

Premiership pressures

Bruce Elliot (right) with his deputy Greg Bolton at the Madjeski

The demands of Premiership rugby and football played back to back on the same pitch are all in a weekend's work for Reading Madjeski Stadium's head groundsman BRUCE ELLIOT.

MIKE BEARDALL reports

BRUCE Elliot is looking relaxed as he catches up on paperwork in his office.

It's the calm before the storm with a week to go before Newcastle FC meet

Reading FC on the Saturday followed by Rugby Union side London Irish meeting Gloucester on the Sunday.

With one night between the two very different

games I was prepared to hear that pressure was mounting.

But Bruce is calmness personified and a practiced professional who has the situation well in hand

from three years of experience at the Madejski Stadium.

"The grass is looking good and we'll be putting some fertiliser on this afternoon if the rain holds

continues over





The north end of the Madjeski pitch

off," says Bruce (42) who does a round trip of 120 miles from Crawley, West Sussex, every day, where his family is based - and where he started his sportsturf career in golf greenkeeping 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 to go to Fulham while I was at Crawley," says Bruce, whose wife Sue works for a fuel oil company in Crawley. They have a son, Dean, (19) and a daughter, Devon, (15).

"I have always travelled from Sussex to whatever club I've worked at," says Bruce.

"When we have a late finish after a game and an early start for a game next day I sleep over at the club."

SO what happens to the pitch before, during and after that football game with rugby the next day.

Bruce outlines the timetable:

- **7am Saturday:** The staff, myself, deputy Greg Bolton, former player Gordon Neat (celebrating 50 years with the club), and Melvin Lovegrove, arrive at the ground.
- **7.30:** Mowing begins using the Dennis G760s. For football the cut is between 25mm to 27mm during the winter. For rugby the ideal height is 30mm. The pattern goes in at this stage.
- **9.30:** The marking-out begins.

“Football and then rugby is far easier to cope with than the other way round”

Bruce Elliot, Head Groundsman, Reading Madjeski Stadium

- **11:** The goals are put in place together with the stop nets to protect spectators. Flags go in.
- **12noon:** The advertising signs are placed and checked.
- **1pm till 2:** Watering the pitch. The goalies go through their warm-up practice.
- **2.20:** The players are on the pitch for practice.
- **2.50:** The grounds team check the pitch for divoting before kick-off at **3pm**. During half-time more watering from pop-us and divot checking.
- **4.45** The goal posts go down and the Dennis mowers are fitted with brush cassettes.
- **5.30:** The football lines are

died over to match the grass.

- **6.30:** Final touches to ensure the pitch is ready for the morning.

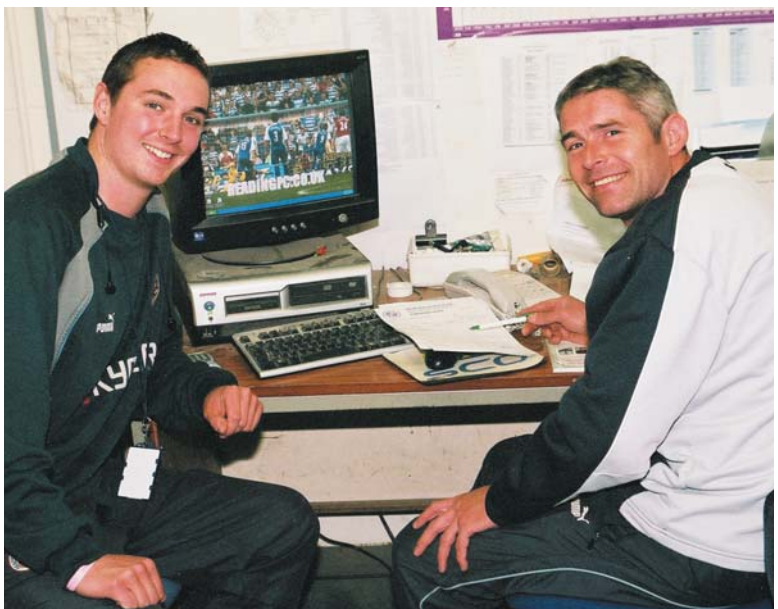
SUNDAY

8am: The grounds team are on the pitch and marking the pitch out for rugby.

