

SHAKING THE BLUES

Paul Burgess has proved to be an exceptional leader in grounds management on a global scale. Now he's back in the UK at the helm at Chelsea FC, we find out how he's moving the club's grounds and landscaping operation in a new high-quality, cost-effective and eco-friendly direction

BY COLIN HOSKINS, FREELANCE WRITER

Paul Burgess is used to facing – and overcoming – challenges. Perhaps most notable were the more recent gigantic tasks of establishing training pitches at AS Monaco's new Performance Center, which includes a series of playing surfaces constructed on a 'shelf' cut into a mountainside overlooking the Mediterranean. And, before that, laying a new pitch in the Santiago Bernabéu Stadium for Real Madrid CF, and then re-establishing the club's training

pitches on an area the equivalent of 11 full-size pitches. The latter included the reconstruction, in 43°C heat, of the pitch in the site's 10,000-seat Stadium Alfredo Di Stéfano.

Paul moved to Spain in 2009, from his role as Arsenal FC's award-winning head groundsperson (he was the GMA Professional Football Groundsperson of the Year in 2005). Working on pitches in different climates, adapting to local cultures and learning new languages obviously presented their own unique



Right: Paul Burgess knows a thing or two about creating elite-level pitches

Left: Chelsea FC is the latest club to enjoy the fruits of Paul's labours

PHOTOGRAPHY: BEN WRIGHT



The birth of a grounds career

Paul admits he was soccer mad as a Blackpool schoolboy, often playing 12 hours a day. Despite his enthusiasm, he realised he would never make the grade as a professional, so jumped at the opportunity for work experience at Blackpool FC, which led to a full-time role. While there – and doing everything from stadium maintenance to pitch work – a member of the grounds team passed him a copy of the GMA's membership magazine, which featured an article by the late Steve Braddock, then head groundsman at Arsenal FC.

"I was inspired and I knew then that groundsmanship would be the career for me," he says. In time, he joined Arsenal FC as assistant head groundsman at Highbury Stadium, working with Braddock. Four years later, he was promoted to head groundsman as Steve moved across to become full-time head groundsman at the club's training ground.

Paul's timeline

1994–1996 Blackpool FC

1996–2009 Arsenal FC

2009–2020 Real Madrid CF

2021–March 2023 AS Monaco

April 2023–present Chelsea FC

challenges, but he succeeded to such an extent in Spain and in France that his name was on everyone's lips whenever exceptional global groundscare was discussed.

Today, Paul faces a new set of tests as director of global playing surfaces and landscaping back in the UK at Chelsea FC. After little more than a year in the job, he is confidently combining his extensive experience of world-class pitch care, people management and environmental awareness to achieve success in a role that he says is "taking the club's grounds and landscaping operation in a totally new high-quality, cost-effective and eco-friendly direction."

This transformation has largely been underpinned by Paul's initiatives of redefining and addressing pitch-quality issues at all club locations: the Stamford Bridge Stadium in London; the Cobham (Surrey) training ground; and the Kingsmeadow (Kingston upon Thames), which is the base for many of the club's Women Super League games and Academy under-21 squads.

TEAM TACTICS

Paul is also expanding and re-invigorating the club's UK grounds and landscaping team to bring most jobs in house. He says: "The changes

PAUL SAYS HE IS "TAKING THE CLUB'S GROUNDS AND LANDSCAPING OPERATION IN A TOTALLY NEW HIGH-QUALITY, COST-EFFECTIVE AND ECO-FRIENDLY DIRECTION"

to employment levels and conditions, as well as significant equipment investment, have been made with no increase in our overall budget."

He adds: "Cobham is the largest football training facility in Europe, having 34 pitches of which seven are hybrid and two are artificial surfaces. Bringing their maintenance in house, as well as landscaping routines and machinery mechanics, reduces our dependency on subcontractors, especially for the annual renovations and for spraying, for example.

"To do this, we have increased our overall head count target to 44 people (including me) rather than 25, with four based at Stamford Bridge, two at Kingsmeadow and the remainder at Cobham.

