

# Winning against the odds

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FOOTBALL EXCLUSIVE

**Grass roots football groundsmen have their day of glory at Windsor as the FA recognises achievements made by these devoted battlers.**

**MIKE BEARDALL meets the man in charge and talks to a top judge.**

SEPTEMBER is a red-letter month for dozens of football groundsmen across England as IOG Saltex marks the Football Association awards for 'Grass Roots' heroes of the sport.

For the FA's Steve Williams it is recognition for those groundsmen struggling in the backwaters with little or no cash to provide half-decent playing surfaces against the odds.

As Head of Facilities at the FA he is responsible for ensuring, together with five regional managers, that clubs have

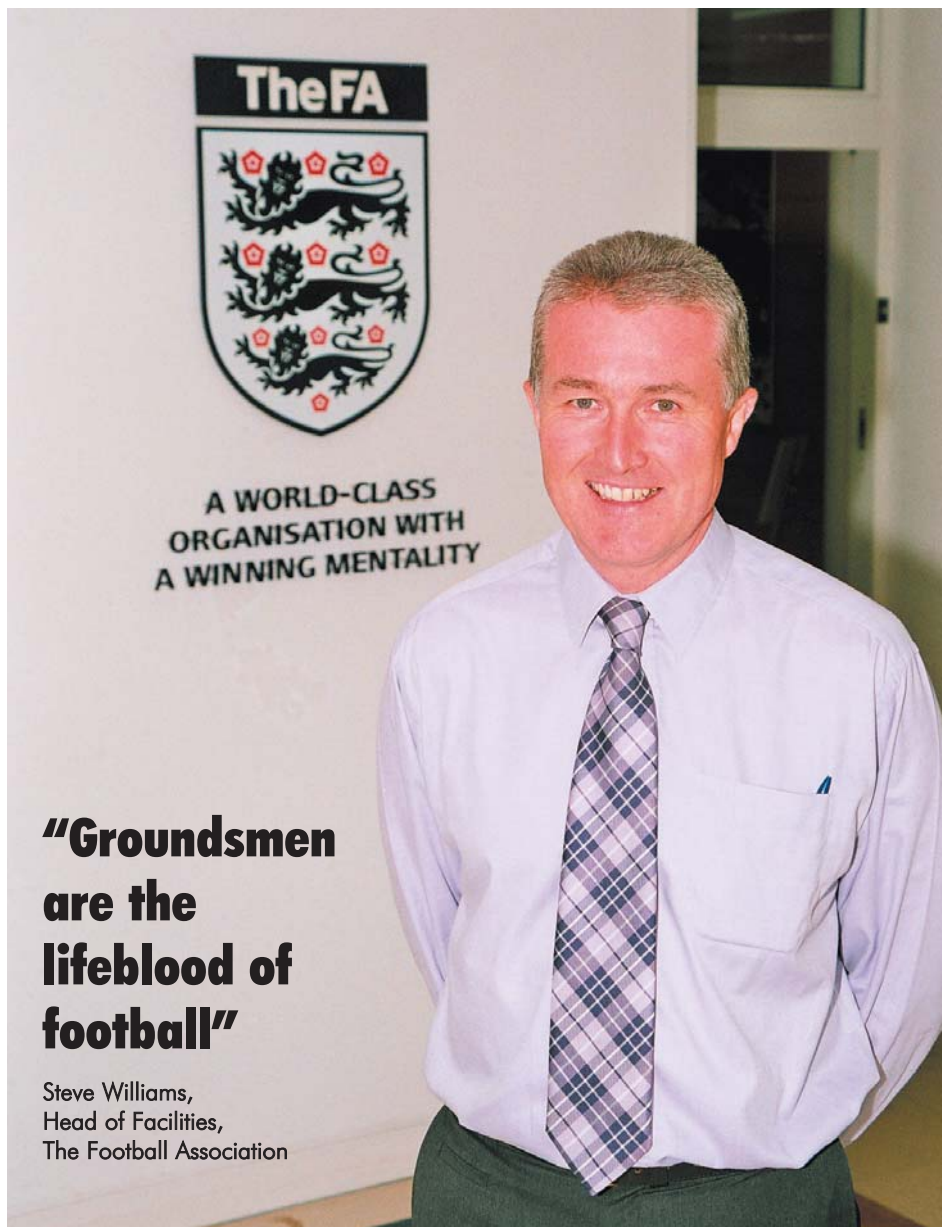
the opportunity of being part of the strategic thinking for the allocation of funds made available through the Football Foundation.

