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A moment with Michael

Cold, dry and stress management!

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With clubs generating less income in the current climate, understandably there is pressure on ground-staff to cut costs. What have you prioritised?

Regardless of the situation, the end of season renovation work is the number one priority. In 2020 many cricket squares ended up a bit neglected and under-used, meaning the potential for organic matter (thatch) to build up was huge – therefore the importance of a thorough renovation was even more crucial.

From talking to clubs and committees around the county, it's clear that the end of season work is one of the most significant financial outgoings, so I can understand why it is tempting to try and cut back. But invariably this is setting you up for a fall and the cost of rectifying several years of neglect is going to be substantial.

Whilst we call them 'end of season', you would be better off framing them as the first task of the following season. The work that you do (or don't) carry out at the end of the 2021 season is the first (and arguably most influential) thing that will determine how good your pitches are in 2022.

Beyond that, whilst the weather over the last week has turned the tables, I had been focussed on keeping enough water in the surface to keep the plant healthy, after a very dry spring.

Right, what's going on with the weather...

Spring 2019 it was too dry, February 2020 was the wettest February ever recorded in England and now April 2021 has been both dry and [third coldest since 1884](#). What does the recent cold and dry weather do to the grass?

Regardless of the temperature the plant still needs water to survive, as it is still growing, just more slowly. A lack of water adds stress to the plant, as does most things that we inflict on it as ground-staff! Keeping it watered removes that factor.

It's important for ground-staff to be mindful of which factors are going to put stress on the plant, and then minimising those which are under our control. The cold weather means that the grass isn't growing as actively as we would like, so it will have to work harder to repair itself when we cut it. So be more cautious with your cutting frequency if you can, and things like keeping blades sharp become even more important than normal.

In your experience, has this time of year always been 'pot luck' for weather or have the last few years been unique?

It certainly feels as though the extremes of the weather are coming thick and fast! The uncertainty and extremes make it a real challenge to both plan your regimes and get the necessary preparation in, and at the pace that we would like.



The 2020 season was both hot and dry, meaning many clubs saw significant damage to their outfields. What advice can you share to keep outfields as resilient as possible?

Without a practical method of watering the outfield this is a challenge, especially in the South East as we're consistently getting warmer and dryer summers. I would look at raising the height that you cut the outfield at. I'm going to use the word again, but this decreases the stress on the grass, giving it the best chance of survival. There's a direct correlation between the length of the grass and the length of the roots, so raising the height of cut slightly enables the plant to maintain deeper roots and therefore gives it a better chance of access to water.

With regards to watering, is it better to water 'little and often' or to give grass a more significant drink but less frequently?

If you water 'little and often' it is only the very top of the soil profile which consistently has water available to plants. There have been studies that essentially show roots doing a 'u-turn' back towards the surface where water is reliably available. For cricket, we want to establish roots consistently deeper than 100mm – so absolutely avoid the 'little and often' approach.

Where possible, I'd suggest clubs look at 'pulse irrigation' rather than simply flooding the pitch and leaving the water to pool on top. Pulse irrigation is where you thoroughly water the surface and then leave it to soak into the ground, before applying more water. This can help to get the water into the surface more effectively and evenly.

As a pitch advisor, the core sample is your first priority. Why is it of such importance?

It's an old analogy but it is just like looking under the bonnet of the car. If a car doesn't start, there isn't often much you can tell by looking at the bodywork. Granted, the grass plant does give us some clues regarding how healthy it is, but it certainly doesn't give you a complete picture.

