

PUTTING A SQUARE TO BED FOR THE WINTER – PHIL FROST

Conversation on 24th September 2022 on a bright Saturday morning in front of the Clubhouse with Phil Frost Head Groundsman at Malahide CC about what's involved in putting a square to bed for the winter months. Phil came to Malahide in early 2013. Previously he was Head Groundsman at Somerset County CC at Taunton for over 20 years. He won the national title of County Groundsman of the Year five times and was runner up on five other occasions.

WARNING: Some technical stuff ahead!

BG When do you begin your end of season work on the square?

PF It could begin as early as August. If I decide that a wicket is worn out and no more cricket can be played on it for the remainder of the season then I will begin by scarifying it. So when it comes to the end of the season it will be ready for seeding and top dressing. End of season work can even be as early as the end of July if a pitch has had enough. Especially in club cricket where a pitch may have had six/seven games on it.

BG But it is a small square with only 13 pitches. So if you're putting to bed a wicket before the end of the season does that not restrict your options?

PF No, if a wicket is worn out then you have no option but to begin restoration work. Another example is when international teams practice on wickets before games. Each practice session is an intensive use of a wicket in a short space of time. That is the nature of international cricket. So for example six intense practise sessions by international teams can be the equivalent of maybe two or three games. In that case such practice wickets with little or no grass will probably have to be put to bed. Otherwise if you wait until September to begin restoration work the wicket will still be bare and you may not get it back for the following season.

BG But why won't you get the wicket back if you begin restoration in September like all the other wickets. I thought the point of such work in September was to restore the wickets for the following spring/summer?

PF It is but sometimes the ends of the wicket where the bowlers land are really cut up and if not dealt with immediately there can be weak grass growth the following year.



BG What are the ideal dates to begin and finish end of season renovation work?

PF I don't like to begin any later than 15th September here in Ireland. When we have gone later in the past there is weaker grass growth the following year.

The big thing with end of season renovation is the soil temperature. If the overnight temperature drops then the soil temperature drops. Now that is a big, big factor in grass seed germination. At the moment I started a week yesterday [16th Sept] and none of the seed has germinated and that is because the soil temperature has dropped at night which then slows the process of germination down from say 3/5 days to 10/12 days. And I have seen a big difference between here and at Somerset in terms of end of season soil temperature. I guess it was milder there and the grass seed used to germinate very quickly.

You see, I always err on the side of caution. When I was at Somerset, I had a baseball match in the middle of October, Team GB played Team USA in Taunton, I was top dressing in November and the square was a disaster the following season.

BG Do you spike the square?

PF Most of it has been spiked. I probably spiked four to five wickets/practice wickets in August and I got the full penetration of two/two and a half inches. The other wickets I got penetration probably to about an inch, so I have got some depth. And I will do them when I come back in the Spring, hopefully it will be soft enough to spike then. Always spike don't slice a square.

BG What do you mean don't slice a square?

PF You can slice a square using an arrowhead blade which can be affixed to spikers. That's a big no no. Just spike, straight in.

BG Is everything in your head or do you have a step by step plan for the end of season work and keep a record?

PF I have a plan but I don't keep a record. I used to. If you talk to any groundsman you can have a plan but very rarely can you stick to it. Weather or games thrust at you at the last minute change everything. So in answer, yes I have a plan and I will follow it if I can but nine times out of ten you don't.

BG What do you need for end of season – I am talking about seed and top dressing for example?

PF Choice of seed and top dressing are really big, big factors. Also, it is a major process to change top dressing because you have to integrate it layer by layer.

BG Does that mean you have to use the same top dressing year after year?

PF Yes. I use Ongar loam here which is also called Essex loam. If I wanted to change over to Surrey loam I would have to heavily scarify and make sure that the new top dressing integrates. Essex loam is a very light top soil. It has a bit more silt than a lot of the others but grass seed seems to germinate in it very well. I started to use it in the late 1980's. I was one of the first on the county circuit at Taunton along with the Oval to use Essex loam and it has served me really well. People will say that perhaps it served me too well, the wickets didn't deteriorate.

