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Groundsmen are in uncharted territory after Covid-19 forced the suspension of all sports this spring, after a challenging winter. **Jane Carley** looks at how racecourses are coping and at the task facing one of the country's 'most flooded' cricket grounds

Testing times

Floods and lockdown!

Worcester Racecourse also suffered severe flooding - a late start to the summer jumping season may allow time for more intensive renovations than usual



Charlie Moore, Regional Clerk of the Course at Arena Racing Company (ARC)

Having battled the wettest winter on record, by mid-March racecourse grounds teams could finally look forward to a dry spell when they could catch up with renovations or prepare for the new Flat season or summer jumping.

Then the Covid-19 pandemic hit and, whilst a controversial Cheltenham Festival was held as cases of the virus rose, racing in the UK was brought to a halt on 17th March after being run behind closed doors for 24 hours. Ireland followed suit on 24th March.

With no plans to start again before 30th April at the earliest, estate managers and clerks of the course are faced with the challenge of maintaining their tracks under government conditions imposed to fight the spread of the virus, against a background of depleted revenues and possible staff absence for self-isolation or sickness.

"Racing's management is working out the best way forward to support staff and look after racecourses," explains Charlie Moore, who heads up Clerks of the Course for ARC's sixteen racecourses in the UK.

"We have to be able to present the tracks in pristine condition for the restart when it happens. There are also health and safety issues requiring us to look after the turf as growth, pests and diseases can lead to the surface being unsafe to race on, and the problems are often unknown until the track is actually used."

Charlie explains that the Racecourse Association (RCA) has established that key staff can travel as their role is considered essential work. "At the same time, we have to remain aware of the rules on social distancing to protect groundsmen and their families and develop ways of working that take this into account."

He adds that racecourses have a 'huge responsibility' to owners and trainers to make the racing surface as good if not better than it was before when racing resumes.

"There may even be opportunities to carry out deep renovations that the busy racing programme doesn't usually accommodate, if budgets allow and we have enough staff."

While not requiring the level of upkeep of turf surfaces, all weather tracks also need to be kept in shape.



Groundstaff have faced the most challenging of winters - this photo, taken by Clerk of the Course Eloise Quayle on 21st December, showed that groundstaff at Uttoxeter had a tight window to repair damage for the New Year's Eve meeting



Groundstaff will need to continue the upkeep of racecourses ahead of the resumption of racing and as such are considered key workers

Two of ARC's all-weather tracks, Wolverhampton and Southwell, have trainers as their tenants, and they have continued to use the racing surface to exercise horses to ensure their welfare during the lockdown.

Charlie admits that it is hard to know how groundstaff teams will be impacted as the crisis reaches its zenith, but points out: "We have the advantage of being a large company with a big human resources team and management who can plan for such challenges."

Economics is another point to consider without the income from racing and other events which use the racecourse facilities, although ARC was able to rely on revenues from greyhound racing for a few more days before that too, was curtailed.

Although ARC courses didn't run behind closed doors, Charlie comments that it seemed to work for Wetherby and Taunton before the shutdown and, if the sport were to recommence under those restrictions, at least it would mean that horses were able to run and the industry re-start.

"It's a difficult time for trainers too, with some choosing to take horses out of training or focus on young horses being prepared for racing. We're hopeful that the industry won't suffer long-term harm in the way that point-to-point racing did after foot-and-mouth."

Arising from the flood

Being flooded is nothing new for Worcestershire County Cricket Club, and its scenic location next to the River Severn is the reason that home fixtures at New Road don't start in a 'normal' year until the last week of April.

However, this winter has been nothing like normal for head groundsman Tim Packwood.

"Our first flood was on 26th October, just three weeks after we'd finished post-season renovations," he explains. "We were under water for twelve days, and its earliness was a major issue. If we flood in November, the new grass has come through and can withstand it, but twenty-three days after seeding the square, and nineteen days for the outfield, there was no chance. It all needs overseeding again."

The club has already invested significantly to protect itself against the impact of flooding - all new buildings are above the 100 or 50 year flood level so that it can operate as a 365 day business for events and conferences; only the closure of a local road meant that the club was not operational for one day over the winter.

However, the ground spent seventy-three days in total underwater and, by the end of March, Tim had only just been able to get on to assess the damage.

At the same time ECB announced that it had suspended professional cricket until 28th May

"What happens next depends on when cricket restarts," he comments. "If we are aiming to play in May, we'll just overseed to get the grass back, but if there is further delay we might have a chance to scarify or topdress."

However, budget constraints may prove a limiting factor.

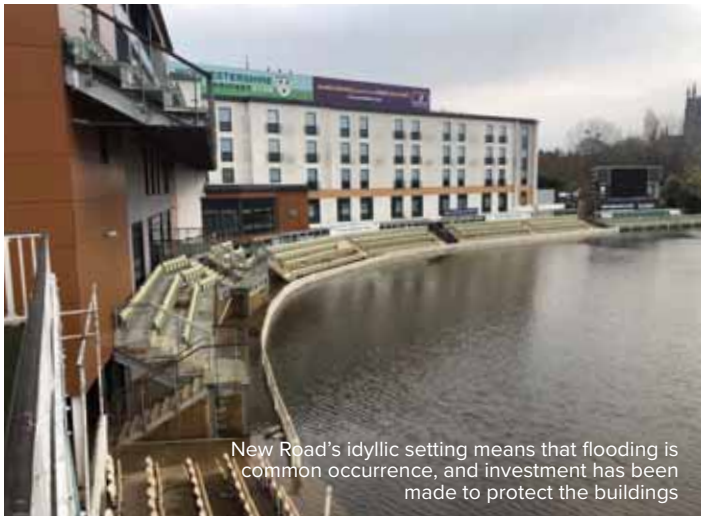
"If there's no cricket, there's no income. Currently, I have a team of three groundsmen and we have already put on hold plans to recruit a fourth."

Biosecurity measures are another consideration, with fingerprint entry swapped for a swipe card.

"We've certainly got plenty to keep us busy, but it's difficult to plan until we know what's ahead."



Tim Packwood, Head Groundsman



New Road's idyllic setting means that flooding is common occurrence, and investment has been made to protect the buildings



New Road had only just emerged from the floodwater by mid-March