

Institute of Groundsmanship blames British weather for the 'Mud Bath and Beaches' Pitch debate

As an increasing number of national press and TV football commentators criticise the state of playing surfaces, and have variously described some as mud baths and beaches, the Institute of Groundsmanship (IOG) is forcibly defending the role of grounds managers by blaming the British weather rather than any lack of groundsmanship skills for poor playing conditions.

"At this time of the year – mid-season – it seems that everyone wants to point the finger at grounds managers for the state of some of our playing surfaces," says IOG chief executive Geoff Webb.

"But grounds managers are attempting to combat climatic conditions that are very much beyond their control while making best use of resources.

"Winter in this country is invariably characterised by a lack of the natural elements essential to turf growth, such as sunshine and good air flow.

"What is also contributing to problems with the pitches is the fact that in many cases stadia have been built without the appropriate feasibility studies concerning the effects of increased stand space.

"When clubs are considering new developments it is essential that the architects and project managers also harness the considerable knowledge of the groundsman or a consultant with the relevant skills to ensure the best possible result for the pitch."

He continues: "An environmental study is essential, tracking the movement of the sun across the pitch and taking into account existing facilities – with the result that the planned facility will enable a pitch system that is appropriate for the site.

"Clubs will also have a range of systems that have been installed over time with various budgets attached. Like any other industry, new products become available and, within the sports turf business, science continues to be central to modern methods of pitch design.

"Again it is essential to ensure that the professional grounds staff are trained and equipped to produce a pitch that is fit for the standard of football being enjoyed today. At the top of the game, clubs are able to afford to pay £40,000 a week to a player but are they budgeting enough in terms of investment in groundstaff and necessary equipment?"

"A grass pitch is essentially a living animal and it requires food, water, light and nutrients to grow and to prosper. It is essential therefore that sport considers the skill and resources that the grounds turf professional has to offer if a pitch is to be maintained in a healthy state."

With a UK-wide membership that includes many Premier and Scottish League grounds managers, the IOG and its members are constantly pushing the boundaries of turf management best practice through IOG-led technical consultation and training, for instance.

Geoff Webb continues: "As an industry we work in close collaboration with various research bodies and turf growers, for example, to develop new strains of grass/turf and growing strategies that will help us overcome the vagaries of the British climate.

"The use of artificial lighting systems is, for example, a proven method of encouraging superb grass growth, as exemplified at Arsenal FC. But not every grounds manager has access to these very expensive systems and not all football clubs can afford to completely renew their surfaces on a regular basis.

"The IOG and its members are doing everything possible to maintain surfaces in pristine condition, but we can't alter the weather and we can't provide a decent pitch if the planners and architects do not utilise our professional skills at the design stage."