

Behind the Scenes at Wimbledon

A special insider's peek at the maintenance and care of Wimbledon's grass courts.

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For two weeks every summer, the tennis world and its millions of followers are focused on The Championships played on the grass courts at Wimbledon. More than 400,000 will make a personal visit and many millions more throughout the world will watch daily on their televisions. But there remains a story behind the public spectacle—a tale of careful turf cultivation practices and a methodical management of logistics—of which the public at large remains unaware.

To begin with, the vast majority of fans do not realize that The All England Lawn Tennis & Croquet Club is really a membership-based club, with tennis being played throughout the year. This puts additional requirements on the turf preparation practices for both the public and private tennis events.

The grass court season starts in mid-May and finishes in mid-September, during which time there are a number of Club matches and other private events taking place, many of them after The Championships. When the grass surfaces are not available, tennis is played on a variety of surfaces consisting of European Clay, Shale and Fast Dry, each of which requires its own particular maintenance program.

Preparation of the grass courts starts within a few weeks of The Championships being played. The all-important autumn renovation commences on Centre Court and No. 1 Court at the beginning of August. This program, which is carried out on each court, consists of scarification, deep tine aeration, overseeding (or "over-

sowing" as we sometimes call it in the UK) and topdressing. Our ProSeed 48-inch seeder/dresser completes both operations in one pass and gives the random seed dispersal and excellent germination rates that we require.

Once the two main courts are completed, work progresses on the remaining 32 courts. The sequence of the courts that are taken out of play is planned in advance in order to cater to the requirements of Member and Club events, ensuring there are always sufficient courts available for play. As the season comes to an end, approximately 10 courts remain that still require autumn renovation work.

Once the autumn work is completed, the winter maintenance routine for the grass courts is put into operation. This consists of deep tine aeration with solid tines using our Verti-Drain aerator. We typically use it until the end of January, whenever the soil and weather conditions allow. Aeration with this type of equipment any closer to playing season can cause problems with holes opening up as the clay loam that forms the root zone is allowed to dry out prior to The Championships. Mowing takes place on an "as and when required" basis; ideally the height will be 14 mm (5/8-inch). Whenever possible after mowing, surface aeration takes place using the ProSeed Sorel Roller machine, though without seed. Throughout the winter, we keep a careful watch for fungal diseases, mainly fusarium, and administer a chemical treatment if required.

During the winter months, much of the organization for the next Championships and beyond will be



F.E. ("Eddie") Seaward, Head Groundsman at The All England Lawn Tennis & Croquet Club, shows off the pristine condition of Centre Court.

dealt with, avoiding the need to do this work once life becomes busy again in the spring with the preparation of the courts. Many review meetings are held at this time to ensure that all arrangements for The Championships are examined and decisions made and implemented.

Recruitment of grounds crew is another major undertaking that requires our attention. There is a need to employ, under contract, an additional 14 members of the staff for the summer season. Some of these are turf students from British colleges, while others are recruited from as far away as Australia.

In August, the Club hosts a three-



The Wimbledon grounds crew utilizes ProSeed equipment to help keep the grass courts in great shape. "Our ProSeed 48-inch seeder/dresser completes both operations in one pass, and gives the random seed dispersal and excellent germination rates that we require," Seaward says.

day seminar for the grounds crew on the construction and maintenance of grass courts. Speakers and topics are scheduled and usually completed by the end of March. With regard to turf management, orders are placed for marking compounds, grass seed, top dressing, etc., so the whole year is planned out well in advance. As the new playing season gets closer, along with The Championships, the majority of time can then be spent concentrating on that all-important event.

The opening of the grass court season is one of the highlights of the year and on that Sunday in May, the majority of the courts are required. Members' play will then continue until two days before the start of The Championships. For the opening of the season, the courts are prepared with the height of cut at 8 mm (3/8-inch). At this stage, the courts are not as hard as they will be for The Championships, because the moisture levels within the soil are a great deal higher at this time than they will be for The Championships.

To reduce the moisture in the soil, covers will be transported from storage in the north of England, installed and gotten ready for operation approximately two weeks before the event. The actual timing of the start of using the covers is very dependent on the weather. If the pressure is high with no rain, then there is no need to use them. But if the weather is unsettled, then the covers will be used each time rain falls, day or

night. This results in the grounds crew having to work long hours as the covers cannot be put on the courts in the evening until after Members have finished playing, which can be as late as 8:15 p.m.

At the time of the final court preparations for The Championships, there are many other important operations that have to be completed. Television crews arrive to install cameras, and many miles of cables for public address and information technology purposes are installed throughout the grounds. Some of this equipment is attached directly to the umpires' chairs. Hospitality units have to be completed, canvas surrounds erected at the courts and scoreboards installed.

One little known fact is the "rabbit warren" of hidden, underground tunnels and access corridors that run below the courts. These are particularly useful during The Championships, as they allow turf maintenance and other equipment, as well as personnel, to be moved rapidly from one area to another—all out of the view of the cameras.

Two weeks before the start of The Championships, 120 students (employed as court attendants) have to be trained in their duties, which include operating the covers, supplying the players with towels and ice, and operating the scoreboards. At this stage there are a large number of people working throughout the grounds on a variety of activities. All this, and much more, has to be completed before the players arrive for practice on the courts prior to The Championships.

