

Multi-Tasking Tennis Ace Puts Communication And People Management Skills At The Top Of The Agenda

As giant cranes fill the Wimbledon skyline and building contractors are busy transforming the stands and areas surrounding the All England Lawn Tennis & Croquet Club's (AELTC) hallowed Centre Court, head groundsman Eddie Seaward reflects on how much the multi-million pound project has impacted his role at the club.

After 47 years as a grounds professional – the latter 16 as head groundsman at AELTC – he has over the years witnessed “a constant stream of remarkable industry developments” in terms of turf sciences and the design and use of machinery, for example, “that have irreversibly changed the way groundsmen work”.

But, he says, it is the events of the past four years or so involving the planning, preparation and now construction of the new look Centre Court that has had the most dramatic effect on his day-to-day duties.

“In short, my job has changed beyond all recognition as the demands of the Centre Court project have added a new dimension to my usual duties involving line management, budget control, staff assessment and training as well as turf care skills, of course,” he says.

“Today, in preparing for and helping to manage the massive changes taking place here, my role depends heavily on communication and co-operation, as well as people management skills.”

With a team of 14 full-time grounds professionals (plus an additional 15 temporary staff who are employed from April through to the summer Championships) Eddie Seaward is well-versed in organising the care and maintenance of the world's premier tennis venue: the 41 grass courts and nine hard courts are used all year round (the Centre Court is used only for the Championships).

An accredited Institute of Groundsmanship (IOG) training instructor and fervent supporter of the IOG and its declared aims – having joined in 1961 when it was the National Association of Groundsmen – Eddie Seaward NDT is also a Fellow of Myerscough College for services to the turf industry and a much sought-after conference speaker, having presented Wimbledon-specific turf care and

maintenance presentations in Portugal, USA and Australia as well as throughout the UK.

His expertise has justifiably earned him revered status throughout the industry, and there's no doubt that the Centre Court project has expanded and enhanced his skills set considerably. From a wider perspective, his key role within the AELTC management team also highlights the significance of top-flight grounds managers and reinforces the IOG view that such multi-tasking and multi-skilled individuals are increasingly being recognised in the boardrooms of power.

Laid down in 1993 as part of the AELTC's plan to enhance Wimbledon's global reputation through the improvement of grounds and facilities, the stream of subsequent development projects includes the jewel in the crown, a new-look Centre Court. For Eddie Seaward, it has caused a sea change in his role at the South West London site.

"My involvement with AELTC directors and key staff, as well as all the consultants, architects, planners and builders over the scheme to expand the stands to accommodate 15,000 spectators as well as incorporate a retractable roof over the court, extends back to 2004," he says.

"Throughout all our discussions and project development meetings – and there have been very many – it must be said that our grounds care routines have always taken priority: whenever my team has needed access to the courts, we've had it.

"For instance, this year's autumn renovation programme was largely unaffected by the construction programme, which is now in full swing as the Centre Court's north, west and east stands have been raised to the ground before being rebuilt.

"Our access to certain outside courts was restricted in part, which meant that some maintenance work had to be completed in the evenings, but by and large we did not encounter any major problems.

"Thankfully, I have an expert team that I trust implicitly, and without them I wouldn't have been able to focus on this project.

"Communication has certainly been the key," he states. "It's all about working and co-operating with people; understanding their needs and ensuring they understand yours. And, crucially, it's about compromise."

Explaining that the rebuilt stands will mean that the stadia will be six metres higher on three sides, Eddie Seaward reveals another string to his bow.

“Ever since the Centre Court plans were on the drawing board, we’ve been carrying out extensive research into light levels on the court, using computer modelling, since taller stands could effectively mean less light for the grass surface. The new stands must not affect playing conditions (by definition, surface quality), and we are confident that will be the case.”

While the new stands are due for completion by 2009 and will continue to demand his attention until then, Eddie Seaward’s multi-tasking skills are again being exercised in full as he is now laying down plans for the next major event at Wimbledon: the 2012 Olympics tennis competition.

Eddie Seaward will be presenting an exclusive public preview of the Centre Court work at the 2007 IOG Annual Conference (24-26 February, Newcastle United Football Club). Visit www.iog.org for full details.