

CACG Report for CCL 2024 AGM

Life became ever more challenging for Cornwall's groundskeepers in 2023, as they grappled with extreme weather conditions, rising costs and a requirement to make their boundaries as safe as possible without making already small grounds even smaller.

In the wake of a much-needed wet winter, one of the warmest and driest Februarys on record proved a false dawn: time-honoured plans to undertake the traditional pre-season rolling of squares in March were scuppered by prolonged downpours into April.

While some groundskeepers in coastal locations were fortunate to have fast-drying pitches and outfielders, enabling them to get their opening games on for mid-April, most alas were not and had to stay patient until the end of the month.

No sooner had conditions firmed up in the middle, as the sun blazed throughout May and June than many found themselves facing a safety dilemma after two players sustained hand and leg injuries while fielding on the boundaries at Holsworthy and Lanhydrock.

In previous seasons the ECB had advised groundskeepers to leave a 1 metre gap between their boundary rope/line and any hard surface or object (such as metal, stone, concrete or tarmac) to avert possible injury and litigation.

In 2023 however, the Cornwall Association of Cricket Groundskeepers was informed by the ECB that this recommended safety gap had been almost trebled to 2.74 metres - to the alarm of those entrusted with looking after Cornwall's tiniest grounds.

The alarm gave way to confusion when the ECB went on to inform the CACG that this was safety guidance only, not a mandatory regulation. It required clubs to carry out risk assessments, mitigate perceived risks, communicate with players and do what they felt was necessary.

Most clubs in Cornwall appeared to heed these words and made adjustments where feasible to their boundaries. A few alas did not - and proceeded to throw toys out of prams, oblivious to the risk of player injury around the perimeter of their ground and the costs if found to be liable.

By the time arguments about this boundary safety issue subsided the rain had returned with a vengeance during July and August, making it ever more difficult to prepare and protect pitches and consistently produce decent surfaces.

Low scores abounded in many places. Long journeys were made in the expectation and hope of play being possible, only for the rain to return and persist, resulting in ill-tempered outbursts against groundskeepers and abortive claims for points.

To add to this woe, along came Storm Betty on August 18/19. Roll-on, roll-off covers in exposed places proved no match for her 70 mph gusts, resulting in soaked pitches and certain high-profile players, not known for lifting a finger to assist, openly berating volunteer groundskeepers.

Special congratulations go to the curators of Penzance, Roche, Wadebridge and Lanhydrock for achieving CACO end-of-season pitch marks of more than 80% and our thanks go to every volunteer groundskeeper and their helpers across Cornwall for continuing to toil in adversity. Without them, there would have been no cricket.

Robert Jobson (Hon Sec, Cornwall Association of Cricket Groundskeepers).