"We tend to use a water-based marker that is easy to remove later," says Bruce.

"We do no watering for rugby matches and the preparation is less intense than for football."

9.30: The rugby posts go up. "In the old days this was a four man job but these days we are using telescopic posts and the job takes just two of us," says Bruce.



ABOVE: Greg Bolton and Bruce Elliot in the office at the Madjeski

After the game the grounds team check the pitch for damage, do any cursory repairs and then remove the rugby posts.

“It’s amazing how little damage the pitch suffers,” says Bruce. “Obviously there is a bit of wear in the scrum areas but this tends to be minimal, depending on the weather.”

READING’s pitch is a Desso system, and has been since 2001.

It was previously fibresand when the stadium opened in 1998

“Desso works brilliantly for the dual games,” says Bruce. “It would be difficult for the pitch to stand up to so much use without it.”

The pitch was completely reconstructed this year by John Hewitt Sportsturf because the stadium is built over a former rubbish site and the levels had altered. The metallic posts topped with cylindrical discs surrounding the stadium are methane gas vents, built to release the



Looking south at the Madjeski on a bright day it is difficult to imagine a third of the pitch is in shade during winter

underground build-up of gases.

The undersoil heating was checked, the existing drains left in place, new drains constructed and a new rootzone

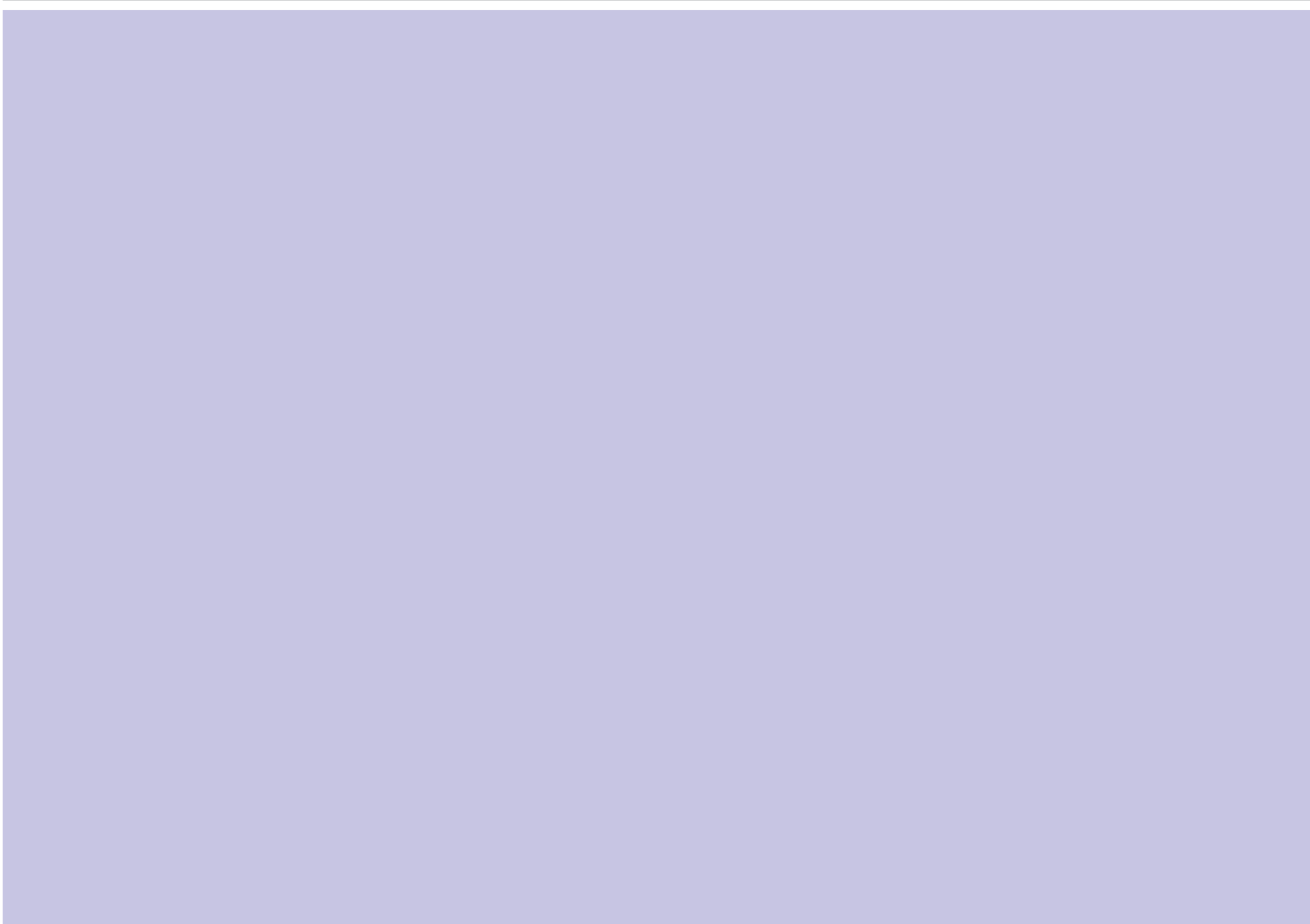
put in place - 97per cent sand and three topsoil.

