



## Len Smith's Blog

3rd April 2010

There are very many full time professional head groundsmen employed in stadiums across the country, covering the first class sports and maintaining the surfaces to the highest level.

The stadium environment poses many unique problems for the groundsmen to maintain a healthy grass sward and therefore the head groundsmen will be an extremely skilled and dedicated individual who will understand the requirements of the sward in his stadium and how to produce an outstanding playing surface.

It takes many years of experience for a groundsmen to learn the skills on how to overcome the problems of light and shade, poor air movement, damp soil conditions, uneven drying, selection of the grasses and the aeration/ fertiliser regimes to name but a few.

Yet systematically the higher management of these stadiums are dispensing with the services of the head groundsmen and very often in mysterious circumstances, with the usual excuse that he has taken an early retirement in the case of the more senior men.

Apparently another recent victim of such a decision has been the award winning, Phillip Frost, the highly experienced and very skilled head groundsmen at Somerset County Cricket Club.

Phill has been a dedicated groundsmen at the club for some 20 years and has won many awards over a long period of time for his 1 day and 4 day pitches. Despite this recognition of producing some of the best pitches in the country, it is reported that there have been constant complaints that the pitches are not bowler friendly and too 'bland'.

However, we can only speculate on why he has left the club he was so deeply involved with for so many years, and the game of cricket will sadly suffer from the loss of such an excellent groundsmen.

In recent years several high profile groundsmen have suddenly been removed from their posts among a hail of publicity. Yet this trend of getting rid of our highly respected and skilled colleagues still persists, no matter what the sport.

It seems nobody is safe nowadays and I therefore firmly believe that all groundsmen should be protected from such potential situations and seek to become members of a strong union (if they have not already done so).

20th March 2010

At long last the cold, wet and miserable winter months are drawing to a close and the fine turf summer sports grounds people will soon be looking forward to starting their playing seasons. With my cricket background, I thought perhaps a few hints regarding the spring work on the square may help.

### Mowing

When the soil and air temperatures have risen and are at a constant during the month of March/Early April, we should gradually reduce the height of cut on the outfield and square mowing each time the areas are cut, until the spring/summer mowing height of the sward is maintained at 12/13 mm and, bearing in mind that as we reduce the height of cut, we should never take more than one third of the height of the grass sward in any one pass.

### Pitch/Square Alignment

It is obviously vitally important that the cricket pitches are aligned and marked out correctly.

The permanent corner pegs/markers on the square should be checked using the Pythagoras 3-4-5 right angle triangle method, (the EWCB TS4 booklet takes you through the correct procedure) to ensure the frost/moisture lift has not moved the permanent markers within the soil and the pitches are aligned correctly.

When the cricket table has been squared off correctly with the use of non-stretch nylon ranging lines and tape measures, place a taut line the length of the square from corner peg/marker to corner peg/marker along the stump line and measure out the pitches.

On the edges of each pitch, paint a letter T with a white marking solution to identify every pitch on the square, this action will make it a lot easier to locate individual pitches when they are required.

It must be remembered to re-paint the T marks on a regular basis to ensure they stay in and are easily sighted.

Another hint is to push/hit in a stump in the centre and at the top of the T mark and make a single hole. This can then be filled with a strong powder/liquid whiting solution which can be easily located during the season when looking to take out a new pitch.

### Rolling

#### Pre-season

The square should be pre-season rolled in four directions (Union Jack) to evenly consolidate the winter swell of the clay soil, the last pass of the roller finishing with the run of play.

Traditionally we would roll the square in the spring with three types of roller, first with a light hand roller of 2 cwt then with a medium 6 cwt and finally the heavy 1/2 ton. It has now been proved that we should use the heavy roller at a steady walking pace as soon as possible when the soil moisture conditions allow.

As a general rule of thumb, the square is ready to accept the roller/s when a clean knife blade can easily penetrate the soil to a depth and can be withdrawn with no smearing of the soil on the blade, this being similar to that of baking a cake and testing to find if it is fully cooked.

#### Rolling of the pitches

Traditionally, the preparation of club pitches would begin 5/6 days before the game, but with the results of the Cranfield University rolling project, we are now aware that far less heavy rolling is required and more time for drying of the soil should be allowed.

With this in mind, the pitch preparation should begin at least 8 or more days before the pitch is required for play to weather permitting, ensure the surface is firm and dry to a depth of 50 to 75 mm.

It is also advisable during the early preparation of the pitch, to retain as much grass cover as possible on the playing surface and only lightly mow the sward. This action will aid the drying process as the grass roots will draw up the soil moisture, which will then be evaporated through the leaves.

The pitch when dry, can receive the final preparations of scarification/brushing, mowing and the marking of the creases closer to the day of the game. It is also a known fact that when the sward is removed in one operation from the normal summer height to the playing height, the colour of the pitch will change dramatically from green to the desirable straw or almost white colour.