



No doubting Thomas



Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year 2012 is Thomas Flavelle, greenkeeper at Lingdale Golf Club in Leicestershire. Steve Castle spoke to him hours after the 23-year-old scooped the award...

Thomas Flavelle tucks into a well-deserved fried breakfast as he attempts to find the words to describe winning the coveted prize. Thomas, and the other six Student of the Year finalists, endured 24 gruelling hours during which they were interviewed by experts, completed an in-depth course report to a tight deadline and faced an agonising wait to see if they had emerged victorious.

"Wow, it was unbelievable. I was shocked. I was aware there were five other lads who were more than capable of winning the award, so it could have gone to anybody. It's nice to come out on top, but they were all so good – they wouldn't have got this far if they weren't – and I know they'll go on and do great things in their careers.

"Now it's all about looking forward to America. I had a really good chat with last year's winner Matt Perks, and his advice was just to throw yourself into it and make the most of every minute. It's going to be

fantastic for me on both a personal and professional level.

"I'm under no illusions, it's going to be a very, very intense few weeks of incredibly hard work going into highly technical detail. But I can't wait to take on the challenge, it will help my education massively."

Thomas joins an illustrious group of winners who have gone on to work on some of the UK's finest courses.

His attitude and outlook belies his 23 years, and it's immediately clear how seriously he takes both greenkeeping and the sport of golf – he has a handicap of two.

His father Dave is a hugely experienced greenkeeper, and while he's proud to follow in his footsteps he's pleased to be making a name for himself away from his family connections.

"It does help that my dad is a greenkeeper, and it also means that people come up and talk to me instinctively because they know him, but I've never actually worked with him and I'm making my own way in the industry.

"I always wanted to work outdoors, and I've spent most of my life on golf courses either working or playing."

He studied A-levels but admits he was distracted because he was so intent on becoming a greenkeeper, and after completing his exams he clinched a trainee position at Lingdale. He then took his Level Two qualification and is close to completing Level Three at Myerscough College.

"After I've completed Level Three I'm going to probably look at doing a foundation degree and also consider other options to progress my career."

So why did he enter the competition?

"I used to look at the faces of the winners on the front of the magazine and think 'I'll never, ever be good enough for that.'

"But, in the last 18 months, I feel I've really progressed as a greenkeeper. I now know where I'm going with my career and just entering the award was a fantastic opportunity.

"Even a nomination stands out



Message from Thomas

"I'd like to thank both my Level Two and Level Three tutors – Kev McAdams and Jonathan Knowles at Myerscough, who have helped me so much. Lingdale Golf Club have given me time and the support I've needed to enter this competition, as well as now having to allow me two months off to go to America! They've also helped me immensely right from the start of my career as an 18 year old.

"I'd also like to thank TORO and BIGGA, and I have to mention Lingdale's Head Greenkeeper Andy McGreal. He's pretty much taught me everything I know since I joined five-and-a-half years ago.

"He's helped with my college work, preparing for this competition and has always been there for me. He's very realistic and knows what we have to do to make the absolute most of the budget we have at the club. I wouldn't be the greenkeeper I am now without him."

FACTFILE

*Name: Thomas Flavelle
Born: Leicester, 2 October 1988
Marital Status: Engaged to Kathryn
Handicap: 2
Hobbies: Golf, shooting, fishing
Favourite Sports Team:
Leicester City*



on a CV, and I just wanted to be a part of it and increase my knowledge.

"I also thought the experience of interview situations would be vital, and I really focused on that side of it. Toro and BIGGA are looking for someone who can represent them in the States, and I knew I had to present myself well as a greenkeeper and as a person to do well in the competition."

Was he nervous during the final?

"We've been really, really busy at work on the course so I didn't have time to get apprehensive until the weekend came round. I drove up and was fine until I got within about five miles of BIGGA HQ and the nerves really set in.

"I met all the other lads and they also seemed nervous, but we sat down together and had some food which was exactly what we needed – it calmed everyone down and there was a really good atmosphere.

"As for the task, it's nerve-racking because you've no idea what you're going to be asked to do. I made the decision to only spend about 40 minutes on the course at Aldwark.

"I must admit I was a little concerned when I saw some of the finalists had brought agronomical equipment with them, but I was confident I would be able to take samples from three of the greens and gain enough information from that. It was quite a stressful couple of days, I have to say."

Thomas, consumed by golf as a youngster, says he always dreamed of following the family tradition and becoming a greenkeeper. However, from a young age he also displayed a real talent for playing the sport.

He says: "I played all sorts of sports – rugby and football as well as golf – when I was younger. Of course it would have been nice to have been a professional sportsman, no-one would turn that down, but I wouldn't change what's happened. Ultimately, my dream was to be a greenkeeper."

And the future?

"The next step is hopefully a deputy's job before moving on to being a head greenkeeper or course manager. It would be nice to work for a big, prestigious golf course and I've also got an ambition to work in course design and agronomy, although you never know what opportunities are going to present themselves.

"Personally, my fiancée Kathryn and I would love to buy a house at some point, but we'll have to see how the next few years progress and where our careers end up."



Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year 2012

Thomas was presented with his award at BIGGA House on Monday 17 September.

Pictured above are (back row, from left); Rachael Duffy (BIGGA Learning & Development Executive-Administration), Jim Croxton (BIGGA CEO) Chris Sealey, (BIGGA vice chairman), Bruce Jamieson (golf course consultant), Sami Collins (BIGGA Learning & Development Manager), Trevor Chard (TORO Key Accounts Manager), Tony Smith (BIGGA Chairman) and Stuart Green (BIGGA Learning & Development Executive-Technical).

Front row, from left; Neil Ivamy, Stuart Imeson, Peter Thompson, Thomas Flavelle, Christopher Watson, Aaron Launchbury, Matt Perks (2011 winner).



Thomas becomes the 24th winner of the Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year competition

The two runners-up were Christopher Watson, Assistant Greenkeeper at Peterculter Golf Club (Elmwood College) and Peter Thompson, Assistant Greenkeeper at Sunningdale Golf Club (Oaklands College).

The other finalists were Stuart Imeson, Head Greenkeeper at Dunstanburgh Golf Club (Newcastle College), Aaron Launchbury of North Foreland Golf

Club (Hadlow College) and Neil Ivamy of Trevoise Golf & Country Club (Duchy College) – congratulations to all the finalists.

The candidates were interviewed by golf course consultant Bruce Jamieson, TORO Key Accounts Manager Trevor Chard, BIGGA vice chairman Chris Sealey and BIGGA's Learning & Development Manager Sami Collins.

Thomas wins a once-in-a-lifetime eight-week trip to the United States, which includes a six-week study course at the University of Massachusetts and trips to visit the GCSAA's Golf Industry Show in San Diego and Toro's base in California.

Christopher and Peter win an expenses paid trip to the Continue to Learn programme at BTME 2013.