



Rain a Pain for Grass Guru

ENGLISH WEATHER TOUGH ON WIMBLEDON KEEPER

London - Eddie Seaward twists his cheery face into a grimace when a racket is stabbed into Wimbledon's soft turf. And certain players always make the Englishman cringe. "Some are more heavy-footed than others. You've got people who drag their toes when they're serving, dragging little bits of turf from behind the baseline onto the court so it looks untidy."

But what really gets the keeper of the most famous grass in the world is, well, the English weather. "The biggest problem is still the rain," said Seaward, in his 10th year as the head groundsman at the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club. "It's that wonderful thing we have a lot of in England. Rain is the bugbear all the way through the tournament. And the last few have been pretty bad."

Wimbledon is more than its famous Centre Court. It's a complex of 34 tennis lawns—20 for competition and 14 for practice. That's 3-1/4 hectares to cut, seed, and roll—and keep puddle free for two weeks. Seaward works out of a series of sheds and a machinery storehouse beside "Please Keep Off The Grass" signs nuz-

zled alongside Court 11. It's high tech versus the unpredictable English summer.

Lasers level the courts and a machine thumps away testing wear. The soil is scientifically uniform, seed research is ongoing, and the grass is mowed daily to an 8 mm cut. Wimbledon is the theatre and Seaward is the stage manager, working alongside the director—referee Alan Mills. He sports a blazer, gray flannel trousers, and a club tie, but he looks "more at home in waterproofs." He's tense on opening day, exhausted when it's finished, and ever mindful of the critics.

"I'm always glad when the first day is over," said Seaward, who directs a ground staff of 150 during the tournament. "At the end you feel dead. You're absolutely shattered. But while there's a lot of stress, there's also a lot of buzz about the place."

Former top-ranked woman Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario, winner of four tennis Grand Slams but never on grass at Wimbledon, offered a famous quote a decade ago that's been fodder ever since for losing players departing the slick, quick lawns. "Grass is for cows," she said.

Players a few years ago openly criti-

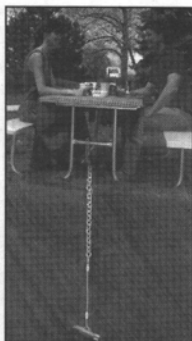
cized Centre Court, which was saturated by rain and smothered by a seemingly never disappearing cover. "You don't like to hear it, but you just get on with the job." Stiff upper lip? "I guess you could say that," Seaward said. Translucent rain covers were introduced a year ago, allowing the grass to be covered for three days with 97% of light still seeping through. Fans were sent to Centre Court and Court 1 to boost air circulation.

The weather may be English, but much of the grass comes from Dutch seed. Wimbledon changed its mix of grasses five years ago, going to 70% rye and 30% fescue and eliminating bent grasses. And the strains are always changing. Another 115 new grasses are being tested, sown in 1 m squares at the Turf Research Institute in northern England.

We want it looking nice and green, but we don't want a lush green grass," Seaward explained. "That would mean too much nitrogen. If we have it too lush, to an amateur gardener it looks very good, but to a professional tennis player it would be too slippery." ♦

—Associated Press, *The Record*, June 18, 1999

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