

Wembley's Steve Welch says Grounds Managers are Ambassadors for the Profession

Wembley Stadium's grounds manager Steve Welch goes to work every day with a smile on his face. "I have the best job in the world," he says, "so it's no wonder I'm happy. My appointment at Wembley is the pinnacle of my career; it's what I've aspired to since I became a grounds professional 27 years ago".

With a football-biased curriculum vitae that few in the profession can match – he joined Leicester City FC in 1978 as groundsman then progressed to head groundsman, followed by his appointment as head grounds manager at Nottingham Forest FC – nobody in the industry will doubt his credentials, and those of his team in West London, for ensuring that the Wembley turf will be blade-perfect as befits a £757 million world-class stadium.

But Steve Welch, the winner in 2002 of the Institute of Groundsmanship (IOG) Professional Football Groundsman of the Year award, is much more than just an expert in sports turf management – he's a true ambassador for the IOG and, in particular, all that the institute and its members represent in terms of grounds maintenance and management professionalism.

"The image of the grounds professional has changed dramatically over the past ten years or so," he says, "and the IOG, for one, has made tremendous strides in elevating the disjointed view held by some that our profession is involved solely in grass cutting and line marking.

"Today, grounds managers are true ambassadors for the profession; they have to juggle multiple demands concerning pitch construction, grass breeds, cultivars, fertilisers and nutrients, as well as irrigation, sub-air systems and artificial lighting, for example.

"They also have to increasingly demonstrate how stadia management skills as demanded by events such as pop concerts, dovetail with grounds management – and for all intents and purposes, do not interfere with pitch conditions.

"In addition, the modern-day grounds manager also has to be adept at costings and budget control - in my case, for example, this includes sourcing the new equipment, including goal posts, required at Wembley, as well as staff training and recruitment issues, risk assessment/health and safety – and, of course team leadership and mentoring.

In terms of the Wembley pitch, this involves a £200,000 investment in 700 tonnes of turf (which includes polypropylene fibres to add stability to the surface, he says) complemented by a £150,000 spend on machinery.

"Of course, there remains the constant need to remind the sporting authorities that all these skills are imperative if our playing surfaces are to be maintained in pristine condition, and it is thanks to the ambassadorial efforts of the IOG and its members that 'the powers that be' are increasingly acknowledging this fact."

With an eye to his close work with the Wembley contractors, Steve Welch has been heavily involved in overseeing the construction of the new pitch at Wembley, and his involvement has extended from discussions concerning pitch construction through root zone testing, drainage and heating systems, for instance, as well as opinions on natural light, heat and irrigation and the role of the retractable roof.

"Ultimately, the success of the Wembley pitch will be down to teamwork," he says, and by that he means the groundscare team he has carefully assembled – including Steve Green his "irreplaceable deputy" who also accompanied him at both Leicester and Nottingham – and the level of co-operative discussion and commitment they achieve between themselves.

"Of course, it is ultimately my responsibility to say what happens and when it happens at Wembley, and I'm sure this will be visibly put to test, especially when we stage non-sporting events.

"But I have long recognised that successful groundscare is also dependent on having a reliable team. I've always been a hands-on manager, and always will be - I would never ask someone to do a job I wasn't prepared to do.

"But by working alongside and with high-calibre people, the job in hand becomes a team effort where everyone shares in both the ups and downs.

"Wembley will undoubtedly be a challenge, and it is one that we will meet. I am totally confident in my ability and that of my team, and I know we can and will deliver what is required.

"Teamwork is all about communication and knowledge sharing, and with a team of empowered people who are as enthusiastic about their jobs as I am about mine, I know that they, too, are smiling when they come to work!"