



pure gold

at the home of polo

MIKE BEARDALL meets the man in charge of Britain's top polo club's pitches and finds a turf professional with a superb agricultural and sportsturf background



Julian Russell-Hayes, grounds manager, Cowdray Park Polo Club

COWDRAY PARK is probably the world's best-known polo club - and it's difficult to imagine that the man in charge of 60 acres of grounds very nearly ended up a computer programmer.

But Julian Russell-Hayes realised two months down the line at the age of 19 on a degree course that he had made a big mistake. He needed to be outdoors.

So when the suggestion of a course in agriculture came up he didn't take five minutes to make up his mind.

After completing an HND in agriculture at Brinsbury College in West Sussex he worked on various farms and became an arable foreman by the age of 23.

Then self-employment beckoned. "I just got sick and tired of the long hours and the low pay," says Julian, now 33. "It was time to forge out on my own so I set up as a contractor and for six years was doing every type of job from fencing to tree work - then a couple of sports-ground contracts came up."

Before long he was honing his skills on cricket squares, bowling greens, and football, rugby and hockey pitches.

"I've looked after every type of sporting surface, except golf courses," laughs

Julian. "A lot of people say they cannot understand how as a groundsman you can look at a pitch churned up by polo pony hooves and not face it as a problem.

"I look at it as no more serious than a badly messed up rugby pitch that needs sorting out. We have routines in place that ensure each pitch has enough time to recover between games."

That seems difficult to believe when you imagine more than 500 games in a season from April to the end of September across five pitches at the main ground (where the finals of the British Open - the Veuve Clicquot Gold Cup - are held) and another five at nearby Ambersham, with a 'chukka' ground for practice (chukka is a seven-minute period of play during a match).

There were polo games virtually every day between April 28 and September 21 this year, putting enormous pressures on Julian and his team of four full-time staff. They also call in between six and 30 treaders-in to deal with divots.

"I took over from a manager who had looked after the grounds well," says Julian, who was about to leave for a holi-



More than 15,000 visitors gathered to see this year's British Open finals

Picture: Steven Morris

day with his fiancée Julie when we met on a sparkling sunny morning on the outskirts of the pretty little West Sussex town of Midhurst.

"It was a question of developing good routines and practices for year-round management of the pitches. We do as much vertidrainage as possible during the winter."

EACH pitch gets a sand spreading treatment in April and June - 250 tonnes a time (500 a year each).

"We use sand with a high percentage of medium and coarse sand with no fines or silt," says Julian.

Fertiliser applications are usually of potash and phosphates in autumn and spring with nitrogen during the playing season.

Grass disease is pretty much non-existent due to the openness of the fields and the sandy loam which makes

drainage so good.

"If it wasn't for the sandy loam we would have real problems," says Julian. "But these are ideal conditions for polo. The only time we would ever delay a match is if there was standing water on the surface, which hardly ever happens."

Grass is kept at a height of 25mm and cut every day during the playing season. The grass is never collected. "I believe in all the principles of agriculture," says Julian, "that putting the goodness back is good for the soil and the growing conditions. We are certainly using less potassium by returning the clippings."

"We scarify heavily at the end of the season so that is not a problem."

From November Julian cuts the grass once a week and vertidrainage as often as possible.

Irrigation is vital during the

season - not for the grass growth, but for the softness of the surface for the horses' hooves.

"With all the impact they have to take we make the surfaces as giving as possible for them," says Julian.

With all the twisting and turning aren't accidents frequent? "Believe it or not we have few accidents because safety is paramount and the riders are highly skilled," says Julian. "It looks far more dangerous than it is but the riders are incredibly talented and nobody wants accidents."

Irrigation is supplied by ring mains and also pumped out of the River Rother.

"The softness of the ground is vital," says Julian. "We don't want any hardness in the ground at all to avoid injury to ponies."

Julian has a wide range of machinery at his disposal, including a fleet of five New

Holland 100hp tractors, two Kesmac 20-foot gang mowers, two Amazon sweepers, a fertiliser spreader and two Wiedenmann Terra Spike vertidrainers.

He also has Charterhouse overseeders to apply the ryegrass mixes he uses from British Seed Houses.

"My agricultural background is very much at the heart of everything we do," says Julian. "Having tackled every type of sports surface over the years I know what works on this type of ground. Polo should not be different from any other game in terms of damage to the pitch - although you wouldn't say that if we were on clay."

