

An American Internship

Wendy O'Brien worked at Augusta National during the Masters last year as part of her American Internship and she has been invited back to work again this year. She describes last year's experiences.



Wendy poses by a familiar Augusta scene

After working for three years on the Nicklaus Course at Carden Park, Chester, and completing my NVQ Level 2, I decided I wanted a change of pace and different challenges, so with the support from Course Manager Andy Campbell MG and other colleagues who had worked in America I contacted Michael O'Keeffe at Ohio State University and applied to take part in the international internship program which finds placements for experienced greenkeepers, in the USA.

In April 2001 I flew out, first to Columbus, Ohio, to the University for an orientation providing valuable information about what to expect eg tax returns, health insurance, driving issues etc. I was also able to go on a tour around the huge University Campus, which even has its own power station! I met others from around the world, which were travelling onto other parts of the country and going to a variety of agricultural internships from a stud farm to a winery.

After three days I flew onto my first placement in Virginia. Placed on the James River, an hour outside Richmond and three hours from Washington D.C. Kingsmill Resort, has three 18 hole courses and a par 3 links course, it also hosts the PGA Tour Michelob Championship every October. I worked on all the courses for six weeks at a time taking part in the renovations of tees and bunkers as well as the day-to-day set up, I experienced three different management styles with the different Superintendents. It was a nice place to start my internship in the USA. I was given the impression that they relied heavily on having interns to stay late and cover different projects.

In September I went back to work on the River Course for the Michelob Championship, in the mornings I would cut the collars and the greens clean-up lap, then help on the Woods Course which stayed open during the competition, in the afternoon following play I would cut the approaches.

After the tournament it was time for overseeding with the resort on the border for transitional courses with Bermuda grass during the summer and over seeding tees, fairway and rough with rye grass for the winter.

While there along with three American interns and the other two internationals one an Australian and the other a New Zealander we had couple turf talks and a opportunity to meet and discuss golf course management with members of the USGA agronomists.

Shortly before leaving a major experiment took place on the Par 3 Bray Links Course where the split green on the 3rd and 4th, was divided into two parts then edged around the collar with the turf being removed. Plastic pipes were laid metre lengths apart across the greens, then covered with plastic sheeting and sealed with the lifted turf and sand, the licensed contractors pumped Methyl Bromide gas into the pipes killing all the grass and sterilising the ground, the covers were left on for 72 hours to ensure all the gas had dissipated, a test area between the grass was left untouched. The greens were then scarified and aerified to remove as much organic matter as possible, the greens were heavily top-dressed to re-define the surfaces ready for seeding, divided into two halves one half was seeded with L93 and the other half with A4 creeping bent grass. After recently talking to members of the staff at Kingsmill the course has now cancelled the annual Michelob tournament after 25 years and is now going to be hosting a LPGA event, after this event is hosted for the first time this month the River Course is going to be closed for a complete redevelopment including the greens using this same sterilisation method.

In late October 2001 I attended a three day short course conference in Florida organised by Ohio State for golf course interns to attend, I met a lot of other greenkeepers from all over the world. On the first day we attended a tour of the TPC Sawgrass facility and the Stadium Course with the Course Manager, Fred Klauk, and the Superintendent, we also visited a course still under various stages of construction with the Superintendent, Site Manager and head of MacCurrach construction, both visits were extremely informative. The following day we had lectures from Joe DiPaolo from Syngenta, Dr Karl Danneberger from Ohio State University and Brad Kocher Vice President of Golf Course Maintenance at Pinehurst, finishing the day with a tour of a local course.

The last day was an excellent talk from Tommy Witt who was at the time President of GCSAA and Course Manager at Kiawah Island, South Carolina, advising us on utilising the internet, networking with others and keeping contacts open in the future, but most importantly advising us not to let our careers to rule our lives.

During my six months at Kingsmill I attended an interview at Augusta National Golf Club, with hope of continuing my internship at the course. The major renovations and construction work was well under way at the time I was able to see first hand the new tees and 18 green etc.



