

A "BASIC" TRIP OVERSEAS REVEALS WHAT MATTERS IN TURF CARE

Safety, playability and aesthetics are the objectives of the sports turf manager. The single best way to achieve these three goals is having grass cover. Healthy, dense turfgrass goes a long way in assuring a field that is safe for the athletes, plays well and looks great. Detrimental to achieving an outstanding playing surface is wear, whether it is on a municipal field or at a professional stadium. Heavy wear affects footing, field hardness, consistency and aesthetics. Conquer wear and many problems are solved. Obviously limiting play is number one in combating wear, but beyond that what makes the difference?

Last summer I was fortunate to have travelled to the

United Kingdom to further my turf management education. The trip confirmed the deep-rooted concepts on turf management that many of us have been taught. Despite this training, we sometimes pay attention to the fringes of turf management, chasing problems with technology fixes and losing sight of what matters most. *The basics are what matter* when it comes to fighting wear. Growing environment, soil, species and cultivar selection: these are the foundations for fighting wear. They are more important than critical cultural practices. Yes, we need to irrigate properly, aerate, overseed, verticut and fertilize because of their importance, but the basics make the difference.

My first stop in England was at the Sports Turf Research

▼ The Yorkshire Dales.





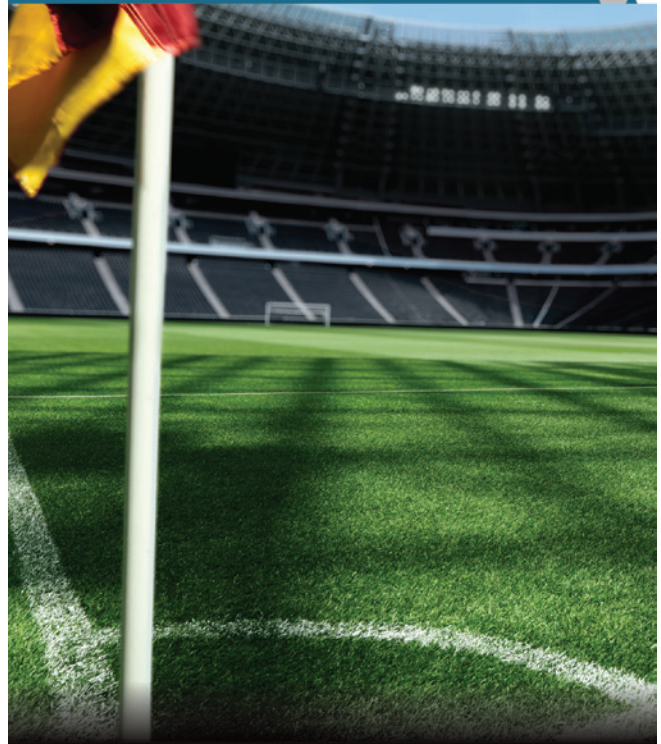
▲ **Wimbledon, Court 1.** Grow-in of new cultivars of perennial ryegrass.

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Institute (STRI) in Yorkshire. But before my visit, I was able to do some hiking in the Yorkshire Dales. What does this have to do with sports turf management? On the theme that basics matter, the Yorkshire Dales are a perfect example of the importance of a brilliant growing environment. The Dales are river valleys that have acres and acres of almost perfect grass. No pesticides, fertilizers or irrigation are used and the meadows are frequently mowed by herds of sheep. There are hardly any weeds and the hiking paths show little signs of wear. What they do have is an ideal growing environment. It rarely gets too hot, they receive just the right amount of rain and suitable grass species are used. These vast areas have very few inputs but they are thriving. Proper fundamentals take care of most of their turf management challenges.

From the Yorkshire Dales, I headed to the STRI in Bingley for a tour from Head of Turfgrass Biology, Dr. Andrew Newell. The STRI performs turfgrass research and consults for many of the top sports events in the world such as The Open Championship (British Open), FIFA World Cup and Wimbledon. Much of their turfgrass research is similar to what occurs at American universities with the biggest difference being that STRI concentrates much of their work on wear tolerance. After being subjected to large amounts of artificial play, the differences in cultivar wear tolerance are striking and easy to see with some plots being almost completely deteriorated and some looking like no wear had been applied. Even product testing is aimed at wear tolerance, with many turfgrass plots subjected to different regimens of fertilizers, growth regulators and other products that claim to help with wear. They can scientifically show which of these products are effective and which ones are of little use when fighting wear. Choosing wear tolerant

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▲ **Test area plots** at the Sports Turf Research Institute, Bingley, England

cultivars is essential and gives the best possible chance of having a solid sward of grass.

After Yorkshire, I moved on to Wimbledon, home to grass tennis courts that receive some of the most intense play of any sport. With over 400 million television viewers each year and the best tennis players in the world competing, safety, playability and aesthetics are all an integral part of the Championships. To accomplish this, wear must be minimized. Under the leadership of groundsman Eddie Seaward and Neil Stubley, Wimbledon, along with science-based recommendations from the STRI, has conquered many of their wear problems by making sure they take care of the basics. Devotion to fundamentals has allowed for sections of the grass tennis courts that typically had 10-20% grass cover at the end of the tournament to now have 80% coverage.

The basics for Wimbledon in order of importance are (my ranking):

1. Grass species selection
2. Cultivar selection
3. Measurement
4. Cultural practices

After exhaustive research Wimbledon decided on perennial ryegrass as their preferred species. No grass is a perfect fit for tennis, but ryegrass offers the best balance between wear tolerance and playability. Along with this they have declared all-out war on *Poa annua*. Each grass court is stripped after the Championships and replanted with ryegrass so that *Poa* has virtually been eliminated from the courts. Using the best species that meet their particular tennis requirements gives them the head start they need to deal with

massive amounts of play in concentrated areas.

Choice of perennial ryegrass cultivars evolves almost every year so that new, improved grasses are being introduced. Wear tolerance is not the only criteria used to select cultivars; color (both winter and summer), texture and ability to tolerate mowing at 8mm are also essential. Picking the right varieties can make the difference between having no grass or 80% coverage on high play areas of the court.

Ranking measurement third ahead of cultural practices may seem out of order for most of us, but for a tennis tournament that needs perfection on the courts for 2 weeks straight, there is no question of its importance. Groundsmen know exactly how much moisture is in each court, how firm they are, and how much grass coverage they have each day so informed decisions can be made on cultural practices leading up to the tournament and precise decisions can be made during the tournament. All 19 Championship courts are prepared to be consistent with each other and records are kept so that tournament officials, players and groundsmen

know exactly how the courts played and fared.

Cultural practices are last on my list, but not because they are unimportant. Wimbledon aerates, verticuts and topdresses frequently and these practices are just as important to their success as they are to all turf managers. Since Wimbledon has taken care of the species, cultivar and measurement aspects, cultural practices are the piece that builds on top of the basics for a superior product and an epic playing surface.

As sports turf managers, we have an immense amount of modern resources to assist us in growing grass. Specialty fertilizers, biostimulants, growth regulators, wetting agents are some of the tools many of us use to step up to a next level of quality

field. Yes they matter and help, but many times they are used to improve our fields by a small percentage. A trip to the United Kingdom reminded me of the enormous advantages of proper growing environment, choosing the right grass and sound agronomic strategies and that the basics count most when striving to maintain grass cover. ■

Michael Buras, CSFM, is head groundskeeper at the Longwood Cricket Club, Chestnut Hill, MA.



▲ **Cleats on wear machine** at the Sports Turf Research Institute, Bingley, England