In fact the amount brought into the stadium was 3,000 tonnes of sand and 300 tonnes of pure soil, the root-

zone covering the top four inches of the pitch.

The Desso polypropylene fibres go down 20 cms and are spaced at 2cm intervals. Grass roots wrap round the

continues over





fibres to give strength to the pitch.

Bruce uses an MM25 seed mix - 80percent ryegrass and 20 slender creeping red fescue.

"We sowed it thickly and the cover is tremendous," says Bruce. "We have a regular fertiliser programme in place. In the winter we give amino acid feeds to replicate the sun's production because shade is a

real problem on the south end of the stadium.

"This year we are borrowing three sets of growing lights from the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff to see if we can improve things on the south side. Tests elsewhere, like Manchester City and Twickenham Stadium, have proved very successful."

"The six yard box sees very little sun and by the middle of

winter a third of the pitch is in shade."

"Diseases such as fusarium are an issue with our current weather conditions. What we really need is colder weather from December till March."

"The pitch is mown two or three times a week and in the winter we leave the grass at 27mm for football and 30 for rugby."

So what are the challenges

of changing from football to rugby and vice versa?

"Football and then rugby is far easier to cope with than the other way round," says Bruce. "Desso is fantastic because of the number of games we have each season - over 20 football fixtures and around 16 rugby fixtures between mid September and May."

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“If you have a good pitch to start with and good maintenance programmes, you can keep on top of problems”

At the training ground in Finchampstead Jem Fox is head of the team of five and

has been joined by Craig Martin (18), son of Billy Martin of Kestrel Contractors



Fusarium has been a problem this year, but is now under control, as pointed out by Bruce Elliot to deputy Greg Bolton

who impressed them while Kestrel were working on the ground.

“I pop over to see them quite a bit,” says Bruce, “but we operate independently and they have their own working regimes and machinery.”

Reading FC is keen on bringing young groundsmen through the ranks. Bruce’s deputy Greg Bolton (21) joined the staff five years ago from school and has a level two NVQ in sportsturf management. He is now working on level three.

“We have a great team here,” says Bruce. “Everyone is proud to be associated with the club and is working to keep Reading in the Premiership.”

“It will be a hard season for the team - they finished eighth last time round.”