"The policy is one of 'let's do the job in the best way possible' with a team that operates under its own steam to undertake all necessary tasks, even pitch renovations, to the highest standards and with keen attention to detail in every aspect."

Indeed, Paul explains that everyone is now involved in pitch renovation, "as well as spraying and in landscaping projects that have included the installation of around 1,000m of kerb stones". He adds: "It has been a steep learning curve for team members."

Additionally, the current programme of training and education has 14 team members undergoing college courses for Levels 2 or 3 accreditation in Sportsturf and Applied Turfgrass Science.

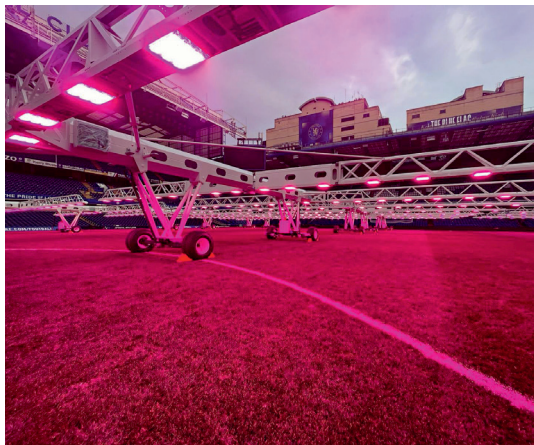
SUSTAINABLE GOALS

In tandem with these changes, there has been a significant investment in new machines and equipment. "Mowers are mostly electric," says Paul, "and electric



options are preferred for every item." All machines have been chosen on the criteria of price-to-performance and sustainability benefits.

The widespread use of electric machinery is just one example of how sustainability is a priority for Chelsea FC. Others include the use of LED grow lights at Stamford Bridge (the first UK stadium with such lights), the implementation of disease control/prevention by best practice and UV treatment (Paul was the first in the world to adopt this technology some years ago), with the use of chemical weed and pest control considered a last resort.



Left: Stamford Bridge is the first UK stadium to use LED grow lights



The club has also invested in pitch sensors to help reduce water input, and there are plans to improve water collection and retention by, for instance, making more use of an irrigation lake at Cobham. “Although I think that gut feeling is critical to top-class turfcare, I also believe marrying this with science is the best way forward,” explains Paul.

A major innovation in sustainability at Cobham concerns the Koro’d waste created during the annual pitch renovations. With 32 grass/hybrid pitches, the resulting tonnes of spoil was traditionally taken off site “at significant expense” and involved at least 4,000 lorry movements each year. Now, the waste is stored on site, turned monthly (using the club’s own digger, purchased primarily for the job), then 12 months later is sieved with the material (primarily sand) being reused across the site.

“The enormous cost savings more than pay for the machinery and labour hours involved, and contribute to the overall bottom line to help fund the wholesale changes we’ve made,” says Paul. “An added bonus is that we use our own material to maintain ground levels.”

Above: Koro’d waste during renovations is stored, turned and reused on site

Right: The in-house team now tackle all grounds and landscaping jobs

Below: All the grounds are meticulously maintained



PITCH IMPROVEMENTS

While there’s been no major overhaul of playing surfaces at any of the sites, a concerted programme of pitch renovation and, especially at Cobham, small upgrades to drainage and irrigation in some areas have all paid dividends. “The pitch has performed really well since last October and this term [season 2023–2024] has held up excellently as being the most heavily used surface in the Premier League. By April 2024, the pitch had hosted 40 games – including some tight turnarounds, such as four games in six days – compared with 24 during the same period in season 2022–2023, when the pitch failed,” says Paul.

All-round improvements to Chelsea FC’s grounds care regime will continue to be a work in progress over the next few years, and while Paul admits that upgrades are needed to the Cobham surfaces (which were laid down in 2005), there’s also plenty of major projects in the pipeline.

But Paul’s laudable grounds management pedigree means he is uniquely placed to overcome every challenge, and industry observers will undoubtedly continue to echo the sentiment that ‘success breeds success’.



PHOTOGRAPHY: BEN WRIGHT