It's a massive job - and it needs a number cruncher (like former bank manager Steve) to tackle the statistics:

- **In England there are 38,500 football clubs.**
- **They support 125,000 teams (of all ages).**
- **82 per cent of football is played on**

**public sector pitches - local authority, town and parish council or school sites.**

- **25 per cent of these pitches are school-owned.**
- **18 per cent are on football club sites owned by professional and non-league sides or youth clubs.**
- **But of this 18 per cent (when stripping out the professional and non-league clubs) only 8 per cent are owned by youth clubs, which tend to be in rural locations.**



**"Groundsmen  
are the  
lifeblood of  
football"**

Steve Williams,  
Head of Facilities,  
The Football Association

And the money:

- **More than 1,000 grass roots projects have been approved.**
- **Total project costs have amounted to more than £460million to date.**
- **Since 2001 £260million has been given out in grants by the Football Foundation.**
- **However it has been estimated that a total of more than £5billion will be needed to tackle all the grass roots needs in England, given the scale of the problem which exists following years of under-investment in previous decades.**

The Football Foundation (which allocates money to clubs) is made up of three providers:

- **The Football Association.**
- **The Premier League.**
- **The Government - through Sport England.**

"The Government have identified that football is a great way to encourage healthy living," says Steve. "It's a great activity and helps alleviate obesity among children, both boys and girls."

"We have identified that to improve football facilities in England would be a £5billion problem and with close to only half a billion allocated so far this has tackled just 10 per cent of the problem. But we will continue to invest while funding is available to assist clubs across strategic and deserving locations."

The FA has developed strategies to identify the poorest and most needy facilities - and all projects must demonstrate viability and value for money. Not a quick fix but a long-term result for an area with real benefits for football players of all ages and abilities.

# Success stories - Football Foundation in action

CIRENCESTER Town FC was given money a few years ago following relocation from a prime inner town site. The sale of this and football and local authority grants enabled the financial ability to make it all happen for the club.

They have a first team in the Southern League with an academy and many other youth teams.

Now they have an indoor training area and seven outdoor grass pitches alongside the main stadium pitch.

"It's been a great way of banding local people together - from the under-eights to the grown-ups who get to use the stadium," says Steve.

Another club which has benefited from Football Foundation money is Hindley Juniors FC in Lancashire.

They have over 50 teams from mini-soccer, girls, boys, seniors and through all stages of development.

"The constant feature in all football," says Steve, "is the amount of volunteering that goes on - from the mums and dads through to the volunteer

groundsmen."

And it is the groundsmen (the majority volunteers with some paid by clubs) who are the key to success in all football facilities.

"Groundsmen are the lifeblood of football," says Steve. "Without them there is no football - and in many cases they are doing the job with few if any resources, and many have not been aware of training courses or have not had the time to get on one.

"This is a major part of what we are trying to achieve through these awards for groundsmen - to acknowledge their skill and dedication and to promote better training and education.

"Facilities are improving but there is a huge lack of training facilities across

the country with too few artificial pitches and poor quality natural grass pitches.

"A once-a-year visit by a contractor to a local pitch is not a way to maintain a properly used football pitch. It's an ongoing commitment by groundsmen who care for pitches before, during and after games each week."

