

PITCHCARE

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ROY - OF THE CITY!

In the latest of our 'Key Note' interviews looking at individuals who have helped shape and move the turfcare industry forward, Lee Williams meets **Roy Rigby**, Grounds Manager Global for Manchester City Football Club, at their City Football Academy training base which is situated next to the Etihad Stadium

Howzat for a job title?

To provide sporting excellence over a number of years takes certain skills and qualities. Often these qualities need to be present not only in the athletes but the coaches and everyone who contributes to the nurturing of them. At Felsted School, Essex, teamwork has become a tradition and it is at its most prevalent in the Grounds Department

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Felsted School

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When you drive through the small village of Felsted towards the vast school campus, the visible part is the sports fields. On this rare cold January morning, the frost had almost finished lifting and the perfect green surface led the eye to the stunning Manor House at the front of the school.

Ready and waiting to give a tour of the 90-acre site was Cricket Professional and Head of Grounds and Gardens, Nick Lockhart. With pleasantries exchanged, a quick first question was needed, an explanation for a slightly unusual job title.

“The combined role has always been part of my job,” Nick explained. “I coach boys and girls during the academic year ages 13-18 and run a team as well. I’m not completely sure how the combined job role came about. I have managed to acquire various coaching certificates in cricket, hockey and rugby and graduated a two year course in Sportsturf Management so, for me, the two jobs went hand in hand. There was a job offer at King’s Bruton which I took, and I was there for eight years before coming here to work with Jason Gallian, who is Felsted’s Director of Cricket.”

Nick is now into his twenty-third year at the school, but he has some competition when it comes to time in service to Felsted. Head Gardener, Nick Day, has been a part of the set-up for forty-three years and Deputy Head, Kevin Cresswell, for forty years.

Clearly, this is a place that attracts and keeps staff for a long time. After a brief chat to Nick and meeting his grounds team, Kevin, Simon Little, Brian Turner and Michael

Morreale and gardens team Nick, Steve McCarthy, Harry Prior and Jamie Robinson, it becomes clear why.

They are a group who take great pride in their work and, as a result, regularly produce something for them all to be proud of. From the outside, there appears to be a dynamic of respect and trust in place that encourages staff to improve through training and education, whilst those with decades of experience, like Head Gardener Nick Day, are allowed to carry out their own vision.

“Nick and I work closely together, but he runs the gardens department on a day to day basis,” Nick explained. “We have regular meetings about what’s needed and what’s coming up, like an open day for instance, but he and his team do a very good job and take great pride in their work and are a good team.”

“Developing the staff is something that we consider annually. We get magazines like Pitchcare and The Groundsman. We visit Saltex, and there are also training days we can attend which are normally informative and thought-provoking which all helps.”

“We have Harry, who is our gardens apprentice, and Michael, who are both doing their Level 3 in Sports Turf Management at college, and they are trying to improve their understanding of their respective roles.”

“Getting young people into the industry is an interesting one because it depends on what your priorities are. If you want to earn lots of money, then you don’t go into groundsmanship and probably don’t go into education. If you’re looking for job satisfaction and reward, then this takes





Nick Lockhart, Cricket Professional and Head of Grounds and Gardens



The Felsted School team l-r: Brian Turner, Kevin Cresswell, Michael Morreale, Nick Lockhart, Simon Little, Steve McCarthy, Harry Prior, Nick Day and Jamie Robinson



You see an area that looks shabby and you spend time and money on it and, in the end, it looks pristine and you can look at it knowing you've had something to do with it - that's the job satisfaction

some beating, because you can see the end product."

"You see an area that looks shabby and you spend time, energy and money on it and, in the end, it looks pristine and you can look at it knowing you've had something to do with it - that's the job satisfaction."

"I'd say trying to get as many places as possible looking as good as possible for as long as possible is the satisfaction for me. Taking that home with you and thinking my staff and I have had something to do with that end product is a good feeling. Hopefully, people who come to Felsted, be it a prospective parent, an old pupil or an opposing sports team, will look at it and think it's been well looked after by a team of groundsmen and gardeners who take great care and pride in their work."

A lot of the pride Nick and his team have derives from the importance of the first impression. It isn't just the job of the Grounds Team to give Felsted's young sportsmen and women the surfaces to achieve sporting excellence, but to be a selling point for the school at all times.

