



Michael Dowling grades the subgrade at the Happy Valley Croquet Club

Building a New Lawn

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Background

It all started in late June of 2021 when I saw how much crabgrass I had to dig out of my 3/4 size croquet lawn before the annual lavender day picnic. This party has been going on for at least 12 years and for me is about getting several small local croquet groups in Victoria to socialize together once a year on the farm with some Golf Croquet, while the lavender is blooming, so I especially wanted the lawn to look good for my guests.

I had spent June, July, and August for the last two years on my knees digging out crabgrass and reseeding the holes with seed and sand, and probably spending more time weeding out the crabgrass than actually playing croquet. Of course, boat owners and lawn owners likely have many things in common in that regard. Maybe horse owners too, but boats and horses don't need weeding.

The old lawn was a funky, barrel-shaped lawn, higher in the middle, which dropped from east to west, and lower on the southern and northern sides. And everyone loved it because there was a chance you could approach hoop three from the perfect angle, coming over the hill in the middle and curling

the ball down into the hoop. No one ever succeeded but it was the dream, helped by civilized doses of beer and wine.

So the day after the picnic on July 11 was D-Day. Don't ask how, but that lawn was dead within a week.

And since I had decided I wanted a new, crabgrass-free lawn, why not a flat lawn, and why not double the size? After all, I had the space, which was an old lavender field. Naturally it had to be a bentgrass lawn like all my favourite lawn bowling greens, and naturally I had to hold my hands over my ears when people talked about how much work and money it took to maintain a bentgrass lawn. We were definitely not going to seed with low brow *Poa annua* or ryegrass. Those varieties are for garden volley ball or badminton or parking for your boat and RV.

The next step was to have a budget meeting with the partner. This meeting was intense- I said "Can I do it?" Bated breath... She said, "Do it," and that was that. She said we couldn't afford it, but do it anyway, so this is perhaps not just a story about a lawn-obsessed croquet retiree, but also a story about wives and partners and love and getting to ride the big surf of a long term relationship. (More on that later)

I talked to my daughter, who is in the horticulture trade, like I am, or was (don't you love commas?), who said she knew people in the biz and advised me to get some quotes for sand before committing to anything. She also said I could borrow her tractor and planer (look up what a planer is — it basically planes the ground; check the photos, too) since she wasn't using it... don't we all have daughters with tractors to lend to the mad dad? It is a 1971 50 HP International Harvester made in



The tractor and the planer

Doncaster, England, just down the road from where I grew up. I probably stood next to the tractor factory on the A1 south as the tractor was being built, as John B and I would hitch down on a weekend to London looking and hoping for all the things a 17-yr.-old looked and hoped for in London on a weekend in the 70s. I remember draught cider, Gitanes in the ciggie machines and lots of live music at the King's Head in Angel, Islington. Tractors and lawns were far from my mind unless it involved sweet young

women. That was to come many years later with fond memories of my dad who once said: "You know your mother I and never saw any inclinations towards gardening as you were growing up".

Scunthorpe, in North Lincolnshire UK, where I grew up (Just for fun... look up "The Scunthorpe Problem" on Wikipedia), was and still is, in a smaller form, a steel town that was in our opinion the armpit of England, and we would escape from it down to the Big Smoke in three hours of hitch hiking immediately after the school closed on a Friday afternoon. And that was while the daughter's tractor was being built for export to the colonies.

Meanwhile, daughter and partner turned up a couple of weeks after delivering the tractor and she said she had news... and that she was not pregnant. (Canceling all prospective grandfatherly imaginings - what's the difference between a seagull and a new born baby? A seagull flits across the shore...)

She and her partner had bought a trucking company... and now I still lie awake at night wondering about what keeps other people awake at night, thinking maybe about how my life would perhaps be richer if I owned a trucking company with eight drivers and eighteen trucks?

So in the end, of course, I got a deal on the cost and delivery of 150 tons of sand. And, she is still naturally my favourite daughter of one. And that is all better than grandkids.

The exclusive thing about Happy Valley Croquet Club was that you could only ever join by sweat equity. It sounded something like this- "See that pile of sand, and that lawn, and that wheelbarrow? Move the sand to the lawn and rake it and level it, and that is your life membership." There were previously only four life members who bought into this Tom Sawyer story, and curiously I still had no problem getting Steffen and Kathryn to start helping with water level surveys every weekend as the project developed, and getting Jeff on the tractor at the beginning and the rake at the end. This means I have seven life members, and the rest of you will sadly have to pay for your membership. That is unless you want to take a look at that pile of sand and the wheelbarrow and the rake...



Steffen and Kathryn earn sweat equity

The Details

First, there was — kill the turf.

Then, persuade the freshly retired neighbour to lend me his new toy 12 hp. tractor and box blade to break the turf. Persuasion seems to be a personal skill. Must take notes on that.

Then scrape the turf off.

Then have the neighbour complain that I was having too much fun with his new tractor and have privileges denied. So much for my persuasion skills.

Install irrigation. (I know how to do that after years in landscaping and farming).

Build a water level. That is a 100 ft. piece of hose, some clear tubing; two cheap measuring tapes, two 2 by 4s, some pipe fittings and some zap straps. Persuade Steffen and Kathryn to turn up every weekend to do a 10ft by 10ft grid survey with the water level.

Do a rough grade with the planer on my daughter's tractor. Just like using a rake but it is behind a tractor. At this point you can do what I did when my daughter offered me the tractor — go on YouTube and check out videos on land planers which are similar to box blades.