The FA's grass roots award for groundsmen are now in their seventh year and this

year's awards lunch on the second day of Saltex will be a real celebrity event.

TV football presenters Ray Stubbs and John Motson will be joined on stage by Sir Trevor Brooking, FA Director of Football Development, and Steve Welch, Wembley Stadium grounds manager - together with former football referee Jack Taylor, former World Cup referee and now an 'Ambassador of the Football League'.



Peter Beardsley leads a training session with club members on the new Mulgrave Community Sports pitches in Lythe Whitby, Yorkshire

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## FOOTBALL & RUGBY

### FACTfile STEVE WILLIAMS

- Born 1958 in Ealing, West London.
- Married to Wendy.
- Son Andrew (17) a football referee since 14. Ambitions to follow his dad into sports management.
- Daughter Lisa (20) studying sports science at Brunel University, Uxbridge.



#### BUSINESS CAREER:

- Aged 17 worked for chartered accountants' audit team.
- Aged 18 joined Natwest (for next 22 years - last six as manager of management and strategic change in Central London and West London head offices).
- 1998 Joined the FA as Facilities Manager.
- Has masterminded the 'Grass Roots' groundsmen awards for seven years.

#### FOOTBALL CAREER

- Steve started playing football at 10.
- Joined a club team for three years (11-14).
- Became a qualified referee at 15.
- At 16 Assistant manager of Pitshanger Dynamo youth team and then moved on to Harrow Borough FC.
- At 20 became the first team secretary at Harrow Borough FC (10 years in post).
- Two years as fixtures secretary of the Suburban Football League.
- 1990 First team sec at Northwood FC.
- 1996 to date managed youth teams (under sevens to under18s).
- 2003 to date: Chairman of their youth section. Northwood had eight teams in 1990. Now has 28. Referees at weekends (as does his son Andrew).



# How top groundsmen are judged

Newquay FC

SIX professional groundsmen chosen by the FA visit nearly 80 clubs across England to make their final judgements on clubs from the Conference Level, the Southern League, the Isthmian, the Northern Premier League, Steps 5 and 6 (feeding into three leagues) and Step 7.

The judges this year were Darren Baldwin of Spurs, Dougie Robertson of West Ham, Roy Rigby and Lee Jackson of Manchester City, Bruce Elliot of Reading FC and Dave Roberts, formerly of Southampton FC and now at Charterhouse School.

Says Steve Williams, "We are judging the person and looking at what they have to work with, what budgets they have, whether they are part-time, full-time, volunteers.

"A good pitch is not just about money - it is about the experience of the groundsmen and the amount of time he spends on it."

In 2003-4 we asked a con-



What the judges hope not to see

sultancy to do work for us - studies on pitches and natural grass, to see how grass plays during the season.

Looking at three non-league grounds they discovered a real pride in the surfaces tended by volunteers.

At the start of the season the pitches were great with two games a week from August to October.

From then the wet weather set in and the pitches were struggling around goal mouths and centre circles.

Grass cover had gone from 28mm to 10mm in places.

In January and February the goalmouths had zero grass cover and there was little or no ball roll with puddles and mud in places.

By April the pitches were like concrete with no grass growing.

Huge variations in pitches were seen as consultants went back each month. But the reports all talked of the devotion of the groundsmen, some with a lack of knowledge and some with very few materials. Some clubs called in contractors hoping for a quick fix.

"Everyone expects the contractor to work miracles in a short space of time," says Steve.



Judges Roy Rigby and Lee Jackson of Manchester City

"The successful nominees among the groundsmen think about the pitch on a long-term basis and do regular maintenance. They are aware that a referee can call off a game if the safety of players is in question."

He cites a pre-season friendly at Braintree in Essex recently which was called off by the referee because he found a hole (probably a collapsed drain) on the pitch.

"In football we say there are two assets to any club - the pitch and the bar," says Steve. "If the pitch is no good games will be called off and there won't be anyone using the bar. It's all about keeping up attendance and the social side of football."