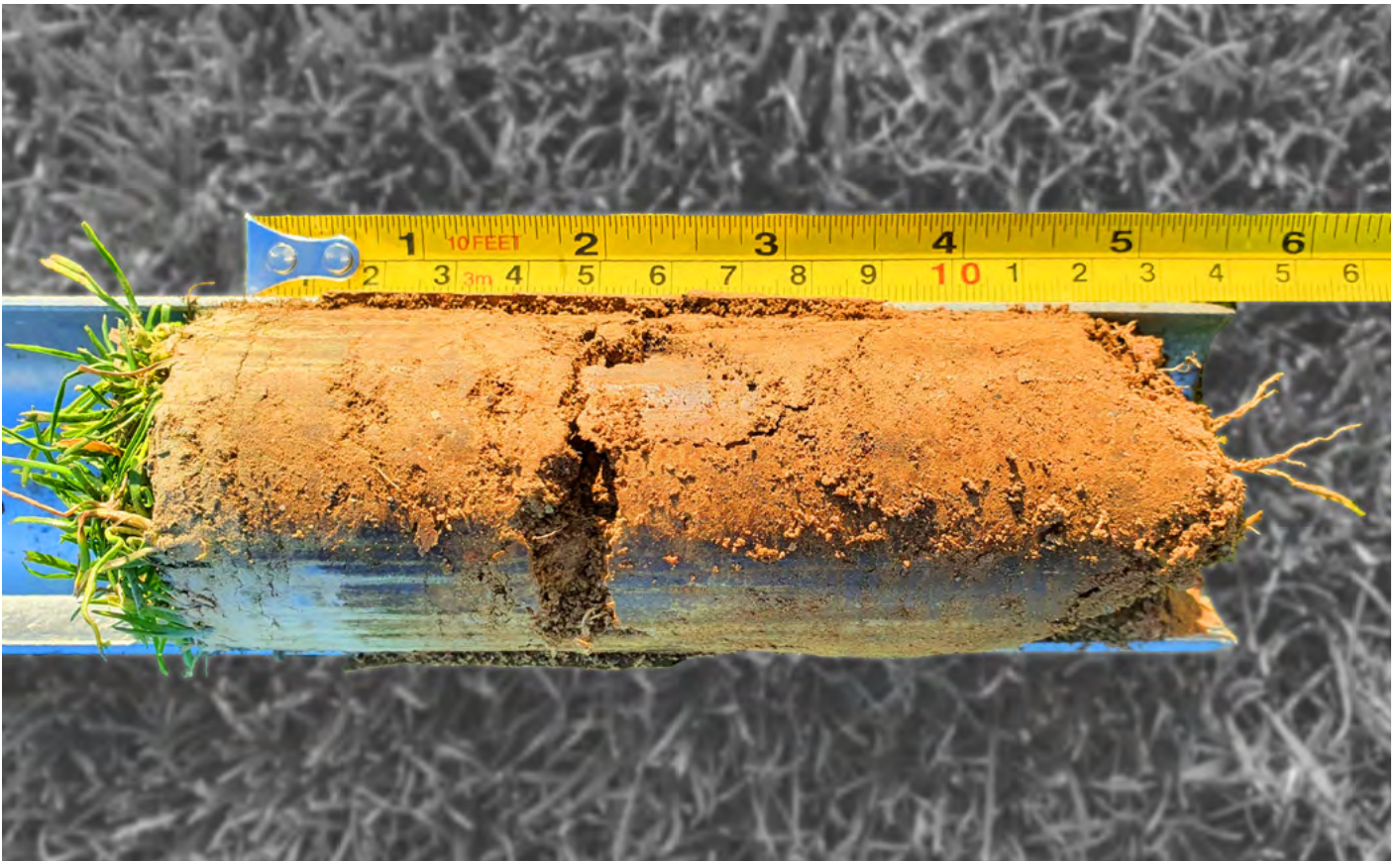
Thatch issues are a common thing that we assess for, again this is something you can get a guide of from the surface but without checking the core you can't tell how severe the issue is and that will drastically shape the advice that you're giving to the club.

Other key visual indicators are soil and root breaks, discolouration and the uniformity of the soil. I get some odd looks when I tell people this, but we also check for any unique smells from a core as well.

We've taken a core sample, pictured below which was taken in early April. The square was aerated with a tractor mounted device to approximately 80mm in the autumn. What are the first things you notice?

It's always a good sign when roots are to a depth of 100mm – which in this core they are comfortably beyond. Similarly, the soil profile looks to be fairly uniform. In the top few millimetres, you can see that the soil looks a bit fibrous which would indicate the thatch layer is starting to build up. But it is hard to give too much direction on the basis of a single static image. On a visit I would be taking multiple cores to develop a clearer picture.

There is a clear break in the profile at around 50mm, which again in isolation doesn't tell me anything definitively. It is a good sign that roots are getting beyond this point and you would argue that the deep spiking in the autumn has aided that. If this break was consistent across the square, then you would encourage the club to continue spiking at varied depths but always beyond the depth where the break is. This will help encourage more roots beyond the break to help bind the profile together and the varied depths will help prevent a pan forming.



Ok and now for the quick-fire round...

1) What is your 'go-to' length to cut a pitch at?

There's an element here of what is right for the surface that you're working with, but 5mm is where I spend most of my time operating. 5mm tends to give you a fairly 'traditional' looking pitch in terms of length and colouring.

2) Can you roll a cricket pitch 'too much'?

Yes, next...

In all seriousness, my staff are taught not to roll a pitch for any longer than 20 minutes in one go – so if you're rolling three wickets (the current pitch, a net strip and the next one) then that's one hour on the roller. It's quite a change in approach for many people.

3) Which cliché would you like to stamp out?

Grass cutters! There can be an assumption that it's all we do, but the job is far more complex than that and much of the good practice is based in some fairly thorough science. Especially when it comes to water management and correct nutrition. Too much, or too little of either will lead to diseased plants and poorer pitches.