

Money down the drain

Mud, mud, glorious mud! In my playing days mud was my friend with nothing quite like it for slowing everyone else down to my level, but with age now forcing me to watch, I acknowledge the advantages of a dry playing surface. Good drainage is the holy grail of winter pitches and the techniques available to improve playing surfaces were well described in November's Groundsman magazine. The last few years have seen a welcome injection of money to improve natural turf pitches, with better drainage a key component of most schemes, and we must complement the largesse of the funding bodies for their support.



Figure 1 – Mud, mud, glorious mud!

The success of any sports field drainage scheme depends upon three aspects: design, installation, and after care. Like the three legs of a tripod each relies on the other for stability; take one away and the structure sooner or later collapses. Firstly, good design takes into account many factors; local climate, soil texture, and usage requirements. Is it groundwater or surface water causing the problem? Pipe sizes, depth, and spacing all need calculating, and a suitable outfall located. Next, installation relies on competent and experienced contractors using appropriate machinery, tested and approved materials and working when soil conditions are suitable; all to a competitive price. The final leg is long-term maintenance, and the ability of the customer to understand, resource, and manage the system once installed.

Observant readers will have noted one key omission to the design stage; that is an understanding of the clients needs, and most important of all, whether they have the ability to manage the system afterwards on a sustainable basis. Some appear to assume that installing drainage is like having the measles; once had there is no need to worry again. Recently I've seen schemes that have become costly failures because of the inability of the customer to manage the completed project; either through lack of resources, lack of technical understanding, or a combination of both.

This is all too common with Local Authorities who are always desperate for funding, and with all good intention confirm availability of additional maintenance budgets with their application. But later, when the Treasurer's department demands cuts, the money disappears to be spent on other vital services, like a team of community nappy co-ordinators. I have some sympathy for Managers here. Small village clubs also face the same dilemma, often having inadequate maintenance budgets, and some can only afford to cut the grass and mark the lines.

The basis of this problem originates in the design stage. It's crucial at this point to analyse the capabilities of the client and make crystal clear the resource implications for the long term success of the scheme. It's not good enough to offer high expectations which cannot be managed. For example I recall projects where sand slits were specified and installed, significantly increasing the initial cost of the job, and yet the clients hadn't a clue about the implications of aftercare. The need to top dress annually at £1,500 or more per pitch, that slits often cap over or slump in early years and need topping up, and that pitches will need irrigation because of the better drainage. These 'full monty' system are doomed to failure within a year or two from lack of maintenance, and often can't be used because the pitch is unsafe due to settlement.

The Contractors aren't blameless either with over engineered design and build schemes that are unsuitable for the clients' needs and resources. Although let me emphasis at this point that I'm not anti sand slits. It's just a plea for realism, and to ask for a pragmatic approach to be taken at this critical stage to avoid over ambitious proposals if the client

manifestly cannot cope with aftercare. It's not acceptable to devise costly options that ultimately cannot be sustained, just because someone else is paying.

In fairness the funding bodies are becoming aware of this mismatch. They need to insist that clients ring fence aftercare budgets, and revisit projects after a year or two to monitor progress. To establish the grant has been responsibly used they will need to check for evidence of training and competency for key staff in drainage principles and aftercare, and that maintenance budgets continue to be available and properly used. If these basic criteria cannot be met, then surely some or all of the funding must be re-paid.

Many small clubs have little or no money, so how about more financial help to provide training and improved maintenance. Enough to allow some end-of-season decompaction, overseeding, and even cutting the grass regularly in the summer would be a major improvement, and perhaps all that's needed.



Figure 2 – ‘Start of the season’

Everyone: grounds managers, designers, contractors, players, spectators, administrators, want better pitches; sustainable surfaces that will last without unrealistic and costly management. But designers must spare a thought for those who have to manage the pitch after the heavy plant has gone, the job is signed off, and the grant money spent. Maybe the design process should be reversed and instead of looking at the site to see what it needs, first of all ask the groundsman what he can afford.

Martin Ford

January 2007