## How the judges make their decision

JUDGES take into account a wide range of criteria in deciding winning groundsmen.

These include what budget is available, how the groundsmen deals with inten-

sive play and the number of games played on a pitch over a season.

Also whether the groundsmen is a volunteer, part-time or full-time, whether he works alone and whether he has

any control over when a pitch is played on (due to weather or pitch conditions).

Judges also look at equipment available, aeration techniques, feeding and irrigation and hours spent each week on pitch maintenance.

Finally training is examined to see whether the groundsmen has been on or is involved in any training programmes.

"Effective use of manpower and material resources plus technical knowledge and management techniques are a vital part of the work of groundsmen and we take all these into consideration," says Bruce Elliot.



FA Grass Roots winning groundsmen 2007

# The Judge's story

**BRUCE ELLIOT**, head groundsman of Reading FC, has been an FA judge for several years and this year he and Dave Roberts (formerly of Southampton FC now with Charterhouse School) visited 25 clubs in five days.

They went from the Midlands down to Cornwall and across to Ipswich.

"It was amazing to see what tremendous pitches were being produced with so little basic equipment," says Bruce.

"Lots of these pitches have as many as 100 games played on them in a season and groundsmen are often volunteers with little or no equipment - some of them even pay for the topdressing and fertilisers themselves, they are that devoted.

"They are constantly battling against the odds - it's a day and night thing with them and you don't find them complaining.

"Returning to our top-notch football clubs with every machine available stored in superb conditions and decent budgets to work with we feel incredibly humbled by the work done by these grass roots groundsmen.

"They are the salt of the earth and there would be no football without them."

Bruce reveals that when he and Dave arrive to interview the groundsmen at their clubs they just say they are from the FA.

"We don't say until we are well into conversation that we are groundsmen from big football clubs - and as soon as we do it becomes a real exercise in picking our brains and discussing all the issues that groundsmen always raise.

"To be honest we love meeting the nominees because they are so devoted to their pitches - and often being volunteers means they are deeply involved in the club and know all the players because they are from their own community.



Bruce Elliot on his pitch at the Madejski Stadium

"We spend far more time at each club than we should because the guys are so interesting. When we get back to our hotel in the late evening we are exhausted."

Bruce (43) started his sportsturf career in golf greenkeeping in West Sussex at the age of 25, a job he did for five years.

He left Tilgate Golf Club, owned by Crawley Borough Council, to look after non-league Crawley Town FC's new ground.

Then he went to Fulham FC, followed by Tottenham's White Hart Lane before joining Millwall FC as head groundsman for three years.

"I wanted to break into the professional game and got the opportunity of going to Fulham while I was at Crawley," says Bruce.

"Having been at the grass roots myself I know exactly what it means to work within a tight budget.

"These FA awards are the highlight of the year for all these groundsmen - they are being recognised for the immense amount of work they do, above and beyond the call of duty.

"To be there with guys from the top of the football world means everything to them and it really is a great day for them all.

"The FA has made this into a real celebration of groundsmanship and I am very proud to be a part of that."



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## FOOTBALL & RUGBY

# Journey back for top groundsman

Darren Baldwin of Spurs travelled 1,500 miles in a week to judge grass roots pitches

DARREN Baldwin, head groundsman at Premiership Tottenham Hotspur and last year's IOG Football Groundsman of the Year, is one of the FA grass roots judges.

He and Dougie Robertson of West Ham travelled 1,500 miles in a week to visit 25 clubs from the North East to Portsmouth and across to Somerset.

"It took me right back to when I started at 15 helping out at Woodford Town in the Essex Senior League," says Darren (35).

"These guys are working with very little equipment or money and producing excellent results with tremendous pressures on them.

"The standards this year were higher than ever before and we spent far more than our allocated time at each club because there was so much exchange of information.

"I learned new things from



Darren Baldwin at White Hart Lane

them and they were able to pick our brains about one or two pitch problems."

