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## How green was my sports pitch?

The one time we all definitely got to touch nature at high school was our sports lessons. Whatever the weather football and rugby dominated the PE department's offerings throughout the autumn and winter terms. Getting truly filthy was an unavoidable part of the experience. My school did have a state of the art all weather hockey pitch surfaced with a material called 'redgra' made of lumps of red ash which, as I found out in my one and only hockey lesson, could strip the skin from your knees if you fell over. For most of the time this facility was reserved for the young gods who played in the hockey team and seemed to be exempt from the rules for us mere mortals where being tripped/pushed/thrown into the mud was an unavoidable thrice weekly ritual. There was no chance for escape from regularly getting covered in mud for those of us at the bottom end of the school sports pecking order.

When I visit high schools now one of the major physical changes I see are the sports facilities. Where once an area of grass and soil was enough now there are high tech fixtures with all-weather surfaces. The uniform bright green of synthetic grass shines all year round. These are often fenced and are designed to be usable for multiple sports. The fully drained surfaces mean no one gets covered in mud anymore and the fencing means the ball doesn't disappear into hedges and ditches thus needing retrieving at regular intervals. I suspect there are many advantages to these modern facilities – they can be used in any weather, don't need constant maintenance and dog walkers can be kept away (finding you had been rugby tackled into a pile of dog faeces was not an uncommon occurrence). The antiseptic appearance of these facilities leaves me wondering if young people are losing a little more contact with the natural environment. We all knew what soil felt (and tasted) like. We knew that if you used one pitch too much the grass would die off leaving a mud bath in winter which turned into a rock hard dust bowl in the summer term. We knew that soil was necessary for the grass to grow and that the land needed people (the groundsman and his assistant) and equipment (the tractor towing the big mower, the line painting machine etc.) to maintain it. When today do young people actually come into contact with soil and mud? Or appreciate that vegetation needs maintenance/is damaged by use? I am sure if I was a young person today I would applaud the arrival of these new facilities and age can give a rosy glow to the small periods of hell that were most winter PE lessons but at least we were fully familiar with some of the dirtier aspects of our environment.

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