

## The Cricket Club Groundsman: More than a Summer's Job...

By Dave Wooding

"The biggest mistake most people make is thinking that groundsman have the winter off!" states Ray Horrocks, Shepley Cricket Club's long standing groundsman. Indeed, those who believe the winter months are a time for him to put his feet up could hardly be further from the truth.

It may surprise some people, but winter is actually just as crucial a part of the job as the weeks leading up to the start of a new season. As Ray puts it: "What you put into the pitch in terms of effort and work in the winter, you will get out in the summer." The one thing you certainly cannot do is leave the ground unattended for weeks and months on end.



Even as the season finishes, Ray's preparation for the new season must begin as, "If you don't do a good job at the end of season it will show at the start of the next." Reseeding all the footmarks left by the many bowlers who run in to bowl on his wicket is just one of the tasks that he is faced with when the season ends. This obviously cannot be done during the summer itself, as there is no time for grass to grow, so it is imperative that it gets done as soon as the season finishes, allowing the grass time to settle, even if it will only get cut up again.

Ray's winter up at Marsh Lane is, then, a far from relaxing one. Despite the threat of bad weather, he will be at the ground regularly to tend to the square, making sure it is in pristine condition come April, and the start of the season. Ray is quick to point out the necessity of keeping the grass on the square trimmed during the off-season period, stating, "If you don't keep the grass at a certain length, it can easily become diseased."

However, Ray's battle against problems such as moss, worms and other things that can wreak havoc on his square does not stop there. Aerating the grass with either his spiking or slitting machine is another integral part of his winter programme. Ray explains that the process will improve the roots, and help them get access to the water that allows them to grow healthily.

With the season around six weeks away, Ray's preparations move into the next gear. Using systematic worm casts, he is able to force the local worms to burrow deeper into the ground, as opposed to leaving wormholes on his square. This is followed a week or so later by treating the grass on the square with lawn sand to prevent moss emerging during the season.

As the start of the season approaches, and with only two or three weeks left until cricket resumes at Marsh Lane, Ray begins the finetuning of the wicket, bringing the roller out of its winter retirement. One of the little known tricks of the trade that Ray employs at this stage is to first roll across the wicket instead of up and down it. The aim here is to ensure the surface remains even. Following this first roll, Ray estimates that the square at Shepley "probably gets around 15 hours of rolling time before the season starts" - proof if any was needed that tending to a wicket is no walk in the park.

By now, with the opening match just days away, the square really begins to take shape, as Ray takes his tin of paint out to the middle. As the Shepley square incorporates 14 tracks, there is a lot to do in terms of marking the first few out. Surely then, it must be heartbreaking as the players take to the field over the summer months, with cricket spikes serving only to damage all that he has worked hard to create? Well, as Ray puts it: "My satisfaction comes from seeing a good game of cricket on a nice white wicket. However, it can be a bugger when it goes wrong and we lose because a lot of people want to point the finger at the wicket."

So let's hope Shepley can put together a good season in 2007 to complement all the hard work put in by Ray over those inclement winter months.