



The Turner prize

Just three years ago Luke Turner was all set for a career as a policeman – now he's **Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year 2013**. Steve Castle investigates the fascinating tale of this year's winner

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TORO®



In 2009 Luke Turner joined the Metropolitan Police force's training scheme, and the only time he'd been on a golf course was to walk his dog. Something told me he would have an interesting tale to tell when we sat down to chat the morning after he became the 25th Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year – and he didn't disappoint.

After completing his A Levels he studied Politics at University, and after moving down to Eastbourne he applied to and was accepted by the Met. However, just a month into his training Luke and the other students were told the money to run their apprenticeships had run out.

Luke recalled: "They got rid of every single one of us. It was a real shock, I had my career plan mapped out for some time, then it was suddenly taken away from me. I had to start all over again.

"In a way it was quite exciting, but I just wasn't sure which direction my career was heading which was unsettling. I knew a couple of guys who worked for the local council, and they told me they needed some seasonal workers at Devonshire Park Lawn Tennis Club. I play tennis as well as several other sports so I thought, why not?"

"I ended up spending a couple of enjoyable and interesting years there, then I heard there was a greenkeeper's job going at a local golf club – Willingdon.

"I applied and had an interview with the club's Course Manager Peter Negus. I was honest and admitted greenkeeping hadn't been my original career choice, but I was very keen to learn. He replied that if I put the hours in he would help as much as he could and he's been true to his word – he's been an inspiration.

"In fact, I think he liked that I had a clean slate. He immediately enrolled me on a Level Two at Plumpton College, and I'm now starting the second year of my Level Three Diploma in Golf Course Supervision and Sports Turf Management."

So, as a newcomer to greenkeeping what struck him immediately?

"My first impression was the importance of time management. Devonshire Park is a closed venue for most of the year, so you cut the courts at roughly the pace you want. But at the golf club you start cutting at 6.30am and people are teeing off at 7.30am – the pace of work to keep ahead of golfers was a shock to the system. It was also difficult at first to keep up with the other greenkeepers' speed of work until you get the hang of it a few months in."

Willingdon is an Alister Mackenzie designed downland course, stretching over 110 acres and built on a natural bowl two miles from the coast. It has a chalk base ensuring excellent drainage. The area also boasts the title of the sunniest

place on the mainland UK – so how has Luke made his mark?

"I'm aware of being respectful of the traditions of the industry, but equally I'm happy to question a lot of things. If someone says "it's always been done this way" I may question it and reply "wouldn't this way be better?"

One of Luke's successful initiatives is introducing a club Twitter feed - @willingdongolf.

"The greens chairman wanted a Facebook page but I argued that was the wrong medium – I wanted something immediate and easy to use, and I used a couple of Twitter feeds from prestigious clubs to support my argument. During the winter months I can simply type – "loads of rain overnight but we're open, grab your waterproofs and come for a round of golf." So if other courses in the area are closed and golfers are looking for somewhere to play, they look at our website and see we're open from our Twitter feed – they don't even need to call us. It's great for educating the members and communicating with them too.

"I'm in the perfect team to help me further my career. I'm trying to absorb knowledge from Peter when it comes to downland course management as he's been at Willingdon for a number of years. He's very hands-on; he has to be because there are only four of us. Matt Webb worked for MJ Abbott doing golf course construction and also went through the Ohio State programme,

PROFILE

Name: Luke Turner
Born: Leamington Spa, 4 January 1985
Role: Greenkeeper
Handicap: 28
Hobbies: Surfing, rugby, cycling
Favourite Sports Team: Northampton Saints

ABOVE RIGHT: The finalists analysing the 18th tee at Aldwark Manor



and Tim Collier has lots of experience working at courses across the South East. They all have their own ideas, I listen and learn and chip in when required."

Back to the final. As well as an in depth interview the candidates were asked to report on the compaction and thatch layer on three specific teeing grounds. They also had to come up with a programme of work required to improve them. So how had he emerged as the winner from some genuinely tough competition?

"I rated several aspects of the condition of the tees on a scale of 1 to 5 on colour, vigour, root growth, moisture, damage and so on. But I also looked at other aesthetic touches. I suggested adding a raised sleeper flower bed or some decorative bark or gravel – it doesn't cost much but it makes a big difference on the impression golfers get as they walk to the tee. Simple measures achievable within realistic budgets, and similar to work we did on our course last winter. We aim for uniformity – set a good standard on the first tee and carry that on for 18 holes."

He admits he was ecstatic but

also shocked to have won, and had one immediate concern.

"The logistics started going through my head – was my boss being honest when he said he wouldn't mind me having two months off to go to America?!"

"I can't wait to go, I've never been to the States. The education programme is bound to massively shape my career and I can bring so much knowledge back. Even if some of it doesn't necessarily apply to our little downland course, I'm sure I'll be able to use the knowledge gained to my advantage for the rest of my career. Maybe I'll also be able to play a game of American Football, I play rugby and I think it would be fun to see how much damage I could cause with the helmet and all the padding!"

He's clearly a busy man with work, cycling, surfing, rugby and the gym leaving little spare time, although he's determined to improve his 28 handicap after recently taking up the game. He admits he currently merely tries to thrash the ball as far as he can, leading to a string of lost balls on the club's tough 6th hole. But what's his career ambition?

"I want to be a Course Manager.

I'd love to work on a links course because I more or less grew up on a beach – I love surfing – so maybe a course in Devon or Cornwall. But in the next few years I'd love to work abroad, learn another language and immerse myself in a different culture."

The Met's loss is clearly green-keeping's gain.

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ABOVE: The finalists; James Wilkinson, Joshua Thorley, Paul Walsh, Ben Waters, Daniel Hardy. Seated are Sam Evans, Luke Turner and Scott Roberts

BOTTOM RIGHT: The interview panel Sami Strutt, Chris Sealey, Trevor Chard and Bruce Jamieson

BELOW: The finalists and judges relaxed with an evening of bowling after the winner was announced



