

How to prevent waterlogged pitches

Due to climate change and a flood-affected fixture list, the GMA regional pitch advisors are encouraging grassroots football clubs to take action with pitch maintenance techniques that will help to prevent cancelled fixtures

BY CHRIS HUNTER, GMA REGIONAL PITCH ADVISOR (FOOTBALL – NORTH EAST)



Water-damaged pitches are increasingly a cause for concern for grassroots clubs, which are turning to the GMA for advice

Last year, recorded rainfall in the North East of England was up by 147 per cent on the long-term average, while the GMA's regional pitch advisors witnessed a 244 per cent increase in football clubs requiring advice and assistance due to waterlogged pitches. The majority of these came from grassroots clubs, including one that was unable to allow play on its pitch for more than half the season.

Now is the time to take action, as what clubs do from

July through to October each year is critical for next season.

Match cancellations can be extremely disappointing for players and costly for clubs. Sport participation is important for both our physical and mental health, and last season thousands of children and adults missed out on play because of waterlogged pitches.

Cancellation can also be expensive for clubs, as finding and paying for the use of alternative grounds for play isn't cheap. And if games

are cancelled, clubs aren't getting the money they need to keep many of these clubs a viable community asset. It's simply not sustainable.

GMA SUPPORT

The GMA's long-term solution is to support the people who look after the pitches, many of whom are volunteers.

Groundspeople do amazing work by ensuring that football can take place for a range of age groups and abilities across many sites

across the UK. However, the levels of rainfall we've been witnessing in the recent past means that the 'climate' goalposts have moved and more needs to be done to protect pitches ahead of what could be another wet season.

The GMA is here to provide support, from offering online toolkits and expert advice to helping clubs get access to specialist machinery. Your club might even be eligible for a grant of up to £3,200 for pitch renovations and up to £50,000 for maintenance



Above: Waterlogging means children and adults miss out on opportunities to play

Right: Situations like this can be avoided if you take preventative measures to protect your pitch

machinery. Now is the time to act – don't sleepwalk into more cancelled matches.

TOP TIPS FOR PROTECTING YOUR PLAYING SURFACE

■ Decompact the surface, using a Terra Spike, Verti-Drain or similar machine in the autumn and again in the spring. If budgets and weather conditions allow, consider further decompaction mid playing season. Make sure you decompact to a range of depths and tine spacings, and do so slowly and with heave.

Consider alternating with linear aeration using a Shockwave, Verti-Quake or similar machine. This must be done when the soil is dry and friable. If done when the soil is too wet, it will smear and have no benefit at all.

■ Fortnightly or even weekly use of a combination grooming tool can offer excellent benefits for post-match repairs. If the surface



is dry, the brush can help disperse worm casts, which thrive in damp weather. The spring tines on this attachment can help control the build-up of dead grass and organic matter. Typically, these tractor-mounted tools have an aeration attachment that help aid water infiltration.

■ Slitting works in partnership with decompaction – use this attachment every four to six weeks. Tractor-mounted deep slitters typically go deeper into the soil than the combination tool aeration attachment. Depths of in excess of 200mm can be reached.

■ Ensure the grass is not cut too short: it should be maintained at about 40mm

so it can help encourage root growth, which stabilises the pitch and helps prevent wear.

■ Be proactive with topdressing parts of the pitch that get a lot of wear and tear, such as the goalmouths. Keeping these areas maintained ahead of time can help avoid cancellations later in the season.

■ If the soil temperatures remain warm enough for a prolonged period of time, consider overseeding high-wear areas.

■ Fertilise the pitches as needed to maintain strong, healthy grass throughout the playing season.

■ If a drainage system is installed, ensure any outlet drains are exposed and free of debris.

THINGS TO AVOID

■ Don't use machinery or allow play on the pitch when conditions are unsuitable. Let nature take its course, as it will be better for the pitch in the long run.

■ Don't roll the pitches with heavy rollers, as this can compact the ground, potentially leading to soil structure damage and drainage issues.

Expert resources

For more expert advice and seasonal tips, check out the GMA's free online toolkit for groundspeople. To find out more about getting the most out of your pitch, including enquiring about grants, get in touch with your local County FA. And to improve your skills, check out the GMA's grounds management courses, available online and designed for all levels at: portal.thegma.org.uk/education/courses/search