Practice officially starts one week before The Championships, on the 14 designated practice courts. The players



Eddie Seaward (left) and John Souter, outside the entrance to The Institute of Groundsmanship display at SALTEX, last September.

are also given allocated times when they are able to use the match courts, with the exception of Centre and No. 1 Courts. These allocated times will commence on the Wednesday before The Championships and continue until 6:30 p.m. that Saturday. That afternoon, a traditional ladies Members' match will take place on Centre and No. 1 Courts, with two sets of tennis being played on Centre Court and one set on No. 1 Court. This provides the opportunity for us to ensure that all the equipment on the courts is functioning properly. It also allows the ballboys and ballgirls, who have been training since February, a chance to get used to the surroundings before going onto the courts on the first Monday—in front of a worldwide television audience and 14,000 people in the Centre Court stadium itself.

During this practice week, the Qualifying Tournament takes place at another facility a few miles away on 16 grass courts, which have all been prepared in a similar manner (including use of the covers) by



The Wimbledon grounds crew uses the Verti-Drain aerator—which has solid tines for deep tine aeration—during its winter maintenance routine.

another grounds team. Weather permitting, this will start on a Monday and finish on a Friday. The effect of all this tennis, and the final prepara-

tions, ensures that the week before The Championships is extremely busy for all concerned.

(continued on page 14)



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Traditional Refreshment

PIMM'S is the traditional refreshment for visitors to The Championships. James Pimm opened his first oyster bar in the City of London in the 1840s and supplied Londoners with good food and a unique drink, which became famous as PIMM'S No. 1 Cup. The drink has powerful associations with the English and events such as Wimbledon's Championships, Ascot and Henley.

Today, PIMM'S is made to the original recipe, which remains a closely guarded secret known only to six people. Although the original recipe is unavailable to the general public, the maker of PIMM'S has released the

two recipes below, which provide a close approximation of the authentic version. Cheers!

Simple PIMM'S

- 1 part PIMM'S
- 3 parts of lemonade (Sprite soda in the U.S.)
- Ice
- Slice of lemon

Classic PIMM'S

- 1 part PIMM'S
- 3 parts of lemonade (Sprite soda in the U.S.)
- Splash of Ginger Ale or tonic
- Ice
- Slice of lemon, cucumber, apple, orange and a sprig of mint

When the first Monday of the event arrives, the grounds crew must ensure that the court preparation is completed before the public is allowed to enter the grounds at 10:30 a.m. If the weather is dry the covers will be removed by 8:00 a.m. to allow work on the courts to commence immediately. If the weather is unsettled, then the covers will remain on the courts to ensure they stay dry. All match court covers can be raised so that work on preparing the courts can continue undercover and on schedule in the hope that play will start on time. As part of this morning routine all the grounds crew have designated work assignments to carry out, whether it be mowing or marking the courts. They have all been previously allocated specific courts on which to work so they know exactly what is required of them. It is vital that they do not require instruction that morning and can work without a great deal of supervision, because at the same time their work is taking place there are other informal meetings underway. These include meeting with the referees and often attending press and television interviews.

Prior to The Championships, a press release is issued on the work of the courts in order to explain our turf cultivation practices. There is no doubt that The Championships focus

interest on the grass courts, not only from the media, but also from the public, who will call or write in with questions and observations. We make certain to answer all correspondence as soon as time allows.

Throughout the match days we must be constantly vigilant with regard to the weather situation. If there is a possibility of rain, then all the court attendants must be stationed at their courts the whole time to ensure that the covers can be operated very quickly. It is imperative that all the courts are kept dry so they do not become slippery and dangerous for the players. It takes slightly less than thirty seconds to cover Centre Court and No. 1 Court while the outside courts take a little longer. All 18 match courts can be covered in less than one minute from the time the decision is made to use the covers. When the rain stops and the covers are removed, all courts have to be inspected by an assistant referee to ensure that they are safe for the players to use. On Centre Court, the decision will be made by the Referee and Head Groundsman. As you can imagine, life can be very busy on a day of rain showers!

Each morning, while preparation of the courts is being carried out,

measurements are taken to see how the grass plants and the courts themselves are holding up. Measurements are made on soil moisture level, soil hardness, grass cover, ball bounce and a botanical analysis is made to indicate how the grass is standing up to wear. At the end of the day's play, the courts are inspected to ensure no damage has occurred. If the weather is hot and dry then a little water may be applied to the grass leaf to relieve plant stress. However, before any water is applied, it is essential to know in advance what the weather conditions are going to be. The courts must be dry by 10:30 a.m., so water will not be applied if there is any doubt about the weather, even if the grass plants need it.

Each day, many thousands of visitors will come through the gates and it is important that they enjoy their day, so a number of convenience facilities have to be provided for them. These include picnic areas, car parking and of course catering. During two weeks, the caterers (amongst other things) will provide 27 tons of strawberries, 7 tons of Scottish beef, 12 tons of salmon and 300,000 cups of tea and coffee. On top of this, meals have to be provided for the staff throughout the day.

All this effort is clearly worth it. The prestige and importance of The Championships is an international fact in the tennis world. Besides, seeing a large crowd of tennis fans enjoying the event, along with the traditional glass of PIMM'S (see Sidebar above for recipes), certainly makes those of us on the grounds crew particularly pleased with the results.

As The Championships comes to an end and the final "Game, Set and Match" is called, thoughts turn to other events still to come, as well as the autumn renovation and review meetings that start this most productive cycle rolling again.

Editor's Note: *This year, The Championships at Wimbledon will be played from June 25th through July 8th, and will be shown in the U.S. on TNT and NBC.*