

Turf for Cricket. A New Challenge for Ontario.

CANADA HOST COUNTRY FOR 2001 WORLD CRICKET COMPETITION: REPORT BY DR. LES EVANS

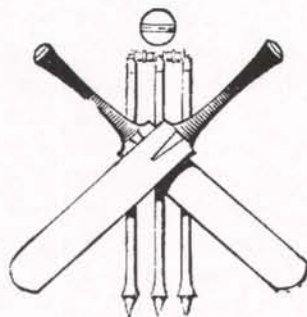
Probably in no other sport is the turf surface so critical to the tactics and playing of the game as it is in cricket. Unlike baseball, the cricket ball generally bounces on the soil surface a few feet in front of the batsman before being struck. This means that the playing surface must be able to withstand a continuous bombardment of balls striking the surface at speeds of more than 100 km per hour during the course of a one-day game.

The quicker the ball leaves the surface and the more even the bounce, the better the pitch. If the surface is too soft, then the ball will not rise sufficiently for the batsman, whereas if the surface is too hard, the playing area not only becomes dangerous but the surface will deteriorate rapidly during the game. A soil with a clay loam or silty clay loam texture containing between 25 to 35 per cent clay is ideal.

Game Preparation

In an established pitch, getting the right texture can be obtained by top dressing with a suitable heavy loam if the texture is too light or hollow tining with a light soil if the soil is too heavy. Getting the right soil texture is only a small part in the preparation of the perfect cricket wicket. The wicket is the playing area for the game and is approximately 10 by 66 feet.

Work usually starts in spring by scarifying the surface to remove debris and cutting the grass to 3/8 of an inch. The application of a heavy roller (13 to 15 cwt) over the pitch consolidates the soil to a depth of 3 to 4 inches, provided there is



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sufficient moisture in the soil. Any earthworms present need to be eliminated. Between games, the grass is usually kept at a height of about 1/2 inch. Any weeds present are generally spot killed.

About six to ten days before a game, the grass is cut to 1/8 inch and scarified to thin out the grass. Three to four inches of water are added and the soil is then rolled with a heavy roller. Large covers are placed over the wicket in the evenings to keep the wicket dry. This routine is followed up to three days before a game when watering is discontinued.

By match day, very little grass will be visible on the wicket. How the wicket stands up during the game now depends on the thoroughness of the pre-game preparation with grass roots playing a major role in holding the soil together. At the end of the game comes the challenge! Having removed almost all of the above

ground vegetation and compacted the soil through heavy rolling, the pitch must be ready again for a new game within a few days or weeks. Established grass must be revived and dead grass replaced. The soil needs to be top dressed with seed and soil, aerated, and fertilized to encourage new growth. Then the whole process of pitch preparation starts again in readiness for the next match.

At the end of the season in the fall, the pitch must be repaired, seeded and prepared for winter so that the next spring a minimum amount of reseeding needs to be done. The soil needs to be thoroughly scarified and spiked to prevent the formation of thatch – a major problem in ill prepared pitches. The pitch is finally overseeded with rye grass, top dressed with loam, fertilized, and the soil well watered to allow the seed to germinate before the start of winter.

Cricket in Canada

Historically, Canada has not been known for its involvement in hosting world class cricket competitions. This all changed in 1996 when a major cricket tournament, the Sahara Cup, was played at the Toronto Cricket, Skating and Curling Club. Five one day matches between India and Pakistan were played. The live television viewing audience for one game was estimated at 1.5 billion people! Because of the success of this series, Canada bid for and was chosen to be the host country for the 2001 ICC World Cricket Competition. This competition will involve 26 countries, including the US,



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Kenya, Netherlands, Israel, Scotland and Ireland. To host the event, the Canadian Cricket Association is required to install ten grass cricket pitches in the Toronto area and ensure that these pitches are of a sufficiently high standard consistent with the calibre of this tournament. These pitches, on both private and public facilities, have been constructed in Toronto, Ajax and King City. Traditionally in Canada, cricket has been played on synthetic mats laid down specifically for a particular match and thus there was little or no expertise in Ontario for the construction and maintenance of grass cricket wickets.

The task of installing these pitches has been given to Chris Chappell of the Toronto Cricket, Skating and Curling Club and Mike Corley of Scarborough, England, a former cricket groundsman and now a private consultant. Both have previous experience with the Sahara Cup competition. Advice on a suitable Ontario soil for the project was obtained from Professor Les Evans of the University of Guelph. Norm McCollum, Superintendent of the Guelph Turf Grass Institute, has been advising on a turf type perennial rye grass species suitable for the climate of southern Ontario.

A new cricket pitch is constructed from the bottom up. Soil is excavated to a depth of 16 inches, 18 inches if the underlying soil is a heavy clay. A minimum area of about 110 square yards is usually excavated. Four inches of gravel (stone chippings) are laid in the excavation to aid in drainage. A base layer of eight inches of soil containing at least 35% clay are laid in two inch increments. Each two inch increment is compacted before the next layer is added. The top four inches of soil added should contain between 25-35% clay – the ideal soil for a cricket wicket. After ensuring that the pitch is level, a perennial rye grass mixture is raked in at about 1-1/2 oz per square yard and the pitch rolled with a light roller.

After the World Cricket Competition in 2001, more grass cricket wickets will inevitably be springing up as interest in the game of cricket increases due to television exposure of the games and the continued coverage of the annual Sahara Cup. The need for greenskeepers with experience in the maintenance of cricket wickets under Canadian conditions will only increase and the challenge to produce the 'perfect wicket' intensify! ♦

— Dr. Les Evans, Department of Land Resource Science, University of Guelph

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At first people refuse to believe that a strange new thing can be done, then they begin to hope it can be done, then it is done and the world wonders why it was not done centuries ago.

— Francis Hodgson Burnett



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