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European Synthetic
Turf Organisation

RUSSIA 2018 FIFA WORLD CUP

AND SYNTHETIC TURF LEGACY?

As many countries worldwide queue up to host major international sports events such as men's FIFA World Cup or the Olympic Games, it is undeniable that the prospect of organizing such events is very appealing to potential host countries and cities. The resulting international recognition, national pride and cohesion, acceleration of economic growth with infrastructural developments are indeed reason enough to embark on the tough journey of hosting a major sports event.

However, behind the immediate and rather short-term festive atmosphere and the general optimistic feeling that organizing a major sports event brings to the host population, there are often more shadowed and profound event legacy aspects that are left unattended or unsustainable. Indeed, many examples can be found of post-major event situations where local communities could hardly reap the benefits from hosting the event or where sports infrastructures specially built for it are left under-utilized afterwards, involving high maintenance costs to the population. This leaves us with the impression that many governments are bidding for major sports events for the short-term positive effects in priority, but that once the dynamic of the competition dies out, longer-term legacy and infrastructure development prospects are often lost.

The sporting legacy resulting from the taking place of a major sports event constitutes a prominent part of the overall event legacy for the host country. The sporting legacy includes the generally ultramodern sports infrastructures and equipment inherited from the major sport event. It also includes the resulting development in sports in the host country; enhanced interest and visibility of sports, increased participants and increased funds allocated to sports equipment and clubs. These outcomes in turn contribute to local community development through sports.

In developing a sustainable major event legacy in host countries, particularly those which have hosted FIFA World Cups, investing in the use of synthetic turf can become important in the scope of building and maintaining a continual sporting legacy.

Since its first application in professional football during the 80's in England, synthetic turf has covered a lot of ground. Through the years, the quality of synthetic turf pitches has drastically improved, now being widely considered as great technological advancements perfectly suitable to today's very demanding standards of professional football. Indeed, a large majority of professional football clubs across Europe now have a synthetic turf pitch on display for training and some of them even host competitive games at their home stadium on synthetic turf.

Moreover, there are examples of investments in synthetic turf to support the development of a sustainable legacy post-world cup in host countries. Indeed, profiting from the dynamism of the South

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Africa 2010 World Cup and in an effort to develop football infrastructures for youth in Africa, FIFA launched the campaign of "20 Centres for 2010". This campaign, aimed at creating a tangible social legacy for South Africa 2010, consisted of building 20 youth football centres across Africa to support education and public health through football in each regions where the centres were implanted. The centres were elaborated and owned by local communities. Five out of these twenty centres were planned to be built in South Africa, not all of them being opened yet.

Each of these football centres was equipped with synthetic turf fields for many reasons. In fact, thanks to this surface, playing hours are highly increased as it can be used much more intensively than natural grass pitches without deterioration. These pitches also have the advantage of being usable under any weather and in each season with consistent surface quality, therefore overcoming damage and impracticability issues linked to climate that natural grass may face. Moreover, synthetic turf can be used for many sports other than football and can support different applications without any problems.

Therefore, the resistance, high usage, quality consistency and multi-use characteristics of synthetic turf enable high youth participation increase. This great participation results in tens of thousands of young Africans from disadvantaged communities having access to improved education and health services in these centres, demonstrating the power football has in terms of social development. This is illustrated by a health academy counsellor at one of the Football for Hope Centres:

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To further capitalise on the South Africa 2010 World Cup, legacy plans also included the aim of building one good all-weather synthetic turf pitch in each of South Africa's 52 regions and a coherent infrastructure for playing the game in order to provide means of developing local communities through football.

Over the years, FIFA has been supporting the development of synthetic turf in world football as a prominent tool to help develop the sport worldwide. It all started in 2005 with the FIFA U-17 World Cup in Peru. This was the very first international football tournament to be played entirely on synthetic turf. Since then, synthetic turf has taken more and more space in international football, from being used in the last Brazil World Cup through hybrid football fields in most of the host stadiums to being the surface on which the next Women's World Cup will be played on. FIFA also admits that a men's World Cup could, "sooner rather than later" according to general secretary Jérôme Valcke, be played on full synthetic turf.

Such involvement in promoting the use of synthetic turf is motivated for many reasons. All synthetic turf pitches installed worldwide are controlled and approved by FIFA, notably through quality certification rankings (FIFA 1 star or 2 star recommended certifications), which ensures the highest quality for these pitches, for professional football or local kick-abouts in communities.

Synthetic turf is a great solution for very dry climates where watering a pitch can be very expensive and environmentally unsustainable. It is also a perfect answer to cold climates as it can survive, with intensive use, winters undamaged thanks to its resistance.

Moreover, another advantage of synthetic turf is that it drains extremely well, even in a thunderstorm. As a result, unlike natural grass fields, pools of water do not form. But more importantly, the pitch does not deteriorate, tufts of grass do not tear out of the pitch from tackles and slides. Such conditions can be found in areas of tropical climate like in Brazil for example where football is a religion.

Last summer, Brazil hosted the 2014 FIFA World Cup. Nearly a year later, the legacy of this event for the Brazilian population is still in its early stages of formation and remains short-term legacy aspects. A high profile case of synthetic turf at the service of delivering a sporting legacy post-world cup is the synthetic turf pitch in service at the Granja Comary training centre, the Brazilian football federation training complex used by its national team during the World Cup. The synthetic turf pitch was installed in 2013 as part of a FIFA Goal Project, which enables member associations to fulfil developments that improve football in their countries.

This FIFA Recommended Two Star synthetic turf pitch which meets the highest international performance and quality standards serves to elevate football education and training in Brazil. In fact, youth, college and professional players from around the world can access this world-class facility as part of a program elaborated by the Brazilian football federation.

