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The Ohio Program

A woman can't handle it!

Denise Fitzsimons shares her experience of working at the Robert Trent Jones Golf Club in Manassas Virginia, thanks to The Ohio State Program. She reckons she's living "the American dream", even though she was told a woman can't handle it!

My name is Denise Fitzsimons. I'm twenty-six years old from Meath, Ireland and this article is what I'm calling "the American Dream". Going on the Ohio State Program was by far the best choice I've made in my life so far, and also the hardest!

Being a woman in this industry isn't what you see every day and what was stated at the start, before I signed up for the program, was that "guys found it difficult to last the year, so a woman probably couldn't handle it".

Well, with this said, six months down the line, we can put that myth to rest as I set out to prove them all wrong - and I had the best six months of my life doing it!

It is true; it has been the best six months of my life to date, I have worked hard to get where I am and it has finally paid off, not to mention all the great people I've met along the way.

One to mention is my Spanish room and work mate, Lara Arias. Lara was in the same situation as me, coming over here on the program, and we had to hit the ground



running. The Ohio Program has four female interns this year, one from Costa Rica, one from China, Lara from Spain and myself, which is a great effort, considering it's so hard to find women in this profession.

I should explain that the Ohio State Program, known as the TOP Program, brings young, single, 19-28 year old trainee greenkeepers, male or female, from around the world to America every year, for hands-on practical training at some of the best golf courses in the country. Typically, you spend six months up north on cool season grasses

and six months down south on warm season grasses. The program is run by one of my compatriots, Irishman, Mike O'Keeffe, a job he has been doing for close on thirty years now. Mike does an excellent job of matching you with just the right golf course and just the right people. He certainly did that for me, Lara and the rest of the TOP interns here at Robert Trent Jones Golf Club.

So, where do I start? Well, on our first day at RTJ we met our superintendent Scott Furlong and he gave us a run through of what to expect, and what he expects from

us. He told us a little bit about the history of the club, the members and how long he has been in the industry. Words cannot describe this man, the work and passion he has for his club and his golf course is incredible.

We then met his three assistants, one of which is a former TOP intern from three years ago. We were next given a tour of the 19-hole golf course, along with the driving range and short game area; altogether twenty-seven greens. I'll never forget the feeling I got driving around the golf course that morning, especially when we came to

Next to the payroll, the cost of chemicals is clearly the biggest expense every superintendent in America faces



Aeration week at Robert Trent Jones

the back nine holes that run along Lake Manassas. It is stunning, to put it mildly; the views and the way the golf course sits right next to the lake. RTJ is a members-only golf course and it has some very exclusive members, I can't name names, if you know what I mean.

When we arrived, the work crew consisted of twelve people, quickly growing to forty-five in the peak of the summer. On our first week there, we learned to do 'course set up' which would consist of two people, one on the front nine and one on the back nine. We would cut the hole, do a full roll on the greens and move the tee markers. Green and tee mowers would require at least four people each to get through the golf course before the first tee off. This was all done under the clock as we had to be done and off the course by first tee time.

Due to the extreme heat and humidity, we seem to be constantly spraying greens fairways and tees.

We had some problems with dollar spot and brown patch. We would normally spray once a week, regardless of the weather (the summer of 2016 went down as the hottest on record for close on one hundred years) They spray what is called 'preventative spray'. This is something I have learned that

we are very fortunate not to have in Ireland. The cost of chemicals is massive in America and it blows their budget; next to the payroll, it is clearly the biggest expense every superintendent in America faces. I have learned a lot of new fungicides and herbicide since starting my training in America and it's great for me to experience.

Again, this is a total misconception that I had before coming to America; we were told they spray excessively, we were told they had massive budgets, but everyone I talked to here, if they had a choice, would spray less, spend less and would love Irish growing condition, but the extreme weather dictates that they have to preventative spray, otherwise, they would lose greens in a matter of days. 35°C and 80% humidity can do that in one afternoon if you are not on top of your greens and your fairways. This makes for great Assistant Superintendents and Supers, and they were certainly great at RTJ, or else they would lose their jobs.

So, as you can imagine, coming from a small work crew in Ireland, this was a big change for me, but great experience. I have learned so much over the last six months from different ways of doing certain jobs and always being part of a team from many different cultures, to dealing with the

extremes of temperature and how to handle disease pressure.

Living in Gainesville Virginia and working in this area we had a lot of different cultures, from Americans, to Mexicans, Australians and English.

We were learning something new every day, learning a little Spanish from the Mexicans at work, who I have to say were a great bunch of guys, to hearing about the Australian way of greenkeeping and, of course, enjoying the local social scene.

RTJ has cool season grasses on greens, tees and fairways so, as you can imagine, keeping grass alive in the extreme temperature and high humidity was a new experience. I was a more worried, some days, about struggling more myself than the grass with the heat! But we learned to pace ourselves, drinking lots of fluids, staying hydrated and making sure we wore sunscreen and hats. With my Irish complexion, I could have burned quickly near the lake and also being out in the sun most days.