BG Is Essex loam from Essex?

PF Yes, it's from a village called Ongar which is just outside of Chelmsford. And of course the type of grass seed is very important. My first two/three years here I tried to use local seed. I was struggling with it. So I went back to Johnson's Premier which I always used in county cricket. But since Brexit it has been difficult to get but the seed manufacturer here has done me a mix of which is similar to Johnson's Premier which has worked out well.

BG Is this rye grass seed?

PF Yes, dwarf perennial rye grass. With grass seed you always get what you pay for. The better the quality the more expensive but it's worth the expense.

BG So quality seed and Ongar loam work well on our square here in Malahide?

PF They seem to, yes. And the club wickets here are really good and they are prepared no different to the international wickets.

BG What particular equipment is required for end of season work?

PF Scarifier is probably the most important thing. I am not a big spiker of squares.

BG Why is that?

PF Well I think if you have a solid base and your pitches are fine then why disturb it. It's a big call. I used to vertidrain Taunton every three to five years. Vertidrain is deep spiking (8 to 9 inches). But it is a major, major process. The whole thing lifts. I have never vertidrained here. I have never felt I needed to. The square has always been good. Good pace, bounce. It's fine. Why change something that's fine. So the scarifier is a big thing with good blades which should be replaced every year.

BG Why the need to replace the blades every year?

PF Well, for example a wicket could be used three or four times over a weekend followed by mid-week games. I will then run the scarifier lightly through the rock solid pitch which is very hard on the blades, it will blunt them. And you really need the blades to be in good shape for the end of season work.

BG So you scarify during the summer?

PF I scarify during the summer, oh yeah. Very lightly because if you don't the grass will crown.

BG When you say "crown" do you mean the grass runs flat along the ground?

PF Yes, it goes flat and then it will crown.

BG I think we used to refer to that as "scutch" grass. Is that it?

PF Yeah that's it. And use a push rake which also lightly scarifies. I usually scarify here in two directions and always finish wicket to wicket, stump to stump so to speak. At Taunton I use to scarify four or five directions.

BG I read an article recently which referred to the Union Flag method of scarification. That is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland flag! Do you use the Union Flag method?

PF That is the diagonal method, from corner to corner across the square. I haven't had to do it here but I did in Somerset.

BG Do you use the tri colour method here?

PF Yes I do actually! Because I only go stump to stump here on most wickets.

BG All jokes aside, why the Union flag method in Taunton and not here.

PF With a 30 pitch square in Taunton you had to ensure that the entire area was properly scarified particularly when some of the pitches may not have been used.

BG What exactly does scarification do?

PF When you prepare a wicket you obviously water it for a period, then you roll what is basically hard mud. Some grass will be rolled into that surface, so that's why the scarifier with new blades is so important because it will remove most of that grass which has been rolled into the wicket. If you don't scarify then the following season there will be a layer of dead matter from the year before.

BG Whats the effect of that?

PF The wicket is like a spongy mattress which affects the bounce and carry through of the ball.

So what happens is that the grass root will make its way down to the solid dead material and turns horizontally right or left because it can't continue its downward journey. This is what we call root break which can cause major problems. You can try and vertidrain through it but that doesn't always work so nine times out of ten you have to dig up. So scarifying is a very, very important process. I have been to many cricket club squares in England in my time where groundsman are afraid to be brutal with their square. You have to be brutal at the end of the season to get the best results. I mean when I top dress the whole square at the end of the season it looks like as if I have absolutely massacred it. But it has to be done.

BG I presume with a bigger square etc you had other machinery in Taunton?

PF Yes. I had a tractor and a pot seeder on the back which actually drills seed into the soil - they make a helluva difference. They are a fantastic bit of kit.

BG But I thought you said you like to do things manually.

PF Well I still do it by hand as well. But a pot seeder makes life a lot easier. I am not getting any younger!

