

Hi,

I'd like to take a moment to talk about a certain football pitch at the home of a football club I used to love.

Let us firstly assume that you are aware of the state of Blackpool's pitch? If not, it should only take a cursory search on social media to see an array of pictures and comments from supporters of clubs from all divisions of the football league.



(Picture taken from "Football League step in over state of Blackpool's pitch", Blackpool Gazette, 12th February 2015.
<http://www.blackpoolgazette.co.uk/sport/blackpool-fc/football-league-step-in-over-state-of-blackpool-s-pitch-1-7102720>)

Most recently, the Middlesbrough manager Aitor Karanka hit out at the club for showing a lack of respect:

"It's unbelievable, the pitch wasn't good enough and it's a lack of respect for everyone who pays to come," Karanka explained. "It's a lack of respect to the Middlesbrough fans who travelled, to those others who travel here, and more so to the home fans who come here regularly to watch football and want to be entertained."

"I said I was concerned with injuries and there were two, Dani Ayala and one of their players. They all have problems with their backs or legs."

"I can't understand why a pitch like this is allowed in the Championship."

(Aitor Karanka, ITV.com, 11th February 2015)

The pitch at Bloomfield Road has caught media attention in recent weeks, so you'd be forgiven for thinking this was a new issue, or at the least one contained to this season. We are, after all, rock bottom of the Championship. But this is not the case. This is an issue which stems back many years.

To cite a few brief quotations about the pitch from the past few seasons, it was described as *"impossible to play on"* by former manager Michael Appleton in January 13, and in the same month called an *"absolute quagmire"* by Hull City boss Steve Bruce. Alex Baptiste, a former player described the pitch as the *"worst he's played on in his whole career"* in May 2013. In early 2014 Karl

Oyston himself declared it *"a shambles"* and *"a stick which is used to beat us and rightly so."* These are all quotes published in Blackpool Gazette across various articles, located by using the search term "pitch".

It was established that we had 'nematodes' in the pitch, which had led to the problem. In January 2013, the then club secretary Matt Williams spoke extensively about the plans for the pitch, which involves consulting with industry experts, the Sports Turf Research Institute, the Football League and the Premier League for advice, along with also speaking to Wigan and Birmingham, two other clubs who had re-laid pitches in recent seasons to determine potential issues and expenses.

The outcome of this was to take 40mm off the top surface of the pitch, with 319 tonnes of fibre sand applied, and then the pitch was to be re-seeded. (Blackpool Gazette, 10th May 2013). At the time, fans were sceptical of this, suggesting that 40mm seemed a very shallow depth.

Further to these concerns, a concert was held at Bloomfield road in late June, meaning that the work had to be rushed in the few remaining weeks before the start of the season. It was requested that our first fixture was to be away; it should be noted this is not the first time we have had to request an away first fixture due to the ground not being prepared. Again, fans issued concerns that this concert would cause problems for the pitch, and again these concerns were dismissed.

The important thing to note from all of this is that this shouldn't be a surprise to anyone. The pitch problems have been there for all to see and predict, and action should have been taken much earlier, as it is too late now to remedy before the end of the season. What does make for interesting reading, is that Karl plans to hold another concert at Bloomfield Road in the summer, and has gone as far as to say *"We are not concerned about the state of the pitch at all. We are confident it will be perfect for the start of the season"* (Blackpool Gazette, 2nd December 2014). How he can be confident of this, when the concert is to be held even later than the Rod Stewart event is quite frankly ridiculous.

Action needs to be taken; it's too late to save the pitch this season, but as other managers have pointed out this is a health and safety risk to the players. It shouldn't have been allowed to reach this point, but a strong enough punishment needs to be served out in order for this not to simply be repeated again next season. Whether this takes the form of a points deduction or not, Blackpool fans themselves will gladly accept this if it will help to provide proper time and money to be invested into the ground.

Thanks for reading!

Vicky