

Golf & greenkeeping at their very best

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Amazing, incredible, life changing... just a few of the words used by British and Irish greenkeepers to describe their experience as part of this year's John Deere TPC Sawgrass Volunteer Programme, organised in association with BIGGA and GCSAI.

Five BIGGA members and one GCSAI member from Ireland recently returned from the trip of a lifetime to the TPC Sawgrass course at Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida. They had won the opportunity to join the maintenance team that helped to prepare the course for the 2015 Players Championship, won by Rickie Fowler of the US after a three-way play-off.

The successful five from the BIGGA regions were Michael Burgin from Normanby Golf Club in Scunthorpe, North Lincolnshire; Chris McArthur from Portstewart Golf Club in County Londonderry, Northern Ireland; Graham Down from Aldwickbury Park Golf Club in Harpenden, Hertfordshire; Joseph Dormer from West Sussex Golf Club in Pulborough; and Mike Ellis from The Point at Polzeath, Cornwall. They were joined by GCSAI representative David Perdisatt from Naas Golf Club in Co Kildare, Ireland.

The Players Championship volunteer force is made up of over 2200 people that make the event possible each year, assigned to one of four divisions: player services, spectator services, volunteer services and facilities. The six UK and Ireland winners joined the greenkeeping team at the legendary US venue for the entire duration of the Players Championship on the PGA Tour, courtesy of BIGGA and GCSAI partner John Deere. They even had the opportunity to attempt to hit the island green on the course's legendary 17th hole, which was achieved by Mike Ellis and Michael Burgin.

"The easiest way to describe my whole TPC Sawgrass experience would be to say truly amazing," said Michael Burgin. "This was golf at its very best and I feel privileged to have been a part of it. The highlight of my trip had to be working on the 17th every morning as the sun came up.

"It was great to see so many people from all over the world, all working together for one special event. The energy levels and enthusiasm from everyone were unlimited, despite the 5am starts and late finishes. I would just like to say a massive thank you to John Deere and BIGGA for giving me this opportunity."

Chris McArthur added: "What an incredible time we had. The energy from the whole staff at TPC Sawgrass was expected, but nothing could prepare me for what ensued at 4.30am on arrival every morning. Singing, chanting and heavy metal was just the ticket to prepare us for the day ahead.

"It was a privilege to share the experience with the other members from the UK and Ireland, it was a great learning curve and they have truly become beacons for me in my turf career. Many thanks to them, BIGGA and John Deere for providing me with the opportunity to progress in my greenkeeping career."

David Perdisatt also said: "A life changing experience is the only way I could describe the 12 days away. I knew it was going to be special, but this has surpassed anything I expected. The scale of the place has still not sunk in, and the sheer amount of work that goes into such an event is amazing. We put in a lot of hours but the positive attitude and professionalism showed by all was a pleasure to be part of."

"It was a great education working with warm season grasses and viewing first-hand the cultural practices used to present this turf to the world. It was also an amazing networking opportunity to meet professionals from all over the world and I have many new friends and contacts as a result – especially my new friends the BIGGA greenkeepers, who made this experience even better."

"I would also like to offer my thanks to John Deere and the GCSAI for this once in a lifetime opportunity – also a massive thank you to Peter Nelder of John Deere, who organised everything for us while we were out there."

Source: John Deere GmbH & Co. KG; ASM Public Relations Ltd