

Everything's Premier at Chelsea

Kevin Fowler, Chelsea FC's Assistant Head Groundsman, provides a detailed insight into the annual pitch-care programme at Stamford Bridge

Although Chelsea FC's last Premiership League game of the 09/10 programme was on May 10, the game did not mark the end of the season for the groundscare team, led by Head Groundsman Jason Griffin, and Assistant Head Groundsman Kevin Fowler and colleague Mathew Thomas who are responsible for the Stamford Bridge pitch. The ground then hosted the FA Youth Cup final and a series of corporate events, and it was not until June 1 that the pitch was handed back to Kevin to make ready for the new season that usually embraces 30 first team matches (including cup runs), three to five youth team games and 20 or so post-match training sessions.

And what preparation is involved!

Contractors use a Koro Field Top Maker to plane off the weaker grasses, leaving the stronger rooted desirable ryegrasses, then 80 tonnes of Mansfield sand is applied to cover the 7,000 m² – a procedure that takes around five days, after which the surface is power harrowed incorporating the liquid rooting stimulant, Activate R, and the Premier 22.3.15 granular fertiliser. Finally, R14 ESP coated seed is sown.

"We selected the ESP seed because we could see from the extensive trials results that the coating enables germinating seed to establish itself earlier through the development of a stronger root system," says Kevin. "In fact, we saw the germinating grasses peeping through just a week after sowing and two weeks later we were using a Honda HRD 435 rear roller mower on the surface, a process that continued every other day, mowing to a height of 40 mm." A Dennis eight-blade cylinder mower was subsequently used to take the height down to 35 mm, and this continued until the first week in August, when the grass began to be cut down to 27 mm. On match days, Kevin cuts to 22 to 24 mm using Dennis Prems.

Five weeks after establishment, monthly applications of MicroFlow were applied at 100 l/ha with the addition of 0.8l/ha of Primo Maxx and Magnet Rapide, the latter liquid iron being used to hide any slight discoloration that may



Kevin Fowler: "I've not seen a better rootzone achieved at eight weeks"

occur through the use of the Primo. "Our feeding regime is very intensive but targeted to achieve a given result," Kevin continues. "We applied Rigby Taylor's new granular BioPlex product to provide excellent root mass, increase top growth and achieve great colour. Our principle is to achieve a strong, sustainable root structure and good density but not at the expense of stimulating excess growth, which could place unnecessary stress on the root system. "We work closely with Rigby Taylor's technical specialists (indeed, virtually all of the products used are sourced via Rigby Taylor) and with our joint inputs have developed a customised cocktail of nutrients involving the rooting stimulants Activate F and Activate XL, which we apply every three-four weeks at the rate of 30 l/ha – and I have not seen a better rootzone at eight weeks than the

one we achieved using this combination.

"On occasion we treat against Dry Patch and we started using Breaker BioLinks following an excellent trials report from the STRI. This is applied at 25 l/ha in 800 litres of water using a pedestrian sprayer with a four metre boom. We have used Rayzor very successfully against Fusarium and Crossbar for selective weed control."

Lighting rigs are used to alleviate the problems caused by shade – 70 per cent of the pitch is affected during November to March – and six full size SGL units are on for 8-10 hours at a time (giving out 750 Watts of light intensity), supplemented by three 'baby' units for the goalmouth areas.

In addition to affecting growth, shade also can encourage algae slime and Kevin applies Blockade granules three-four times a year. These applications also

“We leave nothing to chance”

Kevin Fowler had a long ‘learning on the job’ apprenticeship at Chelsea FC, first as a work experience placement before joining as a full-time apprentice. During this time he studied at Merrist Wood, achieving NVQs Levels 1 & 2 plus gaining an HNC in Sports Management and Sports Science. His day at Stamford Bridge normally starts at 8am and finishes (if he is lucky) at 4.30pm. On match days, he is contracted to be at the ground from 8am through to 8.30pm and for night games he will not leave much before midnight – “it’s important that the pitch is cleaned up and all the divots replaced; it’s not the type of job that can be left to the following morning”. In addition to the annual ‘maintenance’ routine outlined above, Kevin also instigates a monthly aeration programme (depending on match day schedules) using a Toro Procore 648 at depths of two-four inches. His desire for good presentation also involves pitch marking; “we leave nothing to chance”, he says, and he uses a Dimple transfer wheel marker with Duraline Supreme paint. “This is an excellent combination,” he adds, “even though the marking operation takes longer using a transfer wheel rather than a spray marker, the lines are much more defined and show up well on the overhead TV cameras.” The training ground pitches are marked out using Impact paint using a spray; it expected that the award-winning Impact Gold paint will be used in future.



The Koro Field Top Maker in action



80 tonnes of sand was applied to the 7,000m² pitch area



The end result - a Premier pitch!

improve soil porosity.

Conscious that every televised game goes out to a national and international audience, Kevin states: “We are really proud of the team’s achievements and want to ensure we do our bit by ‘showcasing’ the pitch to its best advantage. Our main priority is to provide the very best playing surface that will last a full season and allow our players the best stage on which to demonstrate their skills. If we can do that, then we have done our job”.

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