Darren has recently taken on 19-year-old James Pope, a former Oaklands College NVQ Level Two sportsturf student, who won a Toro scholarship to work at Wembley for a year.

James is *Turf Professional's* Young Groundsman of the Year.

## FA plans for more groundsman training

AS part of the FA's ongoing development work in grass roots football they are working on plans to ensure that every groundsman at Steps 1-4 of the non-league pyramid (Conference, Southern, Isthmian, Northern Premier) get at least one day's training to enhance their knowledge and skill base.

"This may well take two to

three years," says Steve Williams, "while we get everyone involved."

One of the training venues is likely to be Wembley Stadium (where the FA is moving its headquarters to next year) and grounds manager Steve Welch will be an advisor.

Other venues will be at top UK football locations.



## A brand new pitch has also seen the introduction of a new maintenance regime at Rangers FC's Ibrox stadium

IBROX's new pitch was installed in just seven weeks over the close season by contractor Souters Sports in time for this season's Scottish Premier League kick-off in August. It is only the third British football ground after Newcastle and Bristol City to feature a 100mm Fibrelastic rootzone from Mansfield Sand, and the first in Scotland.

As head groundsman David Roxburgh explains, "The original high specification pitch we put in 17 years ago had come to the end of its natural life, so we had to invest in a brand new generation pitch with a completely new rootzone to get the surface right again. After removing the old turf, the upper rootzone and part of the lower rootzone to a depth of 150mm, a new pure sand rootzone was installed up to within 100mm of the final surface.

"The top 100mm was then filled with the new Fibrelastic product, sand mixed with synthetic fibres which contain a percentage of elastic, and the grass seed was sown into this.

"Fibrelastic has been tested by our consultant agronomists, the STRI, and provides great

stability and consistent performance across the whole surface. We've also invested in a new TIS irrigation system and new MLR portable lighting rigs to promote grass growth throughout the playing season."

The initial five year contract finance deal signed with Nairn Brown and John Deere Credit saw the arrival of two 4520 52hp compact tractors with ComfortGard cabs, one equipped with a front loader and one with a snow blade, a 3720 41hp compact tractor with ComfortGard cab and front loader, two 6x4 Gator diesel utility vehicles, an X748 lawn tractor with rotary mower deck and collection system, and three John Deere 500 ride-on triple cylinder mowers.

These are shared between Ibrox, managed by deputy head groundsman Paul Matthew, and the club's Murray Park training facility at Milngavie, with David Roxburgh overseeing eight grounds staff across both sites. In addition, four new John Deere R54RKB 22in rear roller walk-behind rotary mowers were bought in the summer, specifically for use on the new Ibrox pitch.



# of the Ibrox



David Roxburgh

"We needed to look at the best way to maintain such a high performance sports surface, and so I studied what was happening with other pitches in England," says David. "Many of my counterparts use mowers to clean the pitch surface after matches, not just for grass cutting. The new rotaries are used as much as a maintenance tool for hoovering up any debris after games as they are for cutting and striping, with the advantage that they leave a lighter footprint."

"When the lights are in place, we'll really be applying a summer regime throughout the winter. This high level of maintenance means extra work for the staff, particularly on match days, but all to the benefit of the pitch. The club has invested very heavily in these improvements, more so compared with English Premiership sides with their TV income, but we've now got a

very good asset and a good platform to build on for the future.

"As far as the machinery goes, this was also a major deal for the club, and we went through the due process with all the major suppliers," adds David. "Nairn Brown came way above anyone else in terms of back-up service and support for Rangers Football Club, and the professionalism of the dealership is what really made the deal."

"John Deere comes with a very high reputation anyway, so we had no qualms about using their machines, but probably more important is the relationship we have with the dealer. Any issues we've had, they've been dealt with immediately - and not just because it's Rangers, that's what Nairn Brown promises and delivers to all its customers."

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