

Green dreams: A severe winter has hit soccer pitches up and down the UK, but non-league Forest Green Rovers FC was not going to let the weather threaten its shot at FA Cup glory

Matt Rainey, head groundsman at Forest Green Rovers FC, is always busy during winter, but a plum FA Cup tie with Derby County at the start of the year further added to his woes. Having the first team train on the New Lawn stadium's pitch hasn't helped matters: "There's a game at least once or twice a week, which makes the upkeep of the pitch vital," says Rainey. "The team normally doesn't train on the main pitch, but sometimes they have to. We have three other teams that use the pitch for matches – reserves, youth and ladies," he continues, "so there's always work to do."

The week *Stadia* spoke to Rainey, the team had a match Saturday afternoon and another Tuesday evening, with the temperature expected to drop well below freezing. "We'll have to cover the pitch straight after the game on Saturday with heavy frost covers. That way we should have a chance for the Tuesday evening game."

Forest Green Rovers, based in Gloucestershire, England, play at the highest level of non-league football in the Blue Square Premiership. Setanta Sports covers games live on TV, and the club is obviously



Matt Rainey prepares to cover the pitch

keen to avoid cancelled games and the resulting loss of revenue.

Rainey prepares the pitch by scalping the surface to eliminate bumps and irregularities, making the surface completely flat, as a flat surface is less susceptible to frost. The soil is not open enough to allow rainwater to permeate, so Rainey uses an aerating

machine called the 'Verti-Drain'. "It's a great tool that penetrates the surface of the pitch to allow air and water to go all the way to the roots." Any rainwater clears quickly and the result is more dense turf. It's an expensive piece of equipment, but as Rainey points out, "you need the right tools to do the job".

Cup defeat

Unfortunately, Forest Green Rovers were knocked out of the third round of the FA Cup, after an impressive display against championship outfit Derby County, in front of a home crowd of 4,836. Rovers actually took the lead in the first half and again in the second, but a late penalty eventually sealed Rovers' fate.

Regardless of the final result, Rainey is just pleased the game was able to go ahead: "Because of the weather forecast, we were worried that frost would get into the ground, so we took the precaution of covering the pitch 72 hours before the game," he says. "By the time the covers came off on the morning of the big match, the sun was out for the first time in seven days, which heated up the turf to 2°C and the referee passed the pitch fit to play. I was able just to stick a fork into the soil."

Rainey has much to be proud of – the cup tie was the only local game to go ahead on the day, while the Birmingham FC versus Wolves game was called off due to a frozen pitch, and League One Cheltenham Town FC versus Doncaster was postponed too.

Of course, the weather can't always be beaten. Over at Plymouth Argyle, groundsman Colin Wheatcroft used double pitch covers and industrial heaters just a week after the FA Cup third round in an effort to ensure the team's championship match against Crystal Palace went ahead. He was eventually beaten, though, by mid-week temperatures of -7°C. "The frost was so deep from Wednesday night that postponement was inevitable," Wheatcroft told *Stadia*. ■

GOING ORGANIC

Since July 2008, Matt Rainey, head groundskeeper at Forest Green Rovers FC, has been using a 100% organic soil conditioner from Natural Soil, which provides a balanced blend of nitrogen-fixing beneficial bacteria ('probiotic for soil'), micronutrients, vitamins, trace minerals and elements. "So far I have used four applications and the results are all positive," says Rainey. "Feed leaching has been greatly reduced. Within 72 hours of applying, the sward has increased to become tighter, healthier and denser. The roots are stronger, reducing pitch divots and correcting the poor subsoil." Certified 100% organic, the liquid concentrate can be mixed and applied with chemical fertilisers and herbicides. Further information about how the product works along with Matt Rainey's full reports can be found on www.naturalsoil.co.uk.