Coming from Ireland with Poa greens, when we get a hot period - which isn't too often - we drown the green. Here, that is how you kill grass! We were taught that, throughout a day with high humidity, you

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Denise with RTJ's Scott Furlong, Lara Arias from Spain and young Englishman Jack Rank



The 11th at Robert Trent Jones

As you have probably realised by now, our work schedule was pretty hectic, working twelve days on, two days off

only cool off the green, and then only if it is needed, with a light mist over with the hose pointing up at all times.

The first signs of wilt on a bent green are what is called 'foot printing' so, for example, if you walk on the green and it leaves a white tint of your footprint, it needs cooling off. Another sign is colour; if you see a hue of purple, you cool it off. This took a while to catch onto but, after twelve hours a day, seven days a week, I got the hang of it eventually.

Each day we had our own section to look after, which was four greens during the week

and six at the weekend. Everyday was the same greens. I was lucky enough to have what I think is one of the most beautiful holes on the golf course - the 13th - so the view looking out over Lake Manassas was gorgeous - but the signature hole, and the most famous, is the 11th.

As you have probably realised by now, our work schedule was pretty hectic, working twelve days on, two days off, starting at 6.00 in the morning, finishing at the earliest 5.00 in the evening, with the exception of a few days where we might finish at 8.00, 9.00 or even 10.00 at night, depending on what had

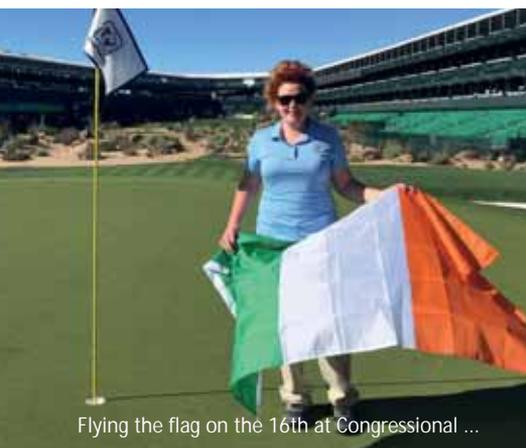
to be done that day. But, in the American turf industry, this is called the American dream; your co-workers are your family, you see them more than anyone else and, to be honest, I wouldn't have changed it for the world. I was lucky enough to have worked with a great bunch of people.

Our most craziest time, in my opinion, was aeration week. During this period, we worked from 6.00am until 9.30pm. We aerated greens, approaches, tees and solid tined fairways and rough, along with fertilising and topdressing everything after. The course was closed for five days, so we

My first baseball game, and what a way to spend it - we were only in the John Deere corporate box - free food and great views



Double mowing the 16th at Congressional with Lara



Flying the flag on the 16th at Congressional ...



... and watching the pros at work

knew we were on a time limit to get everything done, and we did, as a team. We were left with a great sense of accomplishment.

We also got to experience crazy 'eighty-people' shotgun start tournaments; comprising two members, a tournament member and a guest, and nothing like what you expect, with green speeds reaching double figures - in the high teens. Anything lower was not accepted.

It wasn't always work and no play, thanks to our boss Scott Furlong. He gave us great tickets to a baseball game - my first ever - and what a way to spend it! We were only in the John Deere Corporate box - free food and great views. We also experienced an NFL game, obviously supporting the local team the Washington Redskins.

In the last week of June, we got to experience the Quicken Loans tournament at the Congressional Country Club in Maryland. This was a whole new experience for me; volunteering in a tournament as big as this was amazing. This tournament was hosted by none other than Tiger Woods.

We were put up in a nice hotel for free and collected every morning at 3.30am. Coffee and donuts were served every morning for breakfast, and then we headed out to start our morning job which, for me, was raking bunkers. There was a team of seven on both the front and back nine holes, so we were finished by 8.30am, when we

could go in for more grub!

Our afternoon job started at 4.00pm, which was cutting fairways, but not like I have ever done before. There were twenty-two Toro triplex mowers all following each other up and down the fourteen fairways. This was done, not to impress people, but for efficiency. It was an experience I will never forget. Overall, it was a great week. Congressional has a super team from Mike Giuffre to Dave Hutchinson, to Derek Trenchad and Kevin Rajik. We met some great people and seeing how a massive PGA tour event was run was overwhelming, but it was particularly nice to see how these people were so helpful and accommodating to us, willing to answer questions or show us anything we wanted to know about the course, the conditioning of the greens or the method of management for their bunkers.

This experience has been mind-blowing and I have so many people to thank for helping me get to where I am, including family and friends but, most of all, Aisling Mahon and David Perdisatt from Naas Golf Club and, of course, Mike O'Keeffe from the TOP Program.

I'm now heading west to Arizona to work at TPC Scottsdale for my last six months placement. I'm super excited to get stuck into a new challenge. It will be a totally different experience, growing grass in the desert. Stay tuned for my next article; I hope it will be as much fun as the first six months.

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Twenty-two Toro triplex mowers cutting a Congressional fairway