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Magazine - Hong Kong Groundsmanship

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By [Ricky Aitken](#) in [Editorial](#) on [14th Feb 2011 6:00](#)

The challenge of applying the trade of turf management in another country is challenging but at the same time is rewarding and provides one with fantastic experiences. The unique environment in Hong Kong is very different from the conditions experienced in normal cricket countries.

The cricketing community in Hong Kong is made of predominantly expatriates from both Australia & England and many sub continental countries – the local Hong Kong Chinese have little interest in learning the game of cricket.

The cricket season runs in line with the Australian season, stretching from September through to April, typical in Asia, the cricket season is held over the winter months due to the monsoon weather conditions experienced throughout the summer months. The fixtures in Hong Kong are made of two major competitions – a short 35 over a side competition held on a Saturday afternoon, and a more serious 50 over a side competition held on Sundays – the matches are rotated over a mere 6 grounds requiring some creative fixturing ensuring all teams play at regular intervals.



The grounds used in Hong Kong for cricket are very much multi-purpose facilities and are barely get over a hectare in size. On any given week they can hold school sports days, private corporate events, along with a range of other sporting events and of course cricket.

The biggest challenge by far is dealing with the climatic conditions which are extremely variable – Hong Kong has an annual rainfall of around two and a half meters mostly falling in the summer months (May – August) The low light intensity that sometimes accompanies the high rainfall also provides many challenges, it is not unusual to go through periods of 3-4 weeks and not see any sunlight with any notable intensity, the large temperature & humidity range also provides difficulties at the height of the summer months. Temperatures can be as high as 36 degrees Celsius incorporated with 100% relative humidity, and at the lower end of the scale air temperatures can be as low as 6 degrees Celsius during the middle of winter, the cricket season.



The challenges mentioned above require some careful consideration in relation to how outfielders and wickets are prepared. Given the large range of weather conditions experienced in Hong Kong it is commonly referred to as a transitional zone, basically meaning we are unable to survive one grass species adequately year around. Based on this, generally speaking warm season grasses are used as a base grass, over sown with perennial rye grass during the cooler, busier months. All types of warm season grasses are used in Hong Kong ranging from couch grass, Seashore Paspalum, to Zoysia grass, with all common rye grasses used for oversowing.

Pest and diseases also provides plenty of difficulties within the Hong Kong environment. There are many common pests seen in Hong Kong such as Bill Bugs, Army Worm, Sod web worm, Cut worm, African black beetle just to name a few, in relation to diseases, again all the common diseases are required to be dealt with on an ongoing basis.

The management of staff and the communication barrier can also be a challenge in Hong Kong – Cantonese is the local lingo and is generally not an easy language to learn. Any small task at ground level requires it to be translated to the ground staff before the task can be carried out



This poses the obvious question; how these problems are dealt with, and what maintenance programs are in place to ensure turf can maintained at an acceptable level on an ongoing basis. In Hong Kong it is felt that the balancing of soils is extremely important to ensure that the turf has a well balanced growing medium to grow healthily particularly during times of stress where

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climatic conditions are less than favorable. To aid us with the management of the outfield soils tests are conducted on a regular basis that allows us to monitor the ever changing soil and helps us in making decisions in what needs to be applied and largely takes the guess work out of fertilizer applications. Due to the high amount of rainfall some form of nutrition is applied to the turf on a weekly basis – in very small amounts, in other words, the theory of “little and often” applies. The nutrients potassium and calcium are considered particularly important due to the high rainfall. A combination of both foliar and granular fertilizer types are applied with the aim of both spoon feeding the plant through the leaf, and granular applications are applied direct to the turf and watered into the soil solution for plant uptake through the root system, it is felt that to maintain quality turf both forms of application is equally important.

Leading into times of stress and anticipated periods of low light intensity, programming applications of both Primo maxx and potassium silica are considered an important part of the maintenance program. Primo helps the plant to maintain density & resistant wear during these times, allowing the plant to be more efficient in the uptake of water and nutrients, but more importantly the extra density that the plant is able to build up through primo applications allows the plant to take in more natural light through photosynthesis. This is particularly important as these are still the busy times of the year meaning that the outfields are under high usage. The application of Pottasium silica incorporated with the application of Primo has been found to increase the wear resistance of the turf greatly.