Manager Steve Coppell says the Reading pitch is one of the best in the country and puts it down to the hard work and experience of Bruce and his team.

Bruce has never looked back from the days when he decided to quit office work in his mid-20s and join Crawley Council’s greenkeeping team at Tilgate Golf Club.

“A lot of people would look at the challenges of having rugby and football on the same pitch and say it was a tough job, but if you have a good pitch to start with and

Bruce Elliot FactFile

- Age 42
- Worked in office administration till he was 25.
- Sought job outdoors and joined Tilgate Golf Club, owned by Crawley Borough Council, as greenkeeper for five years.
- Got City and Guilds phase two in sports turf management and then NVQ level three in sports turf management.
- Joined Crawley Town FC to look after new ground.
- Moved to Fulham for one season.
- Then to Tottenham for one season.
- Then to Millwall for three seasons as head groundsman.
- Joined Madejski Stadium as head groundsman three years ago.
- Believes that all groundsmen at all levels should be judged on the results they achieve with what they have.
- Has been a judge in the FA Grass Roots Football Groundsmen Awards.

continues over



The giant wind turbine to the south of the stadium is nothing to do with the club, but is a landmark from the M4

good maintenance programmes then you can keep on top of problems.”

Apart from the heavy watering before football and the reduction of water before rugby, Bruce says the maintenance regimes are the same.

His equipment at the Madejski includes two Dennis G760 pedestrian mowers with eight-blade cylinders and brush and verticut cassette units, two Honda rotaries, one Toro 640 Pro-core aerator, one Techneat sprayer, a John Deere 4100 tractor, a Hayter mower for landscapers and a Hayter Condor bankcutter.

The Hunter irrigation system has 14 pop-ups on the outside of the pitch and six in the turf.

In a week leading up to a rugby game on a Sunday the pitch is cut with the Honda rotaries on the Monday, rolled on Tuesday and Thursday and on Friday cut again with the rotaries (lengthways at 30mm) before being marked out on the Friday.

Watering is kept to a minimum.

To keep pitch damage to a minimum, visiting rugby teams are told to avoid line-outs and scrums during practice sessions.

Reading has had eight seasons of rugby as home to London Irish.

The toughest period is between December and January, says Bruce. “We have three double headers in December with five rugby and five football fixtures during six weeks. It’s always best if we have a week to recover.

“We’ve had some fusarium outbreaks this year, which is not surprising considering the warm wet conditions.”

At least Bruce does not have to contend with concerts in the near future. The board decided to give them a miss because of the work involved. But previous concerts, by the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Elton John, were sell-outs.

Bruce and his team still have their work cut out to meet fixture schedules.


“We work long days when there is a match on and if that is an evening game followed

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by a change of the pitch for the next day, then I stay over," says Bruce.

THE pitch is one that any Premiership head groundsman would be proud of, doubly so given the test of heavy football and rugby use.

"We don't expect fame and fortune in this business," says Bruce, "but we do get immense satisfaction from producing superb playing surfaces under pressure."



Madejski Stadium FactFile



- The stadium, seating 22,500, was opened on the site of a former household waste dump in August 1998 at a total cost of more than £50million.
- It includes the Royal Berkshire Conference Centre and the Millennium Madejski Hotel, as well as the £1million indoor training centre.
- Multi-millionaire Reading FC chairman John Madejski earned his fortune by founding Auto Trader Magazine and was awarded the MBE in 2000.
- In the early days of the stadium, Reading were in Division Two, but since 1999 the Royals gained promotion to Division One in 2002 and reached the Premiership last year.
- The stadium has been home to the London Irish Rugby Union side for eight seasons.
- It has played host to more than 21 international sporting events and in February local boy Nathan Tyson capped a memorable debut in an under-20 fixture against Germany with two stunning goals to clinch victory.
- The Madejski Stadium has been named Europe's best mid-sized arena by American sports channel ESPN.



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