

COLLEGE GOLF

The learning curve

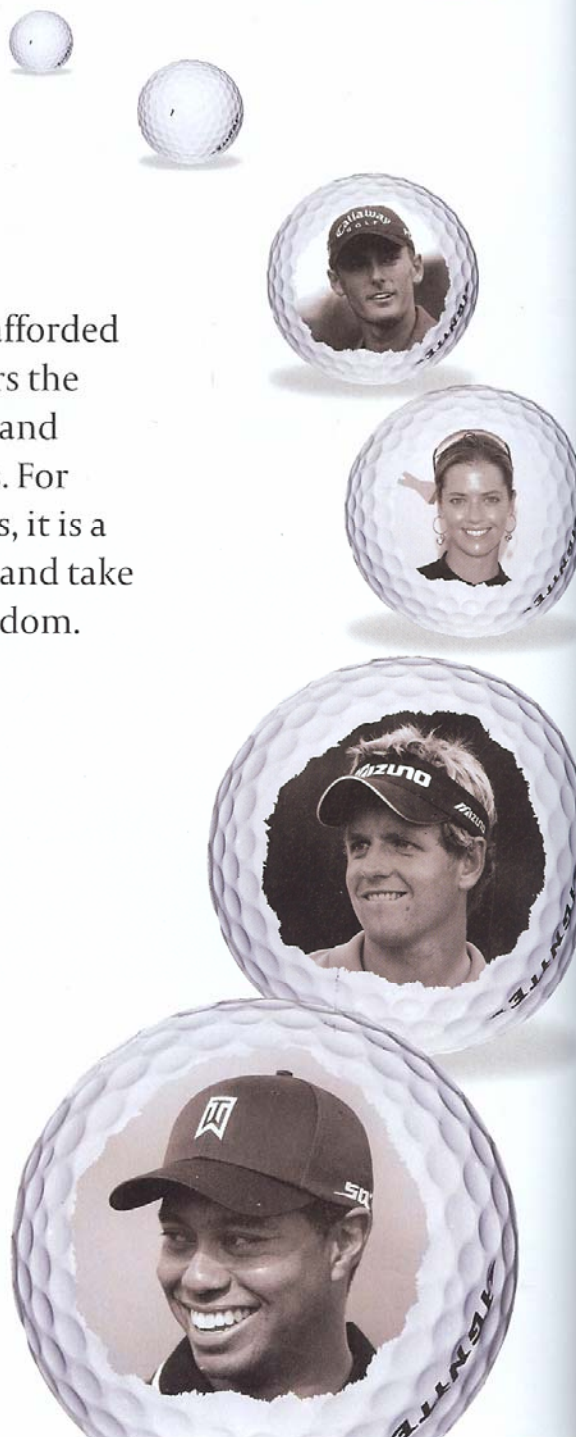
By Alice Hansen Photography Getty Images

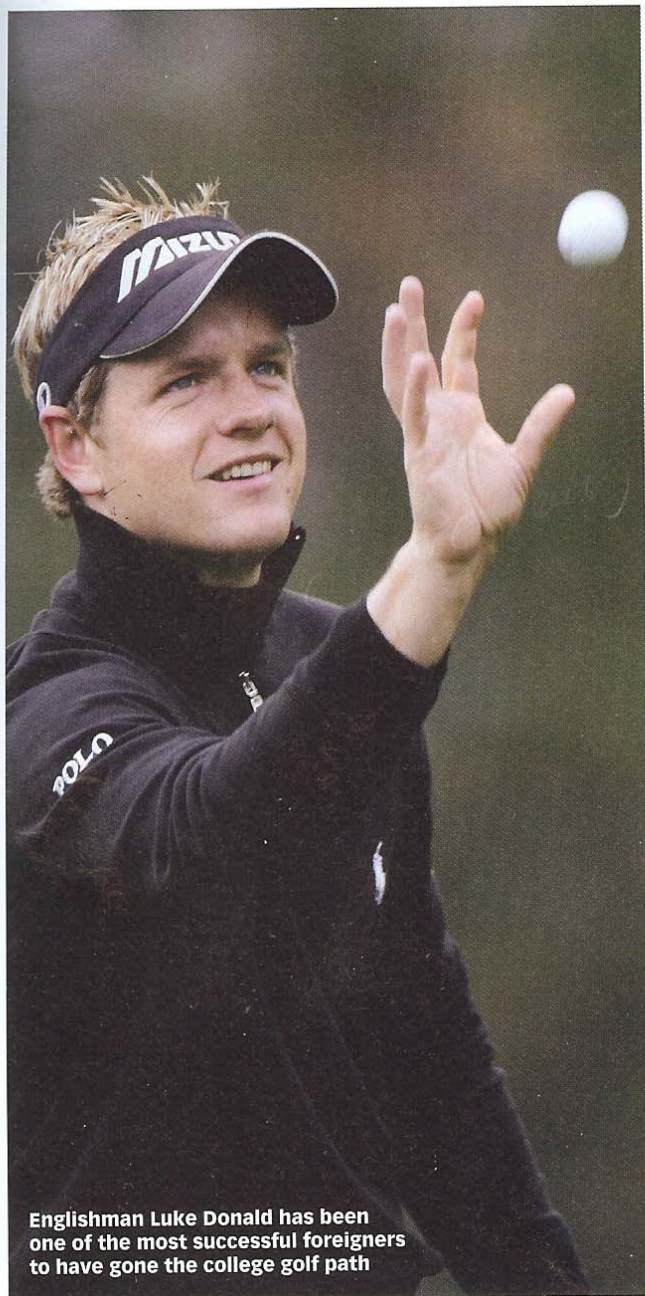
The US collegiate golf system has afforded a number of the world's top players the opportunity to further their skills and provide a strong educational basis. For young Australians with high hopes, it is a great way to experience the world and take the first steps to international stardom.

