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TO THE REAL HERO'S, THE CRICKET CLUB VOLUNTEER GROUNDSMAN.

Thoughts from Gordon Gill, Head Groundsman. Bath CC. and
E.C.B. County Pitch Advisor.

The grass roots.

Where would our summer sport of cricket be without this band of dedicated volunteers? Often referred to as heroes. I was one myself for over twenty years. Started off with no knowledge at all. Asked thousands of questions when playing at other clubs. Never anyone to turn to for help or advice. Always on your own.

This job that everybody thinks is so wonderful for you, sun shining sat on a roller, and wish they had it. Where are they when it's pouring with rain and you are on your own trying to push the covers on, the mower has broken down, the roller won't start or the last man has left and the club wants someone to do the ground? Nowhere to be found. This job became a drug to me. I wanted to know more, learn more, where could I go? I can't remember how, but I found out about the I.O.G., Institute of Groundsman. Life now moved on at a breakneck pace, every cricket course on offer I did and more. My County CDM of the time then encouraged me to attend the I.O.G. level two, then three and later on, ten years ago now, a new position was on offer, would I be interested in becoming the County Pitch Advisor. You bet and I was soon off to Kent to attend a week's course. The people that I met, only read or heard about them before, many are now personal friends, the knowledge I acquired, absolutely brilliant.

At the time, I had just started out as a sole trader; redundancy had reared its ugly head, looking after both my own club ground plus a couple of other local clubs. Three years later I was successful in landing the vacant full time job at Bath CC. I made my business a Limited Company, I employ a couple of part timers, and have taken on a couple of bowling greens as well. Although we do carry out weekly maintenance I consider my company to be an end of season renovation specialist. Profits have been ploughed into the business so that my armoury of quality machines is second to none.

Graden scarifyers, Groundsman vertical action aerators and Blec laser levelling graders. Any job from end of season renovation to a complete new construction can be carried out with complete confidence.

Enough of me. I understand that many/some of your clubs were visited recently by an ECB pitch advisor colleague of mine. Having spoken at some length with him, it appeared that there are at least two maintenance tasks that are rarely carried out. These being the treating of worms and spiking.

Raise the topic of worms and everybody says how wonderful they are for the garden. I totally agree and wish that is where they would stay. The casts of poo! that they leave on our fine turf surfaces are not required. They create a perfect place for weed seeds to germinate, they bring the indigenous soil from down under on to the surface, making a mess of that expensive loam we applied last autumn and what a mess they make of our lovely fine turf mowers, mud up to your elbows. No, the casting worm is considered a pest. You will not find worms at Lords, so why should you suffer them? There are reckoned to be approx. 25 species of native worm, of which it is said, only three cast. There is only one chemical on the market at the moment to treat against these, **Carbendizum** and an operator licence is required to use it. We are informed that the other 22 species are unaffected. **Carbendizum** has to be applied on at least two occasions a year. I have always found that applications made during late October/early November and again end of February/early March achieve the best results. If this chemical is ever withdrawn from use and talk is that it does not have a lot of time left, without a replacement we will be in a real pickle.

Spiking, does it do any good? Using the right machine in the right ground conditions and there is a massive benefit from spiking. Grass plants and there roots like oxygen, how does it get to the roots if there are no airways? Many cricket squares that I see suffer from layering. That is top dressing laid on top of the indigenous soil and in some cases it is several layers. Recreational clubs started top dressing during the sixties and very often that first dressing appears to have been Marl.

It was never integrated into the soil, just laid on top and it was soon found that grass would not grow in it so something else was wanted. Very often the next few dressings would be a clay loam that was close in its makeup to the original indigenous soil, but again it was laid on the top.

Every few years the Groundsman would change and he would introduce the latest best thing since sliced bread, all the time creating layers. Now these layers would have different particle sizes and clay content, so often they would not stick to one another and they would dry out at different rates. This often creates space between the layers, this allows for horizontal rooting as opposed to vertical and when the layer dries out, the void between the layers cushions the bounce of the ball as opposed to rebounding it, often resulting in slow low pitches and inconsistent bounce.

