

CORONAVIRUS & GROUNDS MAINTENANCE

Grounds Maintenance personnel and volunteers find themselves in unprecedented territory at this present time with the onset of the Coronavirus Pandemic and the restrictions on work and personal life imposed by the government in an attempt to minimise and ultimately negate the effects of the spread of coronavirus throughout the population.

Clearly the spread of the coronavirus is having a considerable negative effect, despite all the guidelines, on how we go about; in particular, our working lives. Sport in general (mostly) is being cancelled temporarily and in some cases permanently for this 2020 season.

Many organisations (ECB, FA, RFU, RFL, Leagues and others) are issuing their own guidelines mirroring those set out by government but not all questions are being answered, particularly those questions arising from the very people who are tasked with the preparation, ongoing maintenance and ultimately, the renovation of sports surfaces.

Many grounds maintenance personnel and volunteers are facing the dilemma of “should we”, “should’nt we” be undertaking pre-season rolling and preparation of cricket facilities for the coming season (whether or not it is the ‘professional’ or ‘grass roots’ sectors) or do we abandon work on surfaces until further notice altogether?

So, rather than dwell on the negatives let us look at some positives. The grass plant is a living organism that, like any living organism, requires ‘food’ and ‘water’ to survive and flourish; so applications of fertiliser, and when it is hot, additional water, is or may be required.

In anticipation of some sporting activity i.e. cricket, later in the season (and much debate/discussion is ongoing at this present time in the media and elsewhere) playing surfaces are going to need some degree of preparation i.e. for cricket, rolling comes to mind. Cricket outfielders need some preparation too particularly where the football end of season renovation is a necessity.

FERTILISER (Feeding):

As the summer season progresses the grass plant will require feeding; maybe not as much as when mowing regimes are fully underway but as the plant metabolism increases naturally and some grass growth is removed replenishment of nutrients, particularly Nitrogen (N), will be essential. Nitrogen availability is lost to the plant in a number of ways; by mowing (clippings removed), gaseous exchange (between the soil and the atmosphere), leaching (soil water drainage), by soil organisms and by the plant itself.

Other soil nutrients (Macronutrients) such as Phosphorus (P), Potassium (K) and Magnesium (Mg), Calcium (Ca) and other elements (known as Micronutrients or Trace elements) can

also need replenishment; this is why it is very useful to carry out soil analysis every two to three years or so on intensively managed turf. If your soils are acidic avoid Sulphur (S) based fertilisers as these can further acidify your indigenous soils to the detriment of the grass plant (Dwarf Perennial Ryegrass [*Lolium perenne*]) used on cricket, football and rugby.

The use of a 'balanced' fertiliser (N:P:K) is recommended throughout the season usually applied about every 6 to 8 weeks depending on soil analysis. Any nutrient deficiencies should be dealt with as and when required or identified.

ROLLING:

Pre-season rolling is usually started around early to mid March (weather permitting) and into April starting with a relatively light roller in all directions other than in the line of play; line of play rolling is usually undertaken from about the last two weeks before the first scheduled match and ONLY in the line of play thereafter.

A maximum 2 tonne roller should be all that is required; some rollers can be 'ballasted' to greater weights but this would usually be unnecessary.

If you are intending to start pre-season rolling irrespective of the ensuing circumstances keep your rolling light to medium weight only and until a more positive directive is issued on commencement of the season and how many matches are to be catered for.

MOWING:

The benefit of reduced matches (and therefore reduced rolling) on pitches can help with improved root growth, improved grass establishment and improved 'shoot density' where pitches are not closely mown so many times as during a normal playing season.

There is a correlation between shoot length (grass plant leaves) and root length due to 'food' production and 'food' storage within the grass plant. To keep it simple, sugars and starch are produced in the leaves by Photosynthesis and stored in the roots (storage organs). Nutrients required by the grass plant are taken up from the soil solution by Osmosis and again stored in the roots. Where the leaf volume is being reduced by mowing (and shaving in pitch production) the volume of sugars and starch for storage is reduced, therefore the roots 'die back' in correlation to the storage requirement of the roots. Where the root volume, proliferation and length are reduced the leaves cannot function fully and reduce in length and vigour. This is why areas of turf can appear stunted and discoloured and prone to moss and, to a lesser extent, weed infestations.

The other function of roots is to anchor the grass plant into the surface and to provide moisture for the plant to metabolise and grow. Where the root length and proliferation is reduced insufficient soil moisture will be available thus a 'Drought' environment will result with obvious consequences.

On the point regarding grass plant 'shoot density' if the grass is allowed to grow too long light will be reduced to the lower regions of the leaves thus reducing chlorophyll (green pigment in the leaves) resulting in the lower regions and 'sheaths' becoming white and/or pale. As a defence mechanism the plant will reduce the leaf density and the resulting bare areas will be prone to moss and weed invasion.

Mowing heights will therefore need to be considered; I would suggest the cricket table height of cut be 15 to 18 millimetre (mm) and the cricket outfield allowed to grow to 20 to 25 mm bearing in mind that the cricket outfield in many cases becomes the winter sports pitches i.e. football and rugby. Hopefully the cricket season can start, if all goes to plan, in June or July as stated in the, now released, league guidelines.

Repairs and End of Season Renovations:

Many of you will or may be contemplating, in particular, end-of-season repairs and renovations or even some major improvements to your cricket table surfaces such as 'saddle' removal and/or Koroing off surfaces with a view to improving playing condition i.e. ball bounce! After reading this you may be thinking that due to potentially lost revenue the likelihood of that happening is remote to say the least.

Think again, this is an opportunity to be bold and at least investigate possibilities and ask questions of contractors; the contractors are facing an economical headache as they are trying to stay in business by, even at worst, breaking even in this financial year. Bargains are to be gained, I will not go into detail but cost reductions amounting to as much as 60% could be on the table in what is going to be a very competitive year.

My advice, forget if you can, the negatives and go to work on the potential positives. Ask questions, research opportunities and do not forget the Kent Cricket Groundsmans Association (KCGA) are here to help and give advice where and if we can. No promises, but pick up the phone anyway, you never know?

Tony Leach – Kent County Pitch Advisor, KCGA Committee member (07779 859332)

Peter Robinson – KCGA Chairperson (07968 079948)

Peter Aylott – KCGA Treasurer (07745 821728)