BG But I was watching you recently seeding by hand and you threw the seed into the wind beyond the line but landing on the wicket, a bit like a skilful swing bowler using the elements.

PF There is an art to it but I have been doing it a long time. It just comes with experience. But even if I had a pot seeder I would still also seed by hand as well. Because at Taunton we'd still go through it by hand. So for example in addition to using the pot seeder we used to seed by hand the ends of a wicket after a four day match because the ends need to be vibrant with grass and it has to last.

BG So just going back to the machinery, is there any other machinery you need for end of season?

PF A trulute. It is a type of handrake which levels the soil. When you have been using the trulute for a long time you can feel on the handle the low and high spots on the square so that you can distribute the top soil from the high spots to the low spots. And this why I do a lot of work in August. So it cuts out problems and speeds up the process when I am top dressing in September. That's why I have been able to put this square to bed in a week. Because of the work I did in August and early September.

BG Do you review your stock of machinery at the end of each season?

PF I do. All the machines go in for a service at seasons end. Frank Donlon who helps on the ground tends to look after that. Health & Safety, you have to do it. And it prolongs the life of the machine. I mean we haven't that much machinery really, we haven't got the room to keep it to be honest. Our small fleet of machines go in for a service and are ready by Spring time.

BG Is a level square very important?

PF Oh yes, and a classic example was my first year here in 2013, I topped dressed the square at the end of the season. It was uneven which was to be expected as it was a new square. I mean the pitches were fine and we played England here in September 2013 and it was a good pitch.

BG But if it was uneven why was the wicket so good?

PF Because I wet rolled it. Obviously, I didn't do the whole square like that because it was a new square and what you have got to remember in that first year in 2013 there was little or no club cricket on the square. So there was less pressure on the main square.

PF You haven't got very far down there Brian [referring to my list of questions]!

BG Some of them we have covered already!

BG How long does it take for a groundsman to get to know a square. Is it like getting to know a person almost?

PF Yes, I think so. Two to three years I think. You can say that is excessive but I don't think so.

I have been working on grounds since I was 15 and I am still learning. But if there is a problem on a square I have enough experience now to deal with most problems. Some people try to blag their way through which in the end never works. You can't knock experience, it's the same with anything really.

BG What is the sequence of works for end of season?

PF Spike (if you can), scarify, cut, seed, top dress.

BG Is the cutting important?

PF Well it is because it removes some of the debris what the scarifier didn't collect but most scarifiers have boxes now. You have to collect the debris but back in the old days we used to have to brush the debris off and it was a nightmare.

BG Must it be dry when seeding and top dressing?

PF Yes, it has to be dry when top dressing. Not with seeding. You can seed when it is damp. Top dressing, if it's wet, will stick to the lute, to your shoes, it sticks to everything.

BG What about the damp Irish climate?

PF Well, I have been lucky. What I tend to do is come down early in the morning, say at 7 and brush the dew off, brush where the vehicle [small ground jeep] goes, brush where I am walking, brush the square where I am dressing and probably eight to nine metres away from the square so that I don't bring moisture in from the outfield.

BG Oh my goodness, that sounds like hard work.

PF Well it is hard work but I mean you have to do it. And then probably by about half ten or eleven I can start top dressing.

You can get away without doing any pre season rolling but if you don't seed and top dress the square will be exactly as you left it at the end of the previous season. So end of season is the most important process in a groundsman's calendar, in my opinion.

BG How many wickets would you seed and top dress in a day?

PF Three to four. I have done five but I haven't been able to walk afterwards.

BG After top dressing, if it doesn't rain, do you water.

PF Yes, very carefully, very finely. First, I give it two or three days to see if it rains and if it doesn't then I water. Sometimes it rains too heavily which means you have to do some remedial work afterwards.

BG What would you have to do then?

PF Well go over the top dressing with a lute again. I had to do that yesterday afternoon on some of it after the heavy rain because the seed washes into like trenches. To be fair it was only the one wicket and that was the wicket that was last used here at the end of the season.

