

BURYING BAD MAINTENANCE...

Bury St Edmunds RUFC's much-needed focus on improving facilities and playing surfaces over the past four years is paying dividends, as Volunteer Groundsman Andy Spetch reveals



Established over 30 years ago on an ex-landfill site, Bury St Edmunds RUFC's three senior pitches had deteriorated to such an extent that games were being called off and every penny being spent on new seed every spring was being wasted due to the high compaction levels. Indeed, compaction meant that any grass that did establish was very shallow rooted and weak, and was easily kicked out.

The club's depth and quality of topsoil is variable - at best 20 cms and 10 cms at worst - and soil texture ranges from a predominantly sandy loam and two areas of a clay loam. Combined, this meant that rates of growth across the pitches varied; some areas flooded (there is no drainage) while others succumbed very quickly to drought. Drainage should not be an issue since beneath the topsoil is very loose fill material. But surface compaction (often the spade had to be jumped on to get it into the surface!) meant surface 'puddling' was a regular occurrence.

However, after speaking with other IOG members, such as Tim Parker, Head Groundsman at the Royal Hospital School, and turf consultants including Alex Vickers of TurfTrax, a maintenance programme was devised and agreed with the club's executive committee.

In Spring 2006, topsoil samples were taken to build a clear picture of the soil type and its fertility, and the analysis showed that the fertility was P 32mg/l, K 189mg/l and Mg 33mg/l, total N 0.20 per cent; pH was pH7.7; and conductivity 129 uS/cm. Organic matter

content was recorded as 4.7 per cent.

The pitches were dressed with a 24:5:8 fertiliser at the rate of 40g/m². Then a local contractor started the decompaction process using a verti-drainer at 20 cms deep. This was followed by seeding (using a disc Coulter drill) at the rate of 35g/m² using Barenbrug BAR7. The pitches were then dressed with 80 tonnes of Sports10 from British Sugar TOPSOIL. This was chosen because it complements the predominantly sandy loam topsoil and helps to hold moisture around the seed (to aid germination) because, at this time, the club did not have any means of efficient irrigation. Irrigation using mains water through two sprinklers was applied and mowing was carried out at 7-8 cms high.

During late June 2006, the main problem, weed knotgrass, was targeted with a broad herbicide containing ioxynil, bromoxynil and mecoprop-P at the rate of 3.5l/hectare. A higher dose could not be used because the new grass was still relatively young. A second herbicide, this time containing 2,4-D, Dicamba, triclopyr was applied a month later at the higher rate of 5.0l/hectare.

The cost of the above remediation was circa £4,500.

The following year, after advice given at an IOG In Action Day held at the club, Volunteer Groundsman Andy Spetch persuaded the club to invest in irrigation and, during that summer, a team of volunteers installed a pop-up system around the 1st XV pitch. The £10,000 system comprises:

- 16 timed sprinklers capable of delivering 5 mm of water per cycle
- A centrifugal pump to deliver the water from a 3.5m deep chamber at a pressure of 8 bar (water is extracted from a drainage ditch on an adjacent flood plain), and
- A drag-along sprinkler to apply water to the centre of the pitch.

There were also two further significant developments at the club during 2007: the club secured the use of six acres of adjacent land for conversion into mini pitches; and a RFU-funded three-quarters size third generation all-weather training pitch was constructed. With a total playing membership of over 500, the purpose-built 'minis' and the new training pitch means a reduction in the number of games and training sessions on the senior pitches.

The ongoing pitch maintenance regime now centres on a programme of spiking and verti-draining during the playing season - budget and weather permitting, the pitches are verti-drained three times and spiked on five occasions. Also, playing and training time is now managed - coaches are asked to never train in just one area and to only use the 1st XV pitch for league and cup games.

Areas of greatest wear and known wet areas are regularly forked, by hand, to relieve compaction and to aid surface drainage, then topped up if need be with topsoil and seed. Soil samples are taken every year to monitor fertility and to help dictate fertiliser application. Seeding is performed at the end of each season.

With a net outlay of £14,500 to remediate the pitches and install irrigation, the club today is gaining savings from the work. Irrigation saves £5,000 per year in water rates, and because of better germination rates and healthier deeper rooting, seeding rates have been cut from 35g to 15g/m². The annual budget for the pitches is now running at circa £5,000 per year.

Andy Spetch says that getting the 'buy-in' from the players and the coaches continues to be the biggest challenge! "There have been several occasions when I have had to ask adrenalin-filled players and coaches to not walk across pitches or to move their sessions to another area," he says.



Above: The pitch "pre-repair" compared to how it looks today (opposite page)



Top dressing using Sports10

Andy Spetch – the man

With roots in Yorkshire farming, Andy Spetch (National Manager, British Sugar TOPSOIL) trained in agricultural management and sales at the Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire Colleges of Agriculture. He then worked on several large arable farms in Lincolnshire, growing cereals, potatoes, sugar beet and vegetables. He joined British Sugar in 1987 as an agronomist, advising sugar beet growers on all aspects of growing the crop and, in 1995, became Senior Agronomist with British Sugar Overseas based in Poland. Upon his return to the UK in 1999, he took on the project to develop a TOPSOIL business for the company.

A keen fan of rugby, he played from the age of 11, and his senior playing career as a scrum half started with Lincoln RUFC and finished with Bury St Edmunds RUFC in the late '90s. That said, he continues to turn out for the veterans side, when the chiropractor allows!

Since retiring as a serious player he has had several roles at the club, as well as Volunteer Groundsman: Chairman of the mini section for 7 years, Colts Coach, Social Chairman and now 2nd team Coach and a member of the club's senior coaching team. He holds a Level 2 RFU coaching award.