FOR many budding athletes from Australia and overseas, the US college scholarship system has become an alluring way to kick-start a career in a specific sport. With considerable budgets and a desire to positively promote their institutions, the collegiate process actively seeks international stars of tomorrow to represent their colleges, providing the perfect opportunity for young adults to further their education and develop as sportsmen and women.

The sports encompassed in this pathway are numerous, including soccer, basketball, baseball and golf. While there is no guarantee those selected for scholarships will be playing for Manchester United, or making a splash on the US PGA Tour come the end of their degree, the opportunities provided can prove invaluable.

The US system ultimately offers up-and-coming golfers additional playing options, utilising collegiate competition as well as the more usual club golf tournaments. Divided into sections across the country known as conferences, the system pits college-age golfers against one another at a range of levels. Within the conferences, tournaments are scheduled, and university teams travel to compete against other schools. As a result, college golfers are exposed to an extensive range of courses and competitive play. Unlike club golf in Australia,





Englishman Luke Donald has been one of the most successful foreigners to have gone the college golf path

college golfers can enjoy the fact that coaches arrange all travel and tournament schedules.

One aspiring golfer who experienced first hand the benefits of the American system, was Andrew Bonsey. Having grown up on a farm on the east coast of Tasmania, Bonsey had all the space he could ever need for his fledgling golf prospects, and as young as seven could be found hitting golf balls into distant paddocks.

Realising that he possessed a natural degree of talent for the game, it was not long before Bonsey left the sheep behind in search of a real golf course. What was initially a childhood pastime soon became a strong passion for the sport.

After moving to Hobart at the age of 14, Andrew worked diligently on his game at the Royal Hobart Golf Course and represented Tasmania at a national level throughout his junior career. However, after narrowly missing out on an Australian Institute of Sport scholarship, Bonsey decided to investigate other options that would potentially further his

career. While he did not feel his game was at a professional standard straight out of high school, he was aware that playing college golf in the United States could be the logical next step.

Like many young Australian golfers, Bonsey used club golf as a training ground to improve his game. He knew, however, that travelling abroad would offer him the opportunity to develop his game through a system unavailable in his homeland.

"It was disappointing to miss out on the AIS scholarship," explains Bonsey, "but looking back now, I could not be more happy with the path that I took. Moving to America and the life experiences that came with college golf were just incredible. So for me, this path could not have been better."

Bonsey set about researching colleges in the US. While some players acquire the services of recruiting agencies, Bonsey applied himself to the task, taking the advice of other Tasmanian golfers who had played in the US and using their support to prepare a list of suitable colleges. From this list, he contacted each respective coach with a detailed CV and history of his golfing achievements and current level. In addition, he supplied each college with a history of his academic performance through high school.

Although the scholarships are sport-based, the academic aspect is particularly stringent. All international applicants have to be high school graduates and, in addition, every single international applicant has to take the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). The sports divisions also require applicants to take the SAT to be cleared in the licensing process. Both of these are academic tests that aim to assess the applicants' proficiency in English (TOEFL) and English and Maths (SAT).

"I decided to aim for a junior college to begin with," explains Bonsey, "that way if I didn't enjoy it I could always come home. A junior college in Hobbs, New Mexico with an excellent golfing program offered me a full scholarship. From this point it was just a matter of accepting their offer."

Bonsey did not visit the junior college prior to accepting his scholarship, and knew very little about his new home town of Hobbs. His focus upon leaving his

“
We had
some
great
players,
two of
which
are now
in the
top-50
on the
PGA
Tour.”

”



From left: Australians Kane Webber, Anna Rawson and Aron Price have all gone through the US collegiate system

island home, however, was on playing professional golf after the completion of his college degree. Like any significant life change, it would not be an easy journey for the Tasmanian. Not knowing a soul when he touched down in the US, he was fortunate to be joined by two Swedes and a Scotsman who were also joining the golf team as new freshmen players.

"It was much easier having other international players around with me," says Bonsey. "It's rather daunting when you first arrive, so to have other golfers who are in the same boat and can relate to the situation made it better for all of us."

