

ECO CHAMPIONS

There's no better proof than Yeovil Recreation Centre of how skilled, hard-working and passionate groundsmanship can transform a public recreational site into a GMA Award-winning sports centre

BY COLIN HOSKINS, FREELANCE WRITER





Opposite: From left to right: Mick Greetham, Jordan Baker, Rodney Pippard, Jamie Pippard and Callum Hanson

This page: Rodney and his team have introduced a host of sustainability measures, from regular aerating to reduce watering and feeding to reusing the water from the steeple-chase pit and planting trees

Despite limited manpower and a conservative annual budget, the 37-acre Yeovil Recreation Centre in Somerset enjoys overwhelmingly high usage levels, especially on its three natural turf football pitches and its sand-dressed artificial floodlit pitch, which is primarily used for hockey and football training.

The football pitches are fully booked six days a week in season and cater for teams of five- to 16-year-olds, with a waiting list of clubs wanting to use the pitches. The artificial pitch is also in use every day for much of the time between 8am and 10pm.

The grounds team responsible for this success – head groundsman Rodney Pippard; his son Jamie, who is senior groundsperson; assistant groundsperson Callum Hanson; and part-time members Jordan Baker, who oversees bookings for the artificial surfaces, and Mick Greetham, who maintains the grass pitches at weekends – are worthy winners of the 2022 GMA Awards for Best Environmental and Sustainability Impact (sponsored by Sports&Turf) and Best Managed Artificial Sports Surface.

SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE

While the benefits of the maintenance programme for the artificial pitch are clear (see ‘Tangible sustainability outcomes, p28), winning the GMA Environmental and Sustainability



THEY HAVE TRANSFORMED THE RECREATIONAL GROUND FROM AN ‘ECO WRECK’ INTO A HIGH-STANDARD SPORTING FACILITY THAT NOW FULLY SUPPORTS BIODIVERSITY

Award recognises how Rodney and his team have transformed the recreational ground from an ‘eco wreck’ into a high-standard sporting facility, with first-class grass football pitches, that now fully supports biodiversity. Sustainable land management techniques are successfully being used at this formal sports environment to help encourage wildlife, while at the same time improving wellbeing opportunities for visitors.

With 42 years of industry experience, Rodney joined the team after spending the previous seven years as head

groundsman at Yeovil Town FC. Over the past 15 years, he has gradually transferred his wealth of grounds care knowledge and skills (including an FA Groundsman of the Year Award in 2003) to improve both the presentation and playability levels of the football pitches.

Part of this process was to replace the turfcare equipment by introducing compact tractors and a triple-cylinder mower – and, more recently, an electric mower as part of the environmental strategy. Importantly, he reflects: “I also immediately got rid of the roller!”

PHOTOGRAPHY: BEN WRIGHT

The COVID-19 lockdown period also played an important part in the team's development of the more sustainable pitch care and land management practices.

"With no play allowed, the grounds team were redeployed by the council for food deliveries and other council contracts, such as the maintenance of highway verges," says Rodney. "But we would regularly return to the 'rec' in our own time to ensure that essential jobs were completed so the playing surfaces remained serviceable and would be ready in the shortest timeframe to prevent a pitch care mountain to climb after lockdown ended.

"During lockdown, however, we recognised how the reduced mowing programme encouraged an increase in wildlife and wildflowers. Hand in hand with this was our desire as a grounds team to take swift and positive action in response to South Somerset District Council's recognition of a climate and ecological emergency in May 2019.

"By October that year, the council had a new environment strategy, and we knew we had a part to play in delivering actions to tackle both the climate and ecological emergency at our site. We identified achievable goals that would secure environmental improvements – for example, by reducing the council's wider carbon



Above: Maintaining the athletics track

Right: Wood is recycled into bird and bat boxes to increase species diversity

emissions via reduced grass cutting and transitioning from fossil-fuelled equipment, as well as encouraging fauna and flora."

TRADITIONAL METHODS

Rodney admits that some may describe him as a bit of an 'old school' groundsman because he has always preferred to work with the weather and use maintenance programmes built around generous amounts of slitting and aeration for reduced watering and less feeding, rather than constantly reaching for off-the-shelf chemical solutions.

"Our annual renovations – which, like everything else, are carried out by the in-house team – consist of spiking, verti-draining and dressing," he explains.



"Aitkens grass seed is used: Blade 6 (rye and fescues) for the football pitches and Blade 3 (bent) for the golf course. We don't mow if it's not needed and try to keep the grass a little longer than usual – 2.5 to three inches – to help reduce stress on the sward."

He adds: "I've always been a believer that cost-effective grounds care is about having to go 'backwards' to

Tangible sustainability outcomes

- The team have saved around £5,800 on annual fertiliser use by switching from petroleum-based granulars to a locally sourced sustainable seaweed concentrate. The granular costs £6,400 per year for 200 bags (with the plastic ending up in landfill), while the seaweed concentrate costs £600 per year for 20 litres and the tubes are collected for reuse/refilling.

