

Q&A



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The All Iowa Lawn Tennis Club

I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN AMAZED at the lure that grass has on one's soul. I don't know if you will really learn anything from this story but it is worth telling before we lose our soul in a generation without grass stains.

The anticipation of walking onto the playing surface in a famous stadium simply raises the hair on the back of my neck every time. The first step causes a slight gasp pulling in that unforgettable sense of something real and alive in my soul; a distinctly undeniable smell of earth and dew and grass. It's just grass, but also just impossible to replicate; Febreze has tried as have many combinations of rubber and plastic.

I've walked into the same stadium after it was converted to a synthetic field; it's shiny and new but the feeling has gone. It makes me sad that a generation may grow up playing on fields that make you think you are at the drag races, and that has nothing to do with the speed of the surface.

Now don't get me wrong; I know the advantages of synthetic fields and I have recommended their use for many sports facilities, but it still makes me sad that we may be turning out a generation of athletes that never play on grass surfaces. In another column I'll take you back to my dreams that involve my yesteryear sandlot posse where I should have realized that grass mowing was in my future. But this story is about lawn tennis. Perhaps tennis is the last sport, outside of golf, that will be played only on grass for the most important event of the year.

I want to introduce you to a few groundsman that certainly share a passion for grass. Eddie Seaward is the Head Groundsman at the All England Lawn Tennis Club. You

will find him at centre court Wimbledon during the most prestigious tennis event in the world. I met Mr. Seaward at a STMA conference in the 1990's where he spoke to us on managing this hallowed ground and it has been exciting to follow all the changes that have transpired during his 20-year career at Wimbledon.

He will retire in a couple of years, but not before he and his successor, Neil Stubley, host the Olympic Games in 2012 that follow only 20 days after the July 8 Wimbledon Championship. It will be exciting to see how they pull that off and once again I'm sure the press will bring grass into the limelight. It is comforting to know that that little patch of grass will always remain real. I had the good fortune to briefly visit Mr. Seaward at Wimbledon in 2001 and while we obviously talked a bit about grass, it was this observation that stayed with me about a famous man in a famous place on a famous patch of grass. It has nothing to do with grass but everything to do with leading. As we walked around the maintenance area, under the stands, and on the grounds, he acknowledged every person we walked past. A hello or nod or slight gesture, but Mr. Seaward did not miss a single person regardless of their station in life. It may have

been a simple thing but it is often overlooked in our "hurry up and give me this" business of today. It has served me well as I interact with my colleges and employees daily over the years. Thanks for the lesson, Eddie.

Jump back across the pond and you will see how grass weaves together a dream for Mark Kuhn, club founder, chairman, and groundskeeper of the All Iowa Lawn Tennis Club (www.alliowa-tennisclub.com). The only grass court in Iowa is centered among 770 acres of rolling corn fields outside of Charles City on the family farmstead, just 2 hours from that mythical baseball diamond from the movie "Field of Dreams." Growing up a world away he listened to matches on his father's ham radio and began to dream of creating his own little Wimbledon. And that he did. Visit the website; it's charming with all the details of manicured grass, picket fences, and strawberries and cream. Kudos goes out to the United States Tennis Association for recognizing it as a Tennis Welcome Center. Not to think that these two facilities and two groundsman are even in the same league, but it has been a pleasure to learn from them both and to see a shared dream woven together by a real grass surface. ■