BG How soon do you expect the seed to germinate and see good growth?

PF I would imagine 10 to 12 days as the temperature is reasonably mild. And as I've said before the soil temperature at night is definitely changing and that is a big factor. But I would say 10, 12, 15 days for germination. I reckon there will be new growth in a couple of days time. In fact, I think the seed has now gripped so it's ready to germinate.

BG What is the effect of somebody walking across the square after you have top dressed.

What damage can be done?

PF If its damp they can pick up the dressing on the bottom of their shoes. It's a big no no. That's why I don't want anybody to walk on the square after top dressing. I don't walk on it really. I mean I had to walk on it yesterday to do a bit of remedial. I would like to go on it and brush the dew off but I cant because I would just pick it up on my shoes.

BG I had a walk around the square and it is all roped off etc. I noticed, is it the rooks who have dug a few holes in the square?

PF Yes and the fox would have walked across the square.

BG But a creature has dug little holes.

PF Rooks and jackdaws. They have been really bad this year.

BG Are they going after the seed?

PF No beetles and grubs and stuff like that. I would imagine all the leather jackets, chafers and fruitflies have gone by now. Its just beetles and grubs in the grass.

BG There is a little disturbance, not very much.

PF The jackdaws are a nuisance more than anything else. It is the rook that does the damage because they can even peck through tarpaulins on the square to get at stuff.

BG Ends of the wicket. Is end of the season any different to the rest of the wicket?

PF You have to work extra hard on the ends.

BG Why?

PF Because it is so compounded. Also because they are so bare as well. That's why I work on ends and re-seed during the summer.

BG Are there players who dig big holes, say bowlers in their delivery stride, or batsmen taking guard?

PF There are some, not too may. Batsmen are ok, mostly bowlers are the problem. Will I name them?

BG No need to. [And then he proceeds to name them!]

BG What about batsmen who bat well outside the crease?

PF Yeah, it's a grey area but I don't think it makes a lot of difference. The problem here is that the lower grade cricket is mostly played on artificial wickets and often without umpires. So batsmen often get into the habit of running down the middle of the wicket. And when this is transferred to grass wickets it can do a lot of damage. That's why I don't like the lower grade teams playing on fresh decks because they can destroy them by running straight up the middle.

BG What's involved in end of season work on hybrid wickets?

PF Well, it's exactly the same. I attended a day in March this year with Karl McDermott [head groundsman, formerly groundsman at Clontarf CC] at Lords, just before we had our four hybrid wickets laid here in Malahide, and he stressed that they were no different ie in preparation or in remedial work. I did find them harder to top dress because there was resistance with the nylon fibres. I found that they were not as quick to top dress as normal grass wickets. The soil didn't flow the same as a grass wicket and so I used a bit more top dressing on them. Also, I pulled the drag

mat through the hybrids to ensure that the top dressing was evenly distributed. The drag mat is a heavy mat like a chain harrow. It just levels the soil if you've missed anything with the trulute. Effectively, it's a heavier, bigger version of the trulute and we have one here so I pulled it through the hybrids but it didn't make any real difference to them.

Something I didn't mention was the amount of bags (25kgs) of top dress soil I use per wicket which is usually between 8 and 14 bags. The hybrids took the higher end of that. And in fact one wicket which was very worn took 20 bags.

BG Have you played matches on the hybrids?

PF Yes, we've played about six lower grade club matches on the hybrids. And they have played well.

BG The grass practice wickets [off the main pitch beside the artificial practice wickets at the far end of the ground down by the Gate Lodge] how do you deal with them?

PF I treat them exactly the same as the main square. They took a bit more scarifying. I scarified them crossways, not diagonally, seeded and then top dressed. They have been very good this year because we had a drier summer. They need the trees to be butchered a bit to allow more sunlight at them. When they dry out the lads tell me they play true and have good bounce. Just the run ups need attention.

