



QUICK TURN-AROUND – GREAT RESULTS!

Due to Covid-19 sports calendar upheavals, the window to renovate has been incredibly tight for EFL Championship League football clubs this year, but great teamwork and bespoke maintenance programmes by Nottingham Forest FC's grounds team keep the playing surfaces in top-notch condition

Unlike other clubs in the Championship, the playing surfaces at Nottingham Forest's City Ground and the training ground are not identical, so stadium Head Groundsman Ewan Hunter works closely with training ground Head Groundsman Matt Tietjen to ensure

youth academy up to first- team players experience the best playing surfaces possible.

According to Ewan, the fibre-sand surfaces at both sites are in great condition, and that's due to Rigby Taylor products.

"The players like the pitches at both venues as they give a slick playing surface," he says. "At the City Ground the surface doesn't bobble and the ball moves around well. My deputy, Jack Farmer, and I take a meter reading with a Clegg hammer if areas of the pitch are harder than others and occasionally struggle

with water in the winter months. However, when the weather is on our side, we produce one of the best surfaces in the Championship." And a sizable collection of pitch, grounds team and groundsman of the year awards from the Grounds Management Association and the STRI is testament to the team's high standards.

Ewan says he's proud that the club's team of four full-time and two apprentice grounds personnel do such a good job with what they currently have to work with. The equipment at the stadium includes G860 Dennis cylinder mowers, a

Toro Procore, a vertidrain and sprayers. At the training ground, Matt uses ride on and tractor-mounted equipment to cover the five and a half pitches - including sprayers, Toro Reelmaster 3100 mowers, a Toro Procore and a Rigby Taylor iGO line marker - marking pitches with the dilutable line marking paint, Dazzle.

Regarding pitch materials, Ewan says that Rigby Taylor's Technical Sales Representative Mike Brear is an invaluable addition to the grounds team. "Matt and I speak to Mike quite a bit, he's always at the end of the phone when we need him. His product and industry knowledge is exceptional and we trust him 100%."

The club uses Rigby Taylor products that include the seed and its establishment, disease prevention, nutritional supplements and, according to Mike, his regular conversations with Ewan and Matt cover a proactive programme of treatment.

"We discuss what we're looking to supplement - the leaf, the roots or match recovery," Mike says. "We keep an eye of the fixture list, the time of year and look at what the plant needs, not just now but in a few weeks' time."

The annual nutrient and disease prevention programme at the City Ground includes Rigby Taylor's Microlite premium range of NPK-balanced fertilisers, which is complemented by the Nutri-Link range of bio-stimulant liquid sprays. In addition, Ewan uses the Autumn Green Bio fertiliser in autumn and winter and applies fungicides with fertiliser application throughout the year to keep diseases at bay.



Matt follows a similar programme to ensure playing surface consistency at both venues. "The training pitches get plenty of use from the academy under nine's up to the first team players - 600-700 hours on the three academy pitches and about 350 hours on the first team pitches - so we need to keep up standards. We rely on Rigby Taylor's Fine Turf Bio and Premier HG or PolyPro range of fertilisers, as well as Nutri-Link Revive and Nutri-Link Base liquid sprays, plus the Autumn Green Bio and fungicides," Matt says.

Ewan purchases products for both venues, in close consultation with Matt, and says that since joining the club in 2005, he tried a lot of grass seed brands before Rigby Taylor's R14 100% Perennial Ryegrass blend and continued with this for five years before upgrading to the R140 Tetraploid and Diploid Perennial Ryegrass blend because of its robust, hard-wearing benefits.

According to Mike, doubling the number of chromosomes has given R140 tetraploid perennial ryegrasses cell-wall 'double glazing'. "The increase in cellular chloroplast boosts chlorophyll production and aids energy absorption. It works well in colder temperatures, has enhanced disease tolerance and creates a deeper, denser root mass," he says.

Faster establishment in a shorter renovation window was a key issue for the club this season, due to Covid-19 effects on the sporting calendar. Ewan says he was literally waiting for the last kick of last season's home game so he could start work within a short six-week renovation window before the 2020/21 season kicked off.

Matt too had the same time constraints when renovating his three academy pitches in time for pre-season training.

"One of the major benefits we've both found when using R140 is that it helps to establish germination quickly and offers early protection against fungi," Ewan says. "In the early days, when the seed bed is very young, we don't want to be going on there with a tractor or a sprayer so it gives us that extra couple of weeks' protection before we apply a fungicide."

Matt was also impressed by the fact that the seed can withstand low temperatures and its tolerance to drought.

With such a short window, Ewan, Matt and the club's renovation contractor, Premier Pitches, decided to go a lot lighter with the Koro, before seeding the City Ground and academy pitches - leaving them green, instead of taking them back to sand, which allowed a percentage of poa to remain in the ground; This was controlled by brushing and verticutting after a game and boxing off the clippings to prevent them from spreading.

Ewan continues: "R140 has already worked really well for us during renovation this year. Although we normally leave an eight- to nine-week window to create a quality playing surface, the grass has established well in just six to seven weeks, and we're confident that our on-going maintenance programme will support its durability so we can continue to meet the players' expectations throughout the season."