One of Augusta's immaculate bunkers

When I returned to the course to begin my internship in November 2001, the course was once again open to members and looked in true Augusta fashion. Amazing! The main staff for the golf course was made up of a Course Manager, Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent and three Assistants In Training (A.I.T's), with supporting front office staff. My initial concerns about the course were the staff, I was a little apprehensive that there maybe an egotistical attitude in relation to the National. I am delighted to say that all my concerns were immediately found to be misguided, from the first time I walked in the door everyone was unbelievably friendly and throughout my first few days everyone made a point of introducing themselves to both myself and Sara, the Australian girl I was interning with through Ohio State. Everyone was really open wanting to talk about me and find out as much as possible from where I had come from in England and what I had done, this worked both ways, with my questions being answered when asked about the course, the tournament and the working practices, everyone there was very approachable and helpful. With around 40 to 50 staff on the golf course alone and around 20 people on the nursery crew looking after the landscape gardens, trees and shrubs including the famous Azaleas. The crew varies from interns both Americans and international, retired business men, ex-military, college graduates to people who had lived in Augusta all there lives, there was also an afternoon crew of eight, mainly made up of high school and college students.

The wide variety of ages and backgrounds was something I had not expected but really made the crew great, there were always different debates and conversations going on, different ideas and opinions on the jobs and projects it really made for a good workplace with a mind for practical jokes but always a professional thinking attitude. Most people had worked at least a couple of tournaments so I was well prepared knowing what to expect, whenever I thought of a question there was always someone close by with an answer. With such a large crew it may appear that the work must have been really easy going however, this was not the case, the majorities of tasks are able to be completed more quickly but they must also be carried out much more extensive with a huge amount of attention to detail.

From the start at Augusta I went through everything. Everyone was fully trained on all tasks with specific sheets provided, from flymoing pond banks to driving the skid loaders, this was to ensure that everyone knew what was expected and the jobs were carried out in the same methods for all the staff. The whole aim is to get everyone trained up on as many things as quickly as possible to enable the assistants more

flexibility on job assignments- the more people trained for a task the more choice you have.

Jobs were posted on a chalk board in the break room so you always knew where you were meant to be and what you were meant to be doing, sometimes it would be noted to check with someone but mostly you never had to waste time looking for someone to find out what to do next, and with a lot of staff having 'walkie-talkies' it was easy to contact someone. Everyone is assigned they're own cart which was great. There is a misconception that there is an unlimited budget but as with any golf course all expenses must be fully justified including staff numbers, tools and machinery.

I was encouraged to jump into anything that was going on and to make the supervisors aware of my interest, ie irrigation projects, so that way when scheduling job tasks it was made so you could experience as much as possible by showing a willingness to learn, this happened a lot, anytime I went over to look at something chances are I was working on it the next day. I was started on a greens care run within two weeks, I had greens 2 and 7 which are close together, greens care responsibilities are to mow the green, repair ball marks, rake the greenside bunkers weeding when necessary, other jobs would also include edging sprinkler heads and looking for signs of pests or diseases.

Within a month I was also fully trained on tissue testing, using grass clippings taken from greens that morning, I had to wash the samples, dry them out in a microwave, grind them into a fine dust and prepare them in a sample dish. Then using a special light box and computer programme to analyse the samples showing amounts of nitrogen, potassium, etc. It was my sole responsibility during my time at Augusta, once every few weeks then every week for two months prior the tournament, I ended up training new people on the process before leaving. Another interesting tool used frequently was the GPS system to mark everything including fairway outlines (to ensure they are kept and do not slowly get wider or narrower), also new irrigation, drainage and Sub Air lines so the map of the course is constantly updated.