- They have reduced the use of selective weedkiller and herbicide from 90 to 17.5 litres. They use weedkillers on three football pitches and nine putting greens, reduced from 60 to 15 litres by using a concentrated product considered less harmful to pollinators. This includes bi-annual spot treatment of

the worst-affected areas, and a speed brush-and-harrow scarifying technique is used on playing surfaces to help reduce broadleaf weeds. Herbicide use on the wider site has been cut from 30 to 2.5 litres, costing £800 per year compared with £2,000.

- Electric mowers (around £5,000 each) replace petrol equipment. The cost of mowing a pitch with these mowers is around £1.50 compared with £12–£14 with the fossil-fuel version. Previously, the cost per pitch per year for mowing was around £650; now it is around £150. A biofuel (HVO) tank has also been installed to aid the transition from fossil fuels. HVO is a diesel drop-in replacement with 90 per cent less CO₂ emissions.

- Amenity grass management includes 'no-mow' areas to encourage grassland and wildflower diversity and sinus 'meandering mowing' in marginal areas to reduce mowing costs. Cutting winding paths/swathes helps create a diverse grassland (15 grass species have been identified) providing habitat for invertebrates, pollinators and birds.

- The annual reuse of around 20,000 litres from an athletics steeplechase pit is now used for watering on site rather than being released into a storm drain.

- Extensive mulching has also reduced watering.
- Recycled pallets and wood have been repurposed into bird and bat boxes.



The purchase of turfcare equipment such as compact tractors has played a key part in the team's success

Hectic schedule

The sand-based hockey/football pitch endures heavy usage, especially by the Yeovil and Sherborne Hockey Club, which plays its Saturday home fixtures on the surface from September to March.

Community use takes place on Monday to Fridays and is divided into thirds for football teams to play in hourly slots from 5pm to 10pm.

As well as setting up the pitches, Rodney's team undertake a maintenance programme for the sand-based surface and adjacent Astro training area, and their work has extended the life of the playing surface beyond 10 years.

Maintenance programmes are also in place for the athletics track and golf course. The equipment used include: a 25hp compact tractor, zig-zag brush, drag mat, sweeper vacuum, box sweeper, backpack blowers, boom sprayer, topdresser, pitch marker and rotary head power washer, all of which are maintained in house.



THE PROGRAMME HAS NOT ONLY TRANSFORMED OUR GROUNDCARE BUDGETS AND REGIMES, BUT LOCAL WILDLIFE FIGURES HAVE IMPROVED OVER THE PAST THREE YEARS

go forwards – that is, returning to more traditional pitch care practices, especially when money is at a premium.” It was this mindset, coupled with the ecological alerts, that were central to the sustainability programme.

Supported by advice from the council's environmental specialist, Josh Bennett, and council managers (in particular leisure and recreation senior manager Katy Menday, team leader of horticulture Quentin Coleman and tree officer Phil Poulton), the process involved planting trees in copses and linear hedgerows to create windbreaks between the pitches and help drainage on what was “open parkland with no buffers”, says Jamie.

Phil created a plan that distributed 2,700 trees across the site. It comprised mainly native species, but also included fast-growing and climate-resilient trees. The scheme also helped the council achieve its five-year carbon offset targets for the site. Careful consideration was

given to many aspects of tree planting, including minimising the density of planting by keeping spacing to at least 3m (with the exception of hedgerows) to allow convenient access and minimal risk of mowing damage.

STAGED APPROACH

Developed following research by team members, these changes were introduced in stages. They were also complemented by alterations to existing work programmes on a rolling basis to avoid overstressing resources while clearly identifying successes and failures.

“The programme has not only transformed our grounds care budgets and regimes – for example, less mowing throughout the site means we can spend more time on the pitches – but the local wildlife figures have also improved immeasurably over the past three years, with record numbers of owls, badgers, foxes, deer, partridges and lizards, and

insects and pollinators are prevalent across the site,” says Jamie.

BLUEPRINT FOR SUCCESS

Rodney is certain that other sites could adopt the regimes to their advantage. Their ‘blueprint’ has been widely broadcast via the council's communication channels and is freely available for others to adopt.

While the desire to continue to maintain the rec's playing surfaces during lockdown is clear evidence of their passion for the job, the team's devotion to duty is demonstrated daily as their remit also includes pitch-and-putt golf; a landscaped nine-hole golf course; hard-surface tennis courts; softball, short cricket and grass volleyball courts; and an international A Grade rubber crumb polymeric athletics track, as well as amenity play and grass areas. And the popularity of these areas bears witness to the calibre of their work.