The regular inclusion of an aeration program is also an important part of the ongoing maintenance program and ensuring the outfields can withstand the harsh Hong Kong growing environment. The main form of aeration used is vertidrain. During the summer months, where soil temperatures are high the weather in conducive for root development the outfields are vertidraind twice per month using varying tine depths, different tine types (both solid & hollow) and various spacing – variation is found to be the key with aeration in ensuring maximum benefits can be achieved out of the ongoing aeration program. The cooler months of the year are also included in the aeration program but to a lesser extent – the root system does not develop during the cooler months, however, aeration is used as a tool to keep the profile open, ensuring the plant is getting additional oxygen to keep it functioning through difficult growing conditions.

Surface maintenance through sand topdressing and thatch control is something that is done on an “as required basis” The development of thatch is very much a staggered issue that is dealt with sparingly – many months a year in Hong Kong it is a challenge in getting the outfields to grow and develop due to a combination of poor growing conditions coupled up with high wear resulting in little thatch accumulation. However, during other times of year the thatch can accumulate at quite a rapid pace during the good growing periods, during these times thatch is maintained with regular verticutting, scarifying, and the addition of frequent sand topdressing to not only help ‘dilute’ the thatch but to maintain a smooth playing surface.



The irrigation program is also an essential part of not only managing thatch accumulation but also an integral part of maintaining and developing and a deep and vigorous root system. The maintenance crews in Hong Kong give special attention to soil moisture levels by way of probing them with moisture sensors on a daily basis with the aim of using the data collected to help develop and shape the irrigation program – this allows us to take the guess work out of the irrigation requirements and helps us to use the irrigation scheduling as a tool to help us develop the root system and forcing the roots to grow deep and “chase water” and at the same time not to over water the turf creating excessive thatch. This is particularly important given that the evaporation rates vary greatly through the year.

The preparation of cricket wickets in the Hong Kong environment also provides plenty of challenges on an ongoing basis. Like many Asian countries, the cricket season is played over the winter months where no rain can be expected, but extended periods of dry, cooler weather, this is quite testing given that the use of warm season grasses over the winter period provides slow recover. As the majority of the rainfall falls during the summer, when the season is in recess, ongoing maintenance of the cricket square can provide difficulties in that access to maintaining the cricket squares can be limited due to the extended periods of rain – it is not unusual to see up to three weeks of extended rain during these periods, meaning that the cricket squares can't be covered, and turf density is lost dramatically during these times through poor light intensity or disease infestation. The application of growth regulators and fungicides during these periods is an important part of the maintenance program in ensuring that turf quality can be maintained to a reasonable level.

When the cricket season opens in September, temperatures can be expected to up in the high 20's with a high level of humidity to go with it - usually around 90% relative humidity amounting to relative slow drying conditions. As the season progresses towards Christmas the temperatures and humidity comes down to a comfortable level for player and Ground Staff and more suitable conditions are present for good wicket preparation. From Christmas to the end of the season (around the end of April) cold temperatures are expected to be accompanied with low light intensity again leading to poor drying conditions.



The most significant part of preparing wickets in Hong Kong is the management of moisture within the wickets, this coupled up with the actual drying process of the wicket profile is vital in producing quality wickets. Like most environments, this is a moving target as the season progresses and the climatic conditions change. Pre- preparation watering is considered important as it's key to ensure soil moisture levels are consistent, but at the same time not excessive – excessive moisture within the wicket profile prior to preparation only leads to low, slow wicket conditions once the wicket is in play. The drying process of each wicket can take anything up to 12 days within the Hong Kong Climate, again anything less can only lead to the wickets playing low and slow.



The challenge of providing quality cricket facilities in a foreign country is rewarding in many different ways. Dealing with such a difficult climate requires one's skills to be well tuned and current. Working in a Hong Kong has been living proof that good turf management practices are still the basis for producing good results, but at the same time not all methods work everywhere. Working in Hong Kong has taught one that we need to be flexible in our approach, the more flexible we are, the more equip we are to deal with difficult situations

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