



# Diamond Geezer!



**An internship at the Ohio State University has proved a platform for transforming the career of a groundsman now in charge of an American school's sports provision over here.**

**Report by Tom James**

**D**espite its significant acreage, The American School in London's sportsgrounds are far from imposing at first glance.

Quite the contrary in fact. I nearly drove past the intentionally unassuming black entrance gates when I approached the grounds in Canons Park, north-west London.

And it wasn't merely because, early on a Saturday morning, school sports are out. Discretion seems to be the name of the game, with no signage to guide my way.

The old chestnut that a groundsman is never off duty, proved to be the case again as a sprightly-looking Dan Bingle agreed to take time out of his busy schedule to discuss what has been, for him, an inspiring route into groundsmanhip.

It's a career that he speaks about with passion and eloquence as we explore the finer points of his job as sole groundsman at this prestigious private school, which has its educational hub in the city.

The American School in London (ASL) was founded in 1951 by Stephen L Eckard, an American journalist and former teacher who lived in London. Eckard was working for the North American Service of the BBC when

several co-workers encouraged him to found a school in the UK that followed an American curriculum.

The school began life with just thirteen students, and all classes took place in Eckard's Knightsbridge flat. Within six months, the school had become so popular that three teachers were hired and it moved to a more spacious property in Chelsea.

The school continued to expand, attracting students resident in Grosvenor Square, Gloucester Gate and York Terrace - playing their sport in nearby Regent's Park and on the lawn of Winfield House, the residence of the US ambassador.

In 1964, the newly formed Board of Trustees decided to raise funds for a \$7m building to house all students at One Waverley Place, St John's Wood, where the school is still based.

The sportsgrounds now lie outside the hustle and bustle of the city centre, just outside Bushey at Canons Parks on land that was once the sportsgrounds of North London Polytechnic College until ASL purchased them in 1993.

It's apt that The American School, which boasts more than fifty nationalities among its staff, would find a groundsman who was experienced in preparing sportsturf for American sports such as baseball and softball.

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Yet, that's exactly what the school acquired in 2008, after Dan successfully applied for the vacant post of head groundsman at the age of just 27, but already having amassed a wealth of experience that wouldn't shame a professional twice his age.

Now 29, Dan has worked in the industry for sixteen years, gaining his first taste for groundsmanship at only 14, during a period of work experience at Gloucester City Football Club, while still at school.

“Straightaway, I knew it was the career for me,” he recalls. “I loved the outdoors and was keen to progress in the industry, with football as my preferred route. The head groundsman at the time had clearly spotted some potential in me, as he persuaded me to take my interest further and become trained up properly once I had finished school.”

After completing a National Diploma (ND) in Greenkeeping and a level 2 NVQ in Sports Turf, Dan joined a local sports turf consultant, a post he held for four years before applying for a job on the staff at Westonbirt School in Gloucestershire.

“I stayed there for two years and really enjoyed my time, especially as it was committed to high achievement in sport, so there was always plenty to do,” he explains.

“After four years I was beginning to get itchy feet and was eager to work my way into stadium groundsmanship, something that I had always wanted to do since my first taster at school.”

Dan applied for a few jobs at professional football clubs, most notably at Tottenham Hotspur FC, but was finding little success breaking into the speciality he craved, so felt it was time to rethink where his career was taking him.

“Contrary to what people think, this is a tough industry to succeed in and I was finding it difficult to break into football, so I decided to take a different view,” he

continues.

“I had heard about the Ohio State University programme through some contacts I had, who put me in touch with its head, Mike O’Keeffe, and I sent him a CV to see if I could attract any interest.”

“Shortly before Christmas 2005, Mike called me, expressing an interest in setting me on the programme and asking me whether I would like a placement at the Columbus Crew soccer stadium in Ohio - an opportunity I immediately jumped at.”

In March 2006, Dan set off to the States to start his placement, which saw him undertake an eight-month stint at the stadium and another four months in Phoenix, Arizona, at a baseball stadium used for spring training by the San Diego Padres and the Seattle Mariners.

It was a move that enabled him to gain the experience that would make him a prime candidate for his later role at The American School In London. “My dream was always to work in a stadium environment and I was overwhelmed by the quality in the States, and by the size of the venues I was working in. Mostly though, what hit me was the heat and how the climate opened up my mind to grass maintenance skills in those conditions,” he reveals. “The transition between the winter season grasses and the warm season Bermuda species that take over in April was fascinating to watch. The skill is in the balance between the different grasses, and it’s something that I doubt I will ever experience again, unless I move abroad later on in my career.”

When Dan returned to the UK in March 2007, his fortunes here appeared to have changed, with him immediately landing a position at League 1 football club, Yeovil Town, where he remained for a further year before being recommended for the newly vacant position at the ASL.

“Initially, I was thinking about

applying for a post at a Premiership football club, but I was notified of the position at the school by a colleague who said that, with my experience of working with American sports, I should apply, so I did, and the rest, as they say, is history.”

Up against a host of eager applicants, Dan won through, in part thanks to his time in America, which meant he could step seamlessly into the role. Yet, while it was a big step for Dan to take on full responsibility of the 22-acre sportsgrounds at such a young age, he seems a man who knows what he needs to deliver the goods, so a frank discussion on grounds kit had to be taken early on.

“Whilst at the school, I had to contend with working with a limited stock of quality machines, which made the job all the more difficult,” he notes. “So, I needed to ensure that I would have a decent budget to make machinery purchases. Thankfully, in that respect, the ASL has been fantastic and always accommodating if I feel we need to invest in something.”