Adding the lawn soil

Repair damage to irrigation system.

Those tractor rakes can create havoc.

Add 75 yds. premium lawn soil — which is half premium soil and half sand — and grade the subgrade (see photo on first page of article).

Add 150 yds. concrete sand, and grade the finish grade.

Find a machine operator prepared to finish grade to one inch tolerance over 150 ft. Ha ha ha! Absolutely no one I knew was interested in working with that level of tolerance.

Buy a laser level because now we mean business. They cost a lot more than water levels!

Ask Brian Wasyluk from Campbell

River to help me because he had done it himself 15 years ago.

Finally, find a mad man to do the final levelling, and rent him a skid steer for the day, and what a guy he was, and what a skid steer it was (wrong model according to the mad lawn man, a certified USGA golf course installer doing a thing on the side). This was done on my 40th wedding anniversary. Mid-September, just so you know. (I had hoped to get the lawn seeded by Sept 1st but stuff happened). Wife went off for the day by herself... with a book and a beach destination in mind, and our plans for a wedding



Adding concrete sand

anniversary dinner were abandoned. The work was done with help from Brian and Jeff and Steffen. The man polished the surface and we tidied up the edges.



The skid steer arrives

wholesale fertilizer company rep who used to install golf courses, and I also got great support and equipment loans from the local golf course.

The Cost

After adding up all the costs I came up with a final total of about \$14,000, and that was for a space of 120ft by 85ft. This is a bit close for comfort on the sides but generous on the ends to move the lawn up and down the space to reduce wear.

Then we had to spread the fertilizer, spread the seed, spread more fertilizer, roll everything and start watering eight times a day for a few minutes for two weeks.

Now that everything was in the ground it was down to the watering, and I became aware of a skill I don't possess — patience. Several times every day I would stare at the ground and imagine seeing the seed germinating, which finally took about 10 days.

During all the time of the project we were experiencing the worst heatwave ever in BC, so I spent every day during grading trying to water down the soil and sand so it didn't get blown away.

I got the best help from the local



Polishing



Steffen rakes in seed and fertilizer

calculations as it is also 20% for sand.

When I asked the same sales person what was the difference between a ton of sand and a yard of sand she said it was the same. It is not. That would cost me too. It turns out that 1.2 tons of sand equals 1 yard.

What this meant was that on the last day with the man, I was looking for a missing 2 inches of fill to make the final grade I had imagined, which meant I did not have enough sand to cover some of the rough sub grade of original soil and imported lawn soil. We managed to get a final grade of plus or minus one inch, so even though I was unhappy on the day that is not too bad. After all there are many photos on line of flooded croquet lawns that clearly show how level they are.

Lessons learned - do the research and get more opinions. And Duck Duck Go is your friend!

The Future

If I did it again, I would budget for nothing less than \$40,000 next time. The benefit of getting my daughter's deals on materials and transport was offset by her schedule that only provided 30 cubic yards of material once a week. Apparently it is called an "End run". Anyway, this left me seeding 2 weeks after my desired date. Perhaps next time I would pay more for trucking to get the whole 150 yards in the same week. The cost of renting a tractor for two months has to be included too. But if I had paid more to have the materials delivered in one week, I would not have needed a tractor for so long. So, it becomes swings and roundabouts.

There could actually be a next time as there is room on the farm for another lawn, but I don't have that kind of money so now it is time to start building up the club in the local community and getting some big profile, sanctioned AC events going. So watch this space!

The only labour costs I had were for the USGA guy for two days.

I had all the tools — rakes and shovels and rollers — as that is my trade ...

I know irrigation and have a wholesale account with the local supplier. I saved \$3,000 per month for tractor rental for two months by borrowing my daughter's tractor. And I got at least a 50% deal on concrete sand through my daughter. And I got deal on delivery too.

Lessons Learned

When I asked a gravel mart sales person what the compaction factor was for sand she said it was nothing (it is 20% for soil). That would eventually cost me in my



The roller



The first blades appear

(remember the patience problem) and kept knocking out these huge divots. They were like the first scratch (es) on the new car. And there were so many of them! The lawn was like tissue paper! When we played on the old lawn I used to have a policy of \$2 per divot for the bright young jocks who thought they could jump shot themselves out of any problem, and for a while I thought of raising the cost to \$10 per divot on the new lawn, but when you play on a tissue paper lawn there needs to be some forgiveness, so I have simply banned jump shots for a while.

Meanwhile spring approaches and the new list of tasks all now relate to maintenance. It is time to fertilize, time to roll, time to reduce the height of the lawn down to 1/8 inch, time to blah blah blah . . . but enough of the strident work ethic internal voices — it is actually time to start enjoying the lawn and bring in some friends to share the joy.

This started out as an essay about what to expect when you decide to build a new lawn, but at the end it is starting to seem like it is an essay on how marriages work and how friendships work and how community works, and how we nurture what we want to grow. That is where I will be focusing my energy over the next while . . .

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from “6 Hoops Northwest”, March, 2022

There will always be the annual lavender picnic, some outreach GC events, perhaps a B Flight AC event to support my favourite game, and hopefully some social/charity events to raise the profile. I am told there are around 100 active croquet players in Victoria, so the climate is good for this club to grow locally.

And yes, I still have a wife! Clearly we had other things than the lawn to talk about when we finally had a brilliant home-catered 40th anniversary dinner the weekend after the final lawn polishing and etc was done...

The grass started to grow, and I gave it the first mow to 1/2 inch.

I started to play on the lawn



The first cut