As we began our tour around the back of The Front cricket square towards the school chapel, small signs of attention to detail were everywhere and Nick is clearly aware the impact his team has on the impression the school gives to visitors.

"I'm a great believer in how important that first impression can be. Before a prospective parent or visitor speaks to anyone, they drive through the Stephenson Gates and that may well be the first opportunity they have of seeing Felsted in the flesh."



The Front cricket square



Grass tennis courts beside the chapel

“That impression has to be a good one because if they look and see the grass, gardens, drainpipes, doors and windows are all in good condition, then hopefully they get the impression that everything else is done properly here too.”

“As a team, we have tried to impress the importance of presentation. Whether you’re in catering, domestic services, works or teaching, we’re all marketing the school in

one shape or form.”

Whilst marketing isn’t officially in Nick’s already full job description, his team do a fine job of fulfilling it. A major selling point for Felsted is their sports teams. They have produced a number of internationals over the years, including England Test cricketers Nick Knight, Derek Pringle and John Stephenson.

Rugby, netball, hockey and tennis are also

catered for on three grass, eleven hard and fourteen artificial tennis courts, nine netball courts, fifteen rugby pitches, nine cricket squares, three artificial wickets, ten outdoor cricket nets, two astro hockey pitches and three football pitches.

During Nick’s twenty-three years at the school, the number of pitches has grown, along with increased pupil numbers and the demand for different sports. Like most

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We've had some very good sportsmen and women through the school in the last fifty-odd years and we've produced international cricketers and hockey players, and rugby players who have had good careers in the game



One of the grass hockey pitches



The school chapel

successful institutions, the school is very aware of the world around them and adjust what they offer accordingly.

"There's been gradual change since I arrived at the school. We've expanded the number of tennis courts, artificial hockey pitches, cricket squares, football pitches, and the number of rugby pitches has grown from eight to fifteen, which reflects the growth of the school."

"I think the number of students and needs of the school have been the main motivation behind the expansion. For instance, boys and girls both play cricket now, which means we needed more facilities."

"There's more demand for tennis, so we added more courts, and the Prep school has expanded along with the senior school, so there are more hockey players which led to the second artificial pitch."

"Sport is very important to Felsted and, over the years, a number of people have helped build the reputation of the school resulting in the overall level of sport being very good, and the school has recently been

nominated for TES Sports School of the Year."

It isn't only the sports side of the grounds that have developed with time, but the gardens as well. On the tour route, we walked behind the chapel to the Bury Garden where Nick Day grows a vast majority of the school's plants from seed inside two greenhouses.

When he first joined the school in 1975, there were only vegetable plots, but a desire to improve the aesthetics and a promotion to Head Gardener in 2001 gave him the opportunity to apply his vision.

"We've really developed the gardens because it all used to be grass and vegetable gardens when I first joined. Now they are a feature of the school."

"When I first joined, there were no hanging baskets, but we slowly introduced them and, as one department saw them, the demand increased and now they are all over the site; we've got fifty hanging baskets and forty flower tubs around the school."

Growth in pupil numbers has meant a



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Bury Garden - a lot of the school's plants are nurtured here



Cricket nets area



When I first joined, there were no hanging baskets, but we slowly introduced them and, as one department saw them, the demand increased and now they are all over the site

surge in sports activity and the use and rotation of pitches has to be carefully managed to ensure quality. 551 senior pupils and 509 prep pupils use the pitches and courts on a regular basis, as well as lettings in half-terms and over the summer. Such a full schedule dictates that a plan is in place to keep matches on where possible and have all areas in peak condition for as long as possible.

"September is a very busy month for us as we look to maintain fifteen rugby pitches, three football pitches and two artificial

hockey pitches. We also have some fine turf areas such as cricket squares and tennis courts to topdress."

"The rugby pitches get used at least three to four times a week from September to December, apart from half-term, so we have to try and plan ahead. We have an open day in early October as well, which is very important for the school, and there is a programme involved for that, but the pitches have to be up and running during the summer period to give us the best chance."

"Rounders is now gone, and cricket has

become the major summer sport for boys and girls in both the senior and prep school, with some also playing tennis. In an average summer term, we'd look to host over 160 games of cricket in a ten-week period!"

