





Testing times ahead for Trent Bridge

The England and Pakistan test series begins later this month at Nottingham's Trent Bridge cricket ground. Jim Cook talks to Head Groundsman, Steve Birks, to find out how things are shaping up



Trent Bridge cricket ground in Nottingham is widely regarded as one of the finest of the sport's venues in the world and from July 29 it will host the first test of the series between England and Pakistan. With all eyes and cameras focussed on the pitch, Head Groundsman Steve Birks gives an insight into the preparation involved to create a world class test wicket.

At Trent Bridge there are twelve wickets for first-class cricket in the

central 'square' and of these, five are used as television pitches because of their centrality in the ground as a whole. Several pitches either side of these are used for net practice. In the middle, clay accounts for 30% of the surface and because of the punishment taken during a match, the used wicket is re-seeded after every game. The outfield is built up of *Lolium perenne*, with a hint of *Poa annua*.

Due to the preparation needed for an international test match, Steve begins planning early.

"We normally plan a year in advance; we use the same wicket every year for the tests so we'll find out what test matches we've got. We played the World Cup on it last year, so after that game we seeded it all up, scarified it out and got it all ready for this year. Checked it in September again for all the levels and then top dress any little hollows out and then do the pre-season roll on it leading up to the game. We start about fifteen days before by trimming it out and then watering it and away we go."



“If England come and win then it’s a bonus but you just try for the best pitch out there. The real troubles are from the commentators who are looking at it. Everyone will have their say, but as long as it can last four days and you can get a result at the end everybody is happy usually”

the ground. Every blade of grass has to be spot on, with every angle covered. Plus, it puts a bit more pressure on because we’ve got five television wickets in the centre of the ground, so the more cricket we have on television, the more they have to replay on these five pitches. They look old and tired sometimes if you play maybe about four games on them. For the 20/20 matches we also have to think about marketing because you have the executive boxes behind the stands so that dictates which pitches we will use. There are certain boxes they want to sell so we’re taking a lot more into account with marketing, the cricket manager and everybody else. We normally get on well; as long as we’re pulling in the same direction we’re happy because that’s the big thing.”

And although planning as a team is important, it can also have its limitations.

“At the beginning of the season we do a plan of the pitches. I have the say normally. We show it to the cricket manager, he has a quick

Steve is never pressured into producing a wicket to suit the home team.

“You just try and produce the best possible pitch. If England come and win then it’s a bonus but you just try for the best pitch out there. The real troubles are from the commentators who are looking at it. Everyone will have their say, but as long as it can last four days and you can get a result at the end everybody is happy usually. People listen to what the commentators say and they don’t know what’s

happened in between, but you have to take it both ways; the criticism and the positive.”

With the media, executives and sponsors looking on, Steve is well aware that his work is being scrutinised from all angles.

“They have loads of cameras now. When Sky first started they had about five cameras, now for a test match they will have about twenty. One guy walking around with the roaming camera, one as the players come out of the pavilion, one on a crane and others around



look, we show it to marketing and they have a look, and we sometimes tinkle things about. But the problem with plans is that you could have all the plans in the world but then you get one cricketer who slides on the pitch because nowadays they slide all over the place. They can take a divot out and that pitch might be out for a couple of weeks while we re-seed it up, so you've got to take that into account."

Steve believes that regular interactions with turf professionals from other sports can only be beneficial.

"I go over to Notts County FC and talk to the Stadium Manager, Greg Smith, and Mark from Rigby Taylor, who used to be Head Groundsman at Derby County FC's Pride Park, so we often have a chat with people like that. I think it can really help with different ideas especially now with the grow lights. Football has been using them for quite a while now and they are just beginning to come into cricket as well. If you come into a cloudy day and you want to dry your pitch off you would think about putting them on to help dry it out a bit. And maybe pitches that have just been played on to get the grass back more quickly."

Preparing a cricket wicket, while similar in some areas to preparing a golf course is also vastly different in others.

"You need a good base to start with, with some decent grass on it and all you do is scarify it out then give it a good water. We normally have a screwdriver that we push in to about six inches to check moisture, and then we will start rolling it out. Then it is just a case of keeping an eye on it. If you get the sunshine out it helps a lot.

When you're rolling it with a two tonne roller, you're pulling the water up. All the moisture is coming out then you compact it down. So you've spent all winter growing the grass and then you kill it off by putting the two tonne roller on it. When all the moisture is out of the pitch, we stop rolling. We shave our wickets down to 5mm. The first cut on the wicket would be about 12mm, then down to 8mm, then keep it at 8mm for five or six days and then cut it down to match height about three or four days before the match, which is 5mm."

After a game it takes around three months to have the wicket back in a playable condition.

"The outfield is built up in a similar way to golf greens but the square in the middle is 30% clay, so is completely different to prepare. Like golf greens, every wicket is different and will have its own characteristics"

Steve sees similarities between his job and that of the Course Manager of The Open or Ryder Cup venue.

"They are very similar jobs, but ours is obviously a lot smaller. You've still got the world looking at you and you want everything spot on, that's the key. You've got the pressure of people looking and with cricket it's such a fine balance of getting it right or wrong.

"There is such a fine line of getting it overcooked, especially if you are dealing with clay, that's the difficult thing. With cricket the line is so fine. The outfield is built up in a similar way to golf greens but the square in the middle is 30% clay, so is completely different to prepare. Like golf



greens every wicket is different and will have its own characteristics.”

The club installed a new outfield last spring at a cost of £600,000 and has proven a success so far.

“It takes about 25 mm of heavy rain an hour. It’s been down just over fourteen months and it’s working very well, it looks very good and we’re very pleased with it. It does take a lot more looking after though. A lot more watering, a lot more feed, but it’s in great condition. Drains are five metres apart, with gravel banding diagonal to them and it soaks everything up lovely.”

Despite the pressure of scrutiny, the one thing that causes the most problems for Steve is the natural environment.

“The weather gives me the most sleepless nights. Well it used to, but now we’ve got the Hover cover it’s not so bad.”

The Hover Cover has made life a great deal easier for sports turf professionals involved in cricket and its practicalities are obvious to see.

“It’s on or off in seconds. You’ve got sheets that are 120 ft at either side and it’s on there before the players have had time to walk off

the field. Lords had the first, Old Trafford had the second and we had the third. There are a lot of people getting them now though, because they are that good. It’s one big machine that covers the whole square.”

Although the Hover Cover is ideal for regulating the amount of moisture in a pitch, other elements bring different issues.

“You need the right weather at the right time. You need the sun to come out at the right time and it doesn’t want to be too windy when you’ve just finished watering. The wind is the worst because it dries the top out without the underneath drying out. Although one pitch may be coming along nicely, the problem is that I have four more pitches at different stages, so you’ve got to keep an eye on them all.

“It is like trying to bake a cake, with five different types of cakes in the oven so it can be difficult. It’s all about balancing and prioritising and covering some up with the sheets just to keep a bit of moisture in there.”

And sometimes, even with the best possible preparation and hard work, a bit of luck can help.

“We had a test match a few years ago where, leading up to it, nothing dried for ten days. We had cloudy weather and the paths around the ground were still wet from the morning dew seven days later. Nothing dried, but the day before the match everything changed, the wind got up, the sun came out and we managed to dry it off. You need a bit of luck in life and that game we had a bit of luck. It wasn’t the quickest pitch but it did its job.”

