



Many shades of **Andy Gray**

Southampton FC is riding the crest of a wave and the club's St Mary's Stadium could soon be hosting European football. Grounds manager Andy Gray outlines the regimes that help showcase the pitch to a global audience



By: Richard Fry

Hampshire born and bred, Andy Gray entered the industry at a local golf club in Andover, raking bunkers, before enrolling on a specialist turf culture course at Sparsholt College, Winchester. Aged 17, he then joined Southampton FC's grounds staff in 1998 as an apprentice under David Roberts (at The Dell), at the same time working on a 'loan deal' placement at near-neighbour AFC Bournemouth.

This two-year period gave him a wealth of experience for what was to come because, in 2007, David was appointed grounds manager at Charterhouse School and Andy became joint head groundsman for Southampton FC with Graeme Mills; Andy looking after the stadium and Graeme the Staplewood training ground.

Following a successful period, Andy then stepped into the new position of grounds manager for both the stadium and training complex.

Award winning pitch

The club's St Mary's stadium pitch is regarded as one of the finest in the country and in the 13/14 season was awarded the Premier League's joint Best Pitch of the Year with Arsenal FC. Such an award does not come easily but Andy has enjoyed a continual record of achievement, including winning The Championship's Groundsman of the Year in 07/08 and, in season 09/10, League One Groundsman of the Year.

Another of Andy's achievements is his trademark pitch patterns, which reached its zenith with his design of

concentric circles. Such intricate patterns are, however, only used on match days at the end of the season when nothing rides on the result of the match!

Following the last league game of the season, the stadium pitch is hired out for corporate events. After this it's back to business for Andy and his team - groundsman Ian Lucas and Danny Silvestri at the stadium, and head groundsman Graeme Mills plus a staff of eight at the training ground.

Seasonal pitch renovation

Of fibre sand construction with undersoil heating, the stadium pitch's end-of-season renovation programme consists of a fraise mow, then hollow coring with 60-90 tonnes of sand

topdressing, working it all in, followed by a feed and seed.

When asked why the club had not opted for a Desso system Andy replied: "The stadium is used solely for football – there are no concerts or the like - and our current system allows us to produce an excellent surface all season long without the extra expense. Unless this changes, I see no need to alter something that works."

The summer programme continues with the application of half rate Premier HG 22.2.15 plus magnesium. "We will follow this with applications of liquid nutritional products such as Microflow 12-0-8," says Andy, "and, when required, essential trace elements are applied using Mag-Form and K-Form. Our liquid applications are applied through a 400-litre Allman sprayer; not the most advanced sprayer but it does the job while we can still get the spares."

The stadium's in-season granular programme is based on applications of MicroLite, using 8.0.16 and 12.0.12. "This fertiliser has super micro-sized granules that have a high level of size consistency," states Andy. "Such consistency allows us to achieve uniform



Rigby Taylor's Derek Cunliffe (left) and Andy Gray discuss pitch care



About the Author

Richard Fry is marketing director of Rigby Taylor. Rigby Taylor & Top Green are headline sponsors of the IOG Industry Awards and IOG Young Groundsmen's Conference. www.rigbytaylor.com



Groundsman Ian Lucas uses the Impact/iGO line marking system at St Mary's

spreading across the surface and this is vital for the presentation for televised games since any striping or inconsistent shading will be immediately picked out by the overhead cameras."

Marking out lines at both the stadium and at Staplewood is done by using the Impact/iGO ready-to-use paint system. "At the stadium, we previously used a dilutable concentrate paint," adds Ian Lucas. "But this meant time wasted mixing and measuring, and constant re-filling.

Now we just insert the paint tube into an Impact XP drum and mark away. We use a green cone nozzle and always apply the line against the direction of the cut and obtain a very bright white line in one pass."

Rapid seed growth

Andy is conscious of the high stress levels placed on the plant at the height of the season. "Invariably the busiest part of the season is January/February so the introduction of supplementary amino acids to the soil using Amino-Form LX will assist in combating plant stress," he says.

Compared to many modern stadia, shade is not such a problem at St Mary's and grass growth is assisted with the help of six SGL MU360 rigs with 1,000watt lamps. "It is important to have the flexibility that the lights give," states Andy. "Algae used to be a problem but the lights now make this manageable. We also go over the surface with a Sisis Quadraplay and use pigtail rakes and a drag brush to clear surface rubbish and create an open surface."

The lights are used from mid-October through to the end of February. "The lights not only maintain growth in the

more shaded areas but also allow us to create conditions for rapid seeding in high wear areas such as goalmouths," he adds. "To achieve fast germination and establishment, we use a combination of the lighting rigs, pre-germinated seed and germinations sheets which allows the seed to move from red to green shoots in just four days."

Cutting is with two Dennis G760 mowers during the playing season at a height of 25mm. A Toro ProCore is used every two months. The pitch is irrigated with a newly-installed Hunter system having 20 sprinklers.

The Staplewood training facility is equally impressive. A futuristic building complex houses state-of-the-art facilities and the complex has nine grass pitches, all of which are built and managed as closely as possible to the same specification as the main stadium pitch. ●



Andy Gray joined The Saints when he was aged 17