By Masters 2002 I felt truly at home at the course, with around 100 plus golf course staff that week there was plenty of new faces. Through pre-planned files provided for each volunteer and staff member everyone knew exactly what they're responsibilities were for the week. I cut my greens 2 and 7 first thing in the morning, the 'stimp' team would come after I had completed my specified number of cuts that day and tell me if they wanted it cut again. After we had finished all the green mowers would meet on the course, then leave it together when given the all



Preparation work goes on

clear, then after a break I would go to the 2nd green on back pack duty, which meant clearing the green of debris, ie sand from bunker shots, pine cones, with either a switch or a blower which the officials would let you know. With the bad weather during this tournament contingency plans came into full force, I was part of the emergency 'squeegee' team, situated where needed, on greens or fairways to provide a sufficient drop zone if necessary and when directed by officials. After play had gone through I would return to the maintenance building and start mowing greens behind play. Response vehicles placed at different locations holding everything from eyewash to dog collars were a great idea, everything possible had been thought of for those 'just in-case moments'.



Life at Augusta wasn't all glamorous

In late May the course closes to the members for the summer one week is reserved for sponsors and staff to play, my parents came over on holiday and my mum played that day it was great, but I won't talk about what I shot!

Once the course is closed the mood relaxes slightly. I went onto a shift rota, working on average 10 days for 10 hours with four days off, many of those days I volunteered to go in, so much was happening I didn't really want to miss any of it.

For seven of the ten days I would be on bent check which meant having allocated greens, the amount depending on how many were on bent check, they had to be carefully monitored throughout the day the main priorities were watching for signs of heat stress and wilt, however,



it was also necessary to keep check for tell-tale signs of pests and diseases with a climate and environmental conditions ideal for Pythium. Fans and huge mesh tents are erected on a number of greens providing valuable shade and lowering the temperature by 10 degrees on most greens. Syringe fans, first thought of by the assistant superintendent are used on a couple of greens, which is a regular jet fan with rings of small jets around the edge of the fan when connected to a hose, it creates a fine mist above the green which briefly breaks the humidity.

All the bunkers are covered with plastic sheeting to protect them from the elements during the summer months, with an amount left to make improvements to the edges. Last year also saw renovations take place on some holes, which were very interesting to be involved in, including the opportunity to sod new greens with turf arriving in refrigerated trucks and laid within hours, suddenly a new green appears, with amazing bent grass sod of a great quality. Any work carried out must always be carefully and professionally finished taking into consideration the impact of scars and uneven surfaces.

I spent the majority of the summer working on the Sub Air systems, used for the circulation of air through the sub system of the greens, it may also be used to 'pull' water through the profile of the green. Renovating and extending the exhaust pipe work, also the moving and installation of a new Sub Air capsule. I also became involved in a vast amount of irrigation repairs and maintenance from repairing damaged heads to putting in new lines and rewiring cables.

Education and self development was always encouraged with regular training sessions and turf talks, including measuring the square footage of greens which was very interesting and a new experiment where

shrubs and trees are recorded from a centre point on a green then plotted using a computer program to predict shade patterns, so before any pruning or removal occurs the impact to the green and surrounding scenery can be full anticipated. In September overseeding begins, just like any other the Bermuda grass is scalped down and collected before any seed is dropped, using tractor drop spreaders on fairways, walk drop spreaders and rotary spreaders on tees, around bunkers, pond banks and green surrounds. If we had any rainfall during overseeding, a team with hand rakes went to rake out any seed ripples to prevent the Rye grass from growing in unsightly clumps and lines.

I really enjoyed my time at Augusta, I was constantly challenged and always encouraged to share my ideas, opinions and views on ways of working, trust to carry out new jobs and to take on responsibilities was great. The general opinion was to think for yourself and not have to be hand-held and have someone constantly looking over your shoulder, they knew I was capable of the job and they let me do it, knowing if I needed help or advice I would ask for it. By the time I left in October the course was once again open to the members and looked great again. I have only been able to scratched the surface of my experiences in America and have lots of great memories, I am planning to return and visit next year.

Since returning to the UK in late October last year, I have returned to work at De Vere Carden Park. While in the States I was able to continue my NVQ Level 3 course work over the internet with Myerscough College, sending regular updates and background knowledge tests using email, I am now in the process of adapting my work diary, any certificates and a detailed photo album that I kept, which can all be used as evidence for my qualification.