At the end of each game the treaders-in go round with a trailer filled with a sand and compost mix incorporating seed. "It's about a bag to a trailer," says Julian. "It's all stirred together and the

continues over



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“Polo should not be different from any other game in terms of damage to the pitch”

Julian Russell-Hayes, grounds manager, Cowdray Park

results fill in any gaps around the replaced divots.”

A TYPICAL day for Julian starts at 7.30am with a meeting with the staff.

“They will all have their various tasks allocated and all go off to carry them out, working pretty independently,” says Julian.

“I discuss with the polo manager what games have been scheduled. We speak every day and everyone is kept fully informed.

“Our job throughout the year is to produce an excellent playing surface and the surfaces do come in for some punishment because of the

scale of the sport.

“But we are geared up for it so I never regard this as any more of a challenge than any other sports surface under heavy use.”

When the season ends in September the Cowdray Park team do some heavy scarifying with their Amazon brushes.

“During the winter months we can switch to a five-day week from the usual seven,” says Julian

It's a casual remark but indicates something of the pressures he and his team make light of.

“Cowdray Park is seen as the capital of polo which is why it is such a prestigious

venue and the home of the British Open,” says Julian.

“It is a real privilege to work here in such magnificent surroundings and with such great people. Polo is a great sport with a massive international following - and they all come here.”



JULIAN RUSSELL-HAYES factfile



- Age 33, engaged to Julie.
- Born South London
- Moved to Sussex with parents.
- Started computer programming degree at 19.
- Then decided on agriculture after two months.
- Two years doing HND in agriculture at Brinsbury College, West Sussex.
- Worked on farms until 23. Became arable foreman.
- At 23 became self-employed contractor, which included sportsturf work. Looked after every type of sporting surface during six-year period.
- Three years ago saw Cowdray Park Polo Club grounds manager post advertised and got the job.
- Full-time staff of four. During season between six and 30 part-time treaders-in.
- **STRONG BELIEF:** That a battered polo pitch is no more of a challenge than a badly rucked rugby pitch.

COWDRAY PARK

Home of British Polo

COWDRAY Park is a total estate of around 17,000 acres with masses of woodland, arable farming, dairy herds and heavily into organic production.

With a long and illustrious history, Cowdray Park is recognized worldwide as the 'Home of British Polo' and will celebrate its centenary in 2010. Set in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty within Viscount Cowdray's estate near Midhurst in West Sussex, the game of polo has been played at Cowdray for close on a century - the first competitive tournament recorded in 1910. By the 1920s a whole series of competitions with dedicated cups and trophies was firmly established, although the sport in the UK was to all but die out during the Second World War.

Cowdray Park Polo Club's significance in the re-establishment of polo in England following the Second World War was largely due to the efforts of a legendary name in the history of polo - John, 3rd Viscount Cowdray, who died in 1995. Father of the present Viscount, he turned Cowdray Park into one of the most famous polo clubs in the world - firmly establishing its place at the very pinnacle of the sport both nationally and internationally.

During the early post-war years John Cowdray built up the country's leading string of polo ponies. He was generous in his offers of loaned ponies to increase the number of potential players participating in the sport. Beginning with Cowdray, polo was gradually revived on a small scale at other clubs around the country.



Although he had lost his left arm at Dunkirk, this did not keep the 3rd Viscount from continuing to be part of the sport he loved. With help from Churchill, his gun-makers, he had an artificial arm adapted at the Roehampton Limb-Fitting Centre so that he could hold the reins with a hook.

By 1948, visiting Argentines Jack Nelson and Luis Lacey were sufficiently impressed by the re-launch of British polo to invite John Cowdray to take a team to compete in Buenos Aires the following year. The visit by the English team in 1949 was a huge success and marked a significant step in the recovery of British polo.

In 1953 Cowdray Park played host to England's first big post war international tournament, the Coronation Cup, first presented in 1911 to celebrate the coronation of King George V. Teams from England, the US, Argentina and Chile competed and the finals drew a crowd of more than 10,000 people, including The Queen. In 1956 the country's premier High Goal tournament, the Cowdray Park Gold Cup was inaugurated.

The Gold Cup in June and July continues to be the highlight of the polo season at Cowdray. Sponsored since 1995 by Veuve Clicquot, star players come from all over the world to compete.

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