

Pop Stars, Corporate Events And Pitch Maintenance - A New Era For Groundsmanship

Rubbing shoulders with the likes of Sir Elton John, Neil Diamond and the Red Hot Chili Peppers is all in a day's work for Alan Ferguson, head groundsman at Ipswich Town Football Club. Well it is nowadays as, like so many sporting venues, the club uses pop concerts and corporate sponsorship events to maximise year-round revenues from its Portman Road stadium.

"Long gone are the days when we used to have a seven/eight-week closed season," says Alan Ferguson. "The traditional summer routine of preparing the pitch for the start of the next campaign has been condensed into sometimes only nineteen days' work, and that has revolutionised how we approach the workload."

Highlighting how the role of the modern grounds manager has indeed been turned on its head – for his part, the management of music events extends from not only ensuring that the pitch is suitably protected but also embraces considerable input into staging, seating, crowd management and the siting of lighting and sound rigs before he has to worry about returning the pitch to its former glory - Alan Ferguson also highlights how the advances in groundscare techniques have transformed his 'day' job.

"If I could turn back the clock say 20 years, and were able to combine the machinery, technology and knowledge we now have with the attitude and disciplines adopted by grounds professionals of yesteryear, there would have been raised eyebrows at the quality of playing surfaces we would have been able to produce and consistently maintain.

"Of course, climatic conditions (especially during the 'winter months') obviously dictate surface conditions and pitch performance, but the technical expertise available freely today certainly helps us overcome many obstacles that seemed insurmountable years ago."

However, it is a great shame, he says, that not enough young professionals of the right calibre are being attracted into the industry though, he adds, it seems to be a problem that inflicts other career paths that are regarded as 'get your hands dirty' jobs.

"Maintaining playing surfaces in pristine condition is now very much a science as much as it is an art; the industry is so technically advanced, and not enough people outside of the industry know and appreciate that."

Thankfully, he says, the team at Ipswich FC is excluded from his remarks, "but, clearly, a lot needs to be done to communicate industry messages about the rewards, technology development and high levels of job satisfaction attainable as a professional groundsman. Industry-related websites have been superb at exposing our industry to a wider audience via the Internet and one in particular has to be applauded for many of its initiatives".

He continues: "Organisations like the Institute of Groundsmanship (IOG) are certainly leading the way by increasingly spreading the word and bridging this gap - with the UK's major sporting bodies, for example.

"It is clear that the review of IOG operations currently being carried out by chief executive Geoff Webb will result in an action agenda and a portfolio of services that will be the major platform for the grounds care industry as it approaches the Olympic era while also establishing industry benchmarks that will meet the demands of the 2012 sporting legacy.

"I am fully behind the IOG and its aspirations, and as president of the IOG Scotland and Ireland Region I will do everything I can to assist in developing the institute and the industry in general. It is vital that those with senior roles within the IOG get behind the chief executive and bring the IOG up to date. The Institute has to be run as a business and I believe that in Geoff Webb we have someone who can inject the urgency that the IOG has lacked over the years.

"The whole world needs to recognise that the modern grounds manager is a totally different animal to 20 years ago; today we are faced by a multitude of demands and are increasingly becoming involved in not only the maintenance but also the management of non-sporting events, as well as people issues, budgeting and environmental factors, for instance."

Alan Ferguson's comments are backed by his impeccable curriculum vitae; following his time at St Andrews first as an apprentice then as course foreman, his career has embraced spells at Bathgate and Glasgow Rangers before being appointed at Ipswich in 1996. He has been awarded IOG Groundsman of the Year twice (in 1998 and 2004) as well as Groundsman of the Year on four occasions in both the Premier and Football League. He is also an approved instructor for IOG training courses.

In addition to Portman Road, he and his staff are responsible for the club's 40-acre training ground on the outskirts of Ipswich as well as a further 20 acres that the club leases for use by the community football operation.

"I'm glad to say that our management board recognises the importance of the ground staff and involve us in all discussions that are pitch-related. We have worked hard to gain this recognition and it is essential that we maintain good lines of communication through to the coaching staff and board.

"The board recognises that first-class people are needed for first-class surfaces. They know that experienced grounds professionals cannot be replaced overnight but, sadly, I find it very difficult to find young people with the values required to succeed in today's pressured environment.

"I know they are out there somewhere – you've only to look at Paul Burgess of Arsenal who, at 27, was last year announced as the youngest ever winner of the IOG Groundsman of the Year award and, along with others such as Tony Bell at Middlesbrough and Lee Jackson at Manchester City, these are excellent role models for young apprentices to follow.

"Some might say my views are harsh and wide of the mark, but I am passionate about the industry and I dearly hope that many of the issues that seem to constantly hold us back are resolved and allow all grounds professionals to receive the recognition their work deserves. With the efforts of organisations like the IOG I hope this will be sooner rather than later."