If you suspect a layer in your square, take a sample core and have a look. Very often the change of soil or break is apparent at about an inch and a half to two inches below the surface. If your square is never treated for worms, then it is quite likely that you will not see a change in soil as the worms are good at turning the soil over, integrating it for you. If your pitches are still slow and low it could be that you have a low clay content soil and lots of space created by the worms, ie; worm hole space as opposed to layering space.

There are basically two kinds of spiker, roll over/drum and vertical action. It is advised that roll over machines should not be used on cricket squares. The action of rolling over pulls at the layer, often rapping it around the drum, instead of spiking vertically through the layer encouraging strong rooting to hold the layers together. Most roll over machines I see in sheds have short tines, not been changed in years, and the machines depend on their own weight to penetrate the soil, which is very difficult when the square is hard.

The vertical action machines of today have fewer tines, so replacement is much quicker, cheaper and the depth of spike can be easily altered. You do not want to spike to the same depth every time as that creates a pan layer of its own. So if you can vertically spike your square on at least three or four occasions during the autumn/winter, end of January is generally considered to be the latest, there are major benefits to be had. I tell many clubs, though very rarely does it happen, get the members to bring a fork each and spike the square during the Christmas/New Year break.

Fork straight down, best aeration of the lot and the cheapest.

Very soon we will be into the spring and everybody will be thinking roller. Last year, Cranfield University published the results of a four year trial in rolling cricket squares. The results were quite amazing.

We have all heard we must get at least forty, fifty, sixty and even one hundred hours of spring rolling done. Not any more. We have all heard how we must have a really heavy roller; weight plays a part, but not as much as you might think. In preparing our pitch we must roll for an hour every day during the week leading up to the match. Waste of time.

Drying the soil creates a hard pitch, not the roller. First things first! You will have to use and make do with whatever roller you have. The optimum weight is between the two to three tons mark. A light roller or heavy mower is ideal for the first pass or two before you use big berther. The most important consideration is the dampness of the soil. Basically the soil will be holding water, as this water dries/drains it will leave space. The roller is used to close down this space. If while rolling the roller is getting wet, then you are only pushing the water and the soil surface forward with the chance of damaging your levels.

You cannot compress water so do not try, you have to be patient and allow the ground to dry a little first. In a wet spring and without covers or sheeting it is difficult, but it is pointless wasting your time.

The report states that the square only needs about twenty two passes to achieve its optimum hardness, drying does the rest. These twenty two passes should be carried out over several days with breaks in between to allow drying to take place. If during the spring the square gets wet again, then the square will go backwards in its preparation but it will not be relieved of all of its hardness, so a couple of extra passes may be required to get the square back to its optimum. Up and back down the rollers same path is two passes at an optimum speed of approx half a mile an hour. This equates to each pass taking approx two minutes, two up and two back, when the front roller starts in line with the wicket at one end and the rear roller passing the wicket line at the other.

So not a lot of time needed at all. If you have a four foot roller the time required to roll each pitch is approx two hours and twelve minutes. This equates to approx twenty two hours of rolling for a ten wicket square.

Pitch preparation is even harder to get your head around. In fact I often still do another pass or two for luck. Ten passes, yes ten. You still start your pitch prep ten to fourteen days in advance, getting the water in, but you time the rolling to take place as the soil dries over those ten days. Remember it is the drying process that creates the hardness, the roller only closes down the space left by drying taking place. It is difficult for me to explain in writing, but the soil will often appear to be dry when it is in its optimum condition for rolling. Having access to a coring tool so that you can investigate underneath the surface is invaluable.

To those of you who do not have covers I give the following advice. If it rains during the week leading up to the match, then let the pitch dry for a day before rolling. If you do not get that dry day, then just a couple of passes the day before the match will have to suffice or accept that it is too wet to play anyway.

So, this applies to all. Do not be in such a hurry to get the roller out. It may well be April before much of the spring rolling can be done. You might have to be doing it around pitch prep, but pointless and time wasting trying in March if the soil condition is not right.

That's all for now folks, I hope this article has been of some interest. To those who already knew, I apologise, but I never forget how I learnt and if I can pass on my knowledge to those of you who don't, then it has been a pleasure writing this article. Many thanks for giving me the opportunity.

Gordon (Gordon Gill)