn't even had time to think about going there, but soon I had landed at McCarran airport and was in a taxi on the way to the hotel.

I arrived at night so it was an amazing view driving down the strip with the hotels and shops all lit up. The next day I ventured out and wandered around the endless hotels, casinos and shops and in the evening I met up with Sami, Jim and Andrew from BIGGA. We went out for dinner and chatted about the trip so far and how everything had gone, it was great to see them again.

The next few days were spent at the show looking around the thousands of stands and exhibits. The place was truly gigantic and you definitely needed the map to find your way around. I ran into so many people from the UK while I

was out there and spent hours talking to all of them about the industry and where it is headed. I got a really positive feel from everyone and it was great to see that none of the passion has been lost over the difficult last three years, in fact I think it's made some people even more passionate and determined to succeed in their particular area, whether that be a greenkeeper, machinery supplier, or any one of the many aspects that come from managing golf courses.

Then, before I knew it, Friday had come and it was time to return home, so, I packed my bags and headed for the airport. While I was sat waiting for the plane I had a few hours to reflect on the trip, how much I had learned and how much the experience had changed my life for the better. I can honestly say it was the trip of a lifetime and something I wish I could go back and repeat all over again. I'd like to say a huge thank you to everyone involved with the Toro award, particularly Sami Collins and all of the staff at BIGGA, as well as Pete Mansfield and his secretary Christine Wilson from Lely UK who not only sponsored the award but also made sure that I had everything I needed every step of the way.

This just leaves me to say good luck to this year's nominees and to the eventual winner: get ready for the trip of a lifetime!

New York Hotel, Las Vegas



The Strip in Las Vegas



Umass class photo