Bonsey enjoyed much success during his time at New Mexico, playing in the number one and two positions over this two-year period. He reached a level so impressive that he was able to accept a half scholarship to attend North Carolina State University, ranked in the top-20 nationally for golf.

Pursuing a degree in Exercise Science and Psychology, Andrew successfully

“
In such a competitive golf team, each player had to maintain a certain level to travel on the state team.”

”

balanced his athletic endeavours with his study workload. As a student-athlete he was required to practise and compete for NC State while at the same time maintaining academic grades that were required for competing athletes.

"The day-to-day lifestyle of a student-athlete could certainly be a challenge at times," he says. "Each day we would begin with a 6am gym session before breakfast, then head to classes from approximately 8am to 1pm. From here, it was off to the golf course for practise or play, then dinner and study through the evening. It was then a case of getting up and doing it again the next day."

In such a competitive and successful golfing team, each player also had to maintain a certain level to qualify for travel on the NC State team. After a long morning of classes, Andrew would often head to the golf course and tee off against his team members for a spot on the travelling team.

"We had some great players, two of which are now in the top-50 players on the PGA Tour. Often, the top three [in the team] were already guaranteed a place on the travelling team and the remaining nine of us would fight it out for the other three positions," says Bonsey. "Sometimes I'd make it, and other times I'd miss, but we'd all be vying for those positions."

As part of the ACC conference, NC State were invited to some of the best tournaments in the country, and Bonsey was fortunate to travel to more than 20 states during his time in America.

ANDREW BONSEY



Australian Andrew Bonsey secured a scholarship in the US after missing out on an AIS placement. Despite gaining sponsorship to compete professionally upon completion of his degree, he chose not to pursue a professional career.

From Puerto Rico to San Francisco, the team played against some of the very best colleges, including Duke, Virginia and Florida State.

"Being on the travelling team was exciting," says Bonsey. "Being able to walk straight onto US Open courses such as Pinehurst in North Carolina and Southern Hills in Tulsa, Oklahoma was quite something. The opportunities open to us were just incredible."

Attending a college with such an impressive golfing record meant that Bonsey also enjoyed the very best in facilities and equipment. With a million-dollar annual budget devoted to the golfing team, little was spared to ensure that team members had everything they required.

"What was particularly interesting is how the coach operated," explains Bonsey. "The perception is often that the coach will correct technique and improve your game, but this is not the case. His job is that of a manager, arranging flights, preparing for tournaments, and ensuring our schedule is in order. At the college level, it is expected that you have the ability already. The focus is less on technique and more about numbers and getting the ball in the hole."

As for the American college experience, Bonsey believes he gained so much more than a better golf swing in his four years away. Gaining an appreciation for American culture and the welcoming nature of the people he met, gave Bonsey a new perspective.

"Often I would be invited to spend Thanksgiving with a family, and end up staying there over Christmas time," he says. "They were so generous and wonderful during my time away and loved inviting people into their families."

As with any overseas experience, Bonsey recalls that there were times when being away from family and friends had its difficult moments. Much of what he took for granted in his home country, such as a wide variety of good wholesome food, was far more difficult to come by in America.

"Being away certainly had its moments," he says, "and even a near miss or two, including a time when several gun shots were fired through the front door of an athletic party that I had left only moments before. But all in all, I came through unscathed, and all the better for my time over there."

Bonsey gained sponsorship to compete professionally upon completion of his degree, but after training for three months, chose not to pursue a professional career. He played full-time in Australia for a brief period before deciding upon a different career path, and moved into Exercise Physiology.

Although he is not playing competitively currently, he is confident that if the desire arises, it would only take him a short time to return to the level he enjoyed overseas. For now, he now has a young son and daughter which keep him busy, along with his business.

"For any player thinking about college golf as an option after high school, I'd say go for it," says Bonsey. "The experience is like no other, and the doors that it opens are just incredible. Most of the players on my team could have taken their golf to any level they wished, and while some have stopped playing, others are making a full-time successful career from their golf. It's certainly a fantastic spring-board into the professional golfing world." ●

HOW TO DO IT

The US collegiate scholarship system is now more accessible than ever. Players from all over the world are benefiting from the pathway and the opportunities it provides.

For those interested in following this route, first port of call should be The Ping American College Golf Guide, a publication that details the availability of college golf scholarships across the United States. This guide is available online, with a range of other resources to assist international players in finding a suitable college to attend.

The guide also indicates rankings of each college within their conference and across the country. With this information, players are able to determine the level and ranking of each college before making contact. All universities now have websites with links directly to golf programs and most have direct email addresses for coaches and staff.

There are also a number of questions to consider when researching US colleges:

- What is the location and climate of college?
- What academic courses are available?
- What costs are incurred if I am offered a partial scholarship?
- What are the living arrangements?
- What is the proximity and standard of the golf courses used for practice and play?
- How well established and successful is the current golf program?
- What are the college facilities like?
- What is the current coach like?
- How successful are the current players?
- What conference is the college in and how will this affect our tournament schedule?
- How many players travel and compete?
- What are the day-to-day expectations of a college athlete?