



CASE STUDY

IOG Instructor Goes Back To School To Promote The Role Of Grounds Professionals

Careers are often shaped by defining moments. And for Ian Mather Brewster, that moment came sitting in front of a careers officer as a young man. "I said that if I wasn't good enough to play sport at a high level then I wanted to still be involved in sport in some capacity," he explains. "It was then that he asked me if I knew what a groundsman does."

Fast forward some 25 years, 23 of which have been spent as a groundsman at Middleton Cricket Club in North Manchester, and Ian is putting the same question to a class of eager-eyed 14-year-olds at a secondary school in Bolton.

Approached by a teacher who wanted his pupils to be more aware of sports-related careers, Ian is aware that the Institute of Groundsmanship (IOG) will as part of its just-announced Challenging Perceptions strategy start to send more of its members into schools to attract more youngsters into a profession that has seen its profile rise steadily in accordance with the growth of sport as a global industry.

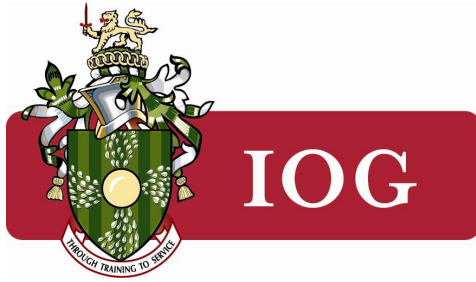
"The question of what we do provoked a few puzzled looks but 'they cut grass' was the general view," he chuckles. The truth, he notes with a smile, is very different. "The perception of us as grass cutters is fast changing and our profile in the media is helping this. I see us as technicians now.

A lot of the job is scientific based as it all begins in a laboratory. Grasses are crossed genetically to produce better cultivars. Essentially what we're doing is battling against nature." Putting this across in a morning of theory-led teaching to the class he explained the basics of his job at Middleton.

"I pointed out to them that grass needs free-draining soil to develop roots but in cricket we use a clay base, which is one of the hardest mediums to grow grass on," he says. "We mow the grass very short and then use a roller to make it hard and restrict its growth. It's totally against nature. Then we spend six months spiking it to allow air and light to get in and keep the grasses alive. It's difficult to master." The pupils' interest level perked up considerably though when it came to an afternoon session of demonstrating how he goes about maintaining grounds. "I quickly learnt that their concentration wavered after a while and I needed to balance the theory with some hands-on work," he explains.

"Unfortunately their school grounds were not in particularly great shape so I was able to show them how I'd get it into a better condition and add the appropriate markings." He also discussed with them the constant struggle he faces in having to adapt to ever-changing and extreme weather conditions.

"We're getting a lot of extreme heat and extreme rain now," he says, "and a groundsman has to deal with that. We've got to adapt to the weather conditions. It's all about air, light and water getting through to the roots and we have to maintain a delicate balance and work with the right



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grasses. "We've got to keep looking forward and experimenting to maintain the highest standards in sporting arenas."

Back at the school in Bolton and after he has put right some of the pupils' initial perceptions and talked of the challenge of keeping Britain's greatest stadia in tip top condition, interest is beginning to emerge. "At least half of the class were asking questions about work experience and how they can get a job in the profession," he says.

The course he provides covers a Level One introduction to groundsmanship (he is an approved IOG instructor). Run over four days it demonstrates basic skills, the preparation and maintenance of cricket and football pitches and hands-on work. "It's important that people who are interested in sport understand what other opportunities are available to work in this industry other than that as a professional sportsman or woman," he says.

"Because not everyone makes it. "But what I really wanted them to understand was that we're not providing a marginal service. What we do is absolutely integral to the game." That almost goes without saying. Whether it's Geoffrey Boycott interviewing a groundsman for Channel 4's cricket coverage, Andrew Flintoff congratulating the groundsman in his post match interview or Sir Alex Ferguson bemoaning the state of the pitch after his team have come unstuck, the role of the grounds professional is increasingly publicly acknowledged as an important factor in the end result.

"There's no doubt about the value of the IOG's intention to promote our role more in schools," he enthuses. "Not least because it's a very enjoyable career and not everyone understands what we do.

"I class myself as very fortunate to have been able to work in sport where you're appreciated for 25 years, and I can honestly count the number of times when I've been fed up with my job in that time on one hand."