"Brian Turner spends virtually all of his time during that period in his cab on a John Deere cylinder mower and he will be gang mowing every day for ten weeks around the campus. It would take three to four days to cut the entire site, so we try and cut inside the boundaries on a Friday for matches on a Saturday and Sunday. If things go really



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This year, we've been appointed to host the prestigious Bunbury Festival. There are various plans in the pipeline for that and, nearer the time, we'll have a better idea of what we need to do



The Prep School



Phillips Pitch - the new artificial hockey pitch

well, it could take three days and then Thursday and Friday he focuses on just cricket."

"Once the summer term finishes, we have an annual International Cricket Festival which is played over the course of three days with three touring teams. Our former pupils come back in the second week of July for a week and then we have various lettings on the main cricket field known as "The Front"."

"This year, we've been appointed to host the prestigious Bunbury Festival - which is the top sixty U15 cricket players in the country - for a week in August. There are various plans in the pipeline for that and, nearer the time, we'll have a better idea of what we need to do depending on the weather."

Like most independent schools, lettings has become an important area of income for Felsted, but it has reduced the time for renovations and other more invasive maintenance. Some of the smaller cricket squares on site will get renovated in July

and August, with other areas getting attention when time and scheduling allows at other times of the year, such as early autumn.

Half-terms are generally used to feed the pitches and mild weather throughout January 2019 meant a more extensive aeration operation took place on the cricket squares, outfield, rugby pitches and tennis courts with a Wiedenmann Terra Spike.

Nick regards the Wiedenmann as one of the most important machines he has because it opens the ground up and gets air into the root system, reducing compaction and improving drainage at the same time. His next most important machine is the Sisis drag brush which he uses to keep the leaf dry to reduce the risk of disease.

Away from machinery, an irrigation system for the rugby pitches and cricket squares is the next step for improvement. Like most turfcare professionals in summer 2018, Nick was faced with the stifling heat and the challenges it brought. A lack of irrigation is becoming a growing issue, but the school



Prep School cricket



The grounds are used for football, rugby and cricket at various times



At the moment, the plan for irrigation is ongoing. We have a meeting coming up which will hopefully mean we can take it a stage further and I very much hope that, in the next year or two, the irrigation will be improved

has recognised it needs to be addressed.

“At the moment, the plan for irrigation is ongoing. We very much hope that, in the next year or two, the irrigation will be improved because, with climate change, it will be of paramount importance to Felsted as we are in one of the driest parts of the country.”

“Last summer, we had a period where we didn’t have any rain for eight or nine weeks and that had an impact on our grass tennis courts, cricket wickets and cricket outfield.”

“Once the impact of irrigation is seen in one area, we hope there will be a desire to have it across all of the pitches.”

“In terms of development, we had the sand filled artificial hockey pitch rejuvenated last summer and all of our cricket squares were upgraded a few years ago.”

“I think you’re always trying to improve things if you can but, at the end of the day, a lot comes down to what your budget is and what you can allocate to that.”

Seeing the grounds of Felsted and hearing Nick talk passionately about his work goes a long way to explaining the high standards in place and the progress that has been made in his time there.

It is an educational establishment that excels in every area it has ventured into, be it academic, student welfare or sport. For a number of years, Felsted has been run the correct way by the right people and, with Nick and his eight staff working on the grounds and gardens, progress and excellence will continue.



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Hockey pitches



Felsted celebrated its 450th anniversary in 2014, one of only a handful of schools in the country who can claim this historic milestone.

A wide variety of celebratory events were held to mark the wonderful occasion. The celebrations got off to a majestic start in March 2014, as the entire school community (Prep & Senior) descended upon St Paul's Cathedral in London. The service also saw a number of VIPs in attendance, such as the High Sheriff of Essex, Julia Able-Smith, and Robert Finch,

former Lord Mayor of London and former Felstedian.

Other events throughout the year included an OF Anniversary Dinner at Middle Temple Hall, a CCF & Corps of Drums Reunion Dinner and a Family Day - which saw the whole school and local village community come together to celebrate the 450 year legacy - an anniversary cricket match, and a celebratory 450th Winter Ball.

Felsted enjoyed its crowning moment of the celebratory year when Her Majesty The Queen and HRH The Duke of Edinburgh visited the school in the May of that year. Following in the footsteps of Her Majesty The Queen Mother, who visited for the 400th anniversary, it was an extremely special occasion.

During an extraordinary day, Her Majesty unveiled two plaques commemorating the 450th anniversary and also the rebuilding of Follyfield House. The plaque unveiling was followed by the presentation of a number of gifts, including a boot scraper made by Felsted pupils and staff.