BG Do you do remedial work on the outfield at the end of season?

PF Yes, I have been seeding and top dressing any bare patches on the outfield. The plan is to spray next spring for weeds and diseases and which also should solve the problem of the birds looking for grubs etc.

BG Is there any work to be done on the ground say from October to March?

PF No, not really. Frank would come in weekly and perhaps brush the outfield and cut if he deems fit. What Frank does he will watch for disease. Actually, this is something that is different from Taunton. There is a lot more airborne turf diseases when you go further north. Something I never came across at Taunton [South of England]. We use to get a lot of red thread in Taunton which is something that is spread on shoes and that. It doesn't kill grass but here a couple of times we have had fusarium on the edges of the square. It's an airborne disease. Birds carry it. Also, it can come from local golf courses in the area.

BG How do you recognise fusarium, what does it look like?

PF A brown area or brown spots. It gets worse if you don't deal with it quickly. I can smell it. We saw it at college. I went to college for two years when at Taunton. To understand grasses and diseases. Diseases can be a disaster.

BG When you say airborne disease and golf clubs, why do you connect the two?

PF Because fusarium comes from finer grasses. Golf greens use finer grasses and are much more susceptible to fusarium and turf diseases such as brown spot, dollar spot. All turf diseases look very much alike. But some are different in treatment. And fusarium is the one that you really have to look out for. I've had it twice here. And to me that was a new thing. I worked at Somerset and I worked at Portsmouth Football Club and I never had it there.

BG Does it manifest itself during the winter?

PF Oh yes.

BG Is there any fusarium out there now?

PF No. I haven't had fusarium this year. We had it when I came back after the Covid and we had it a couple of years before that.

BG And you were able to deal with it?

PF Yes, as soon as we identified it we treated it immediately and that solved the problem on both occasions. You have to treat it immediately as it spreads like wildfire.

BG Is Frank very familiar with diseases such as fusarium given his golfing background [Frank was greenkeeper at Malahide Golf Club for many years]?

PF Yes he has great experience and knowledge of turf diseases.

BG Do you monitor the square from the UK during the winter when you are back home in Somerset.

PF I speak to Frank every fortnight, every week sometimes and get an update on the ground.

BG How do you know that the end of season work has been successful?

PF When your square is grassed over, no bare spots. I mean if you look at our square now the only bare spot is the last wicket that was used, so I think that the end of season work has been really successful.

Don't take grass off a wicket if you are not sure. You can never put the grass back once you have taken it off. I always played on grassy wickets. Cricket is a grass sport. Not to be played on bare wickets.

BG Do you feel the square is in a good state at the moment?

PF Yes I am happy with it.

BG Finally, and this is unrelated. Have you any advice for a groundsman/woman starting off?

PF Yes, work with an experienced groundsman. Listen to what they have to say and make your own mind up on some factors. I worked with two head groundsmen who taught me a lot. I started when I was 15, although I had no intention of being a groundsman. I was a good listener and took it in.

BG Who were the two groundsmen?

PF Don Price was head groundsman for seven/eight years at Taunton and then he retired and then I worked with a bloke called Gordon Prosser who was a very different type of groundsman from Don Price. Gordon was very ahead of his time.

BG In what way?

PF With using different types of roller, different ways of taking the grass off ends, for spinners and stuff like that.

BG Where is he now?

PF Sadly, he passed away.

BG Thanks Phil

PF No problem.

Brian Gilmore 2022



07/09/23

End of season work completed on the practice wickets which are located off the main ground down by the Gate Lodge. PF says the practice wickets are treated in the same way as the main square.



18/09/23

PF says that the main square is in better condition this time last year essentially for two reasons:

1. He has been able to work early on the ends of wickets where the most wear and tear take place. The photo demonstrates the strong growth of grass at the ends/popping crease and beyond.
2. All games, international and club, finished earlier this year in September allowing for end of season work to be completed.



Brian Gilmore
September 2023