His first purchases focused largely on John Deere - an Aercore, 3720 compact tractor and Gator utility vehicle, plus a Major roller mower followed. “I looked at a number of firms before settling on John Deere,” explains Dan, “but the decision centred on two key factors. First, their range was enormous and they could supply pretty much any part faster than anyone else I’d looked at. Second, the quality of their aftercare service and linkage with their dealerships, an attribute that makes repairs and servicing so much easier, knowing that, even in the worse case scenario, we can receive parts quickly.”

Dan is hoping to expand his John Deere fleet by replacing his ageing Hayter triple mower with a fine turf alternative, plus an additional walk-behind cylinder mower for the baseball diamonds.



The 'love of his life' though, is an Amazone Groundkeeper, a machine he swears he couldn't work without. "It's a wonderful piece of kit," he enthuses. "A scarifier, great post-match maintenance machine and a handy leaf collector rolled into one - a real Jack-of-all trades."

For someone as young as Dan to be in a head's position is rare yet, still rarer perhaps, is his position of having to undertake the programme of turf maintenance himself. "Being sole groundsman can be a difficult burden to shoulder, but I enjoy the work and the change of seasons we have with all the different sports on offer," he says cheerily.

No man is an island, however, and Dan reveals plans to hire an assistant to help him with the workload - part of a longer-term strategy to create a legacy and a strong grounds team at the school.

"Throughout my years of training, one of the most important things I've learned is the value of being inspired and having people above me who were willing to invest time and effort into training me up," he says.

"I want the opportunity to do that here and help bring on new talent with the same passion as I had." Until that time though, Dan has to contend with the workload himself.

As you'd expect from an American school, the emphasis on US sports is strong, with baseball playing a central role in the yearly programme. Dan manages four football, three 8-a-side football and one rugby pitch.

Between November and March, another rugby pitch is created and only one football pitch is in service. In summer, he makes further changes to cater for baseball and softball.

Lacrosse is another North American import that's making a comeback in the UK on the back of a tidal wave of uptake in the US - one that the school is looking to start soon, Dan reports. Luckily, it's another sport that he has ample knowledge of, having been the primary sporting pursuit at Westonbirt School. "It was one of the few schools in the country that played the sport as its number one, so, looking back, it was a great experience for me to learn the ropes with such a variety of sports."

Summer term is one of the busiest for Dan, despite the long vacation. The school is one of the founding members

of the International Sports Schools Tournament (ISST), and they will be hosting three ISST tournaments this year - rugby in March, baseball in May and football in November. All are three day events, but the number of participating schools from Europe depends on which sport is being played. But, it will be a busy year ahead!

Dan is one of few groundsman in the country who has to maintain not only one but two baseball diamonds, a skill he honed during his time in the States, and one that requires more time than you'd expect, he says.

"Although baseball is straightforward to set up in terms of turfcare requirements, the challenge lies with the dirt," he explains. "I've always traditionally used a red shale, but, recently I've been experimenting with using Surrey Gostd cricket loam to reinforce the dirt pads. I want to see how tough I can make them to limit the amount that usually gets kicked up during play."

"The only problem comes when the surface becomes wet. If I decide to move permanently to the loam, I'll have to buy covers to avoid the surface becoming too mushy."

While, in the early 1990s, the school leased the grounds to clubs such as nearby Watford FC for training, nowadays the pitches are the sole preserve of the students, so Dan is spared from having to look after overworked playing surfaces.

But, he suffers in other ways. Worms have created a "massive headache", he says. "The issue is a bigger one than we can really contend with ourselves, so I use outside contractor, A T Bone, who also come in twice a year to apply our feed application," explains Dan. "We have few weed problems on the whole and only need to spray once a year, in June." Natural turf doesn't cater for all the sports on offer, however. Tennis is played on a concrete multi-use area, while plans are afoot to redevelop the 1930's clubhouse.

Currently, the site lacks the scope to stage the full range of sports the school offers; hockey, field and track athletics and basketball are all played at other locations around London, but the new developments are planned to bring everything on to one site.

The characterful exterior of the clubhouse will be retained, while inside is

created "a modern sports complex", Dan reports. "The school is keen to retain as many English elements as possible, even though the curriculum and the teaching styles are American, especially among the sports department," he adds.

Work is set to begin in June, with completion over the summer in time for the start of the new term and football season. Sadly, Dan will lose his shed, also built in the brick and tile style of the clubhouse. "I'll become a nomad while work is in progress," he says, "but, I'll gain a new shed at the back of the new development and will be able to house all the machinery."

Dan is excited about the plans ahead and, with the prospect of nurturing new talent once his new assistant comes on board, he hopes he can pass on some of his experiences and draw on those from his own colourful career. "I want to give people help and a chance at a career. I've seen the benefits of being pushed to do the training and to be ambitious about long-term goals," he says.

"My training in the US has, ultimately, had the most profound effect on my career and how I now feel about the industry and where I think it needs to move."

"The positive way I was treated by Columbus Crew's head groundsman, Matt Williams, had a huge effect on my attitude to training. He always went above and beyond to make sure I understood everything and knew the reasons behind what we were doing," he continues.

"I rank Matt alongside Mike O'Keeffe as two of the most influential figures in my development, who have helped shape how I approach my work today." Praise indeed.

Dan's time in the States presented him with many memorable moments yet, arguably, the one that will last longest is during his first fortnight at Columbus Crew.

"Matt asked me to cut the grass on the opening day of the season in front of a gathering crowd in the stadium. It was then that I realised how lucky I was to be there, having been sat in Gloucester a month earlier wondering what my next move should be."

"The internship opened many new doors to me and I would recommend it to anyone wanting to move on up in the industry."