It also serves as an example that synthetic turf perfectly suits world-class football standards as it is used by the Brazilian national team and that it can be expanded to training infrastructures used during the world cup, new community and grassroots-based installations and even to the World Cup hosting stadiums.

Reasons for this are that synthetic turf pitches require little maintenance and therefore very limited expenses to maintain. They have a long life expectancy (generally warranted for eight years) and use much less water than natural grass fields. This is why it can be highly utilised in a sustainable way, serving the interests of social development in local communities.

Moreover, their low maintenance costs can mitigate financial losses of "white elephants" (stadiums left unused following a major sports event) that cost a lot to local populations.

In terms of sporting legacy for youth, investing in synthetic turf within the dynamic brought by hosting a World Cup may be advantageous. Indeed, this type of surface is a perfectly adapted tool at grassroots level. The constant quality and evenness of synthetic turf fields allows the ball to move better and faster and the pace of the game is hence improved. At grassroots level, learning and training in such conditions allows for thorough technical and skills development and familiarization with high intensity football. On the long-term, this can bring about a new generation of talents that took their rooting from the organization of a World Cup and the associated developments in football infrastructures.

After having outlined reasons why investing in synthetic turf could have an importance in ensuring a sporting legacy benefiting social development in countries hosting major sports events, we can now look at a future major event. Indeed in three years, the next FIFA World Cup will be taking place in Russia. It will be an enormous opportunity for the country to benefit from the dynamism brought by arguably the biggest sports event in the world. It is an opportunity for Russia to not only invest in the aim of producing a successful event but also to profit from the dynamism to also invest in ensuring a legacy and infrastructural development that will benefit to the local populations. As said previously, investing in synthetic turf installations can significantly contribute to this.

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Russia already benefits from sports infrastructures and equipment that serve the general interests of the local populations. Indeed, Russia's capital Moscow is home to Europe's largest sports and entertainment complex: the Luzhniki Olympic complex that notably hosts the nation's largest stadium of the same name. The Luzhniki stadium of a capacity of 78,360 seats will host the final of the 2018 World Cup. It has already hosted a number of major international sporting events and features a synthetic turf pitch since 2002. The general complex comprises more than twenty football pitches and venues for training and competitions, ten of which are synthetic turf pitches, all of which are available for public hire. The surface therefore allows for extensive use of the installations.

Here, the synthetic turf pitches have the ability to withstand adverse weather conditions such as the cold climate in Moscow. The evenness of the playing surface remains throughout and is not damaged by snow or rain, unlike natural pitches where maintenance throughout winter months can be both expensive and time-consuming. In October 2012, two new synthetic turf pitches were installed at the complex that had to provide "natural" playing conditions. Following the installation, the two pitches were subject to rigorous training sessions for assessment. The head groundsman commented afterwards that "this premium quality football field plays like natural grass".

The advantages of these synthetic turf pitches are the resulting high community participation that contributes to create a very dynamic surrounding area in terms of social development and cohesion. These installations also allow the hosting of diverse and extensive numbers of sports competitions without consequences to the pitches. For example, the Luzhniki Stadium and its surrounding pitches hosted the Rugby World Cup Sevens 2013. 24 men's and 16 women's teams from around the world took part in the tournament, with all matches played on the Luzhniki Stadium's synthetic turf.

Another example of a prominent Russian football stadium equipped with synthetic turf is the Arena Khimki Rodina, located in Khimki city, Moscow region. The stadium is owned by FC Khimki, who plays in the Russian second division. The surface was installed in 2013 and certified FIFA 2-star quality. Beforehand, the product was thoroughly developed to satisfy the high expectations of the Russian professional football league and the players in general in terms of quality and convenience. It is an example of how professional clubs in Russia have already widely adopted synthetic turf to improve cold-weather playing conditions. As the club's groundsman explained:

"This new pitch is a tremendous facility not only for the club but for all of the community. We could only have dreamed of this, years ago".

This installation can be awarded to the many developments made in relation to the approaching World Cup which is a catalyst for the growth of the game in Russia.

Moreover, as Zakhid Urazbakhtin, director of a research centre in Moscow describes: "unfortunately, Russian clubs allocate very little funding to the maintenance of grass on pitches." To answer this issue, the Zvezda Stadium in Perm, Russia, was for example also covered with synthetic turf. The stadium, which can hold 17,000 people, benefits from this surface to be a multi-use ground, among which being host to FC Amkar Perm. Minimal maintenance is therefore required with drastically reduced costs: no more watering, sowing, mowing, fertilizing or chalking the lines. The usage capacity is also largely increased: it has the capacity of at least 3 natural pitches as it can be used for different sports at different levels from juniors to the first team, as well as for training and competitions.

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Federico Addiechi
Head of Sustainability, FIFA

As Russia is establishing a national environmental standard specially adapted for football stadiums, a big step is made in supporting a sustainable facility legacy after 2018. According to Federico Addiechi, Head of Sustainability at FIFA, “we believe that this new improved standard for green and sustainable sports infrastructures will become the first legacy of the 2018 FIFA World Cup”. Investing in such infrastructures equipped with synthetic turf in the wake of the World Cup would coincide with this trend. Indeed, synthetic turf fields, such as the one used by one of Russia’s top clubs Dynamo Moscow at their training centre, are suitable solutions for a sustainable legacy. This particular pitch at the Novogorsk training centre in Moscow for example enables efficient use of water and energy. More into details, environmental benefits include the recycling of old tires, the elimination of pesticides, chemicals and fertilizers. In addition, thousands of gallons of clean drinking water that would be used to maintain natural grass playing fields are saved.

The dynamism and optimism brought by the coming Russian World Cup already serves the objective of creating a sustainable post-event legacy. Last year, the construction of a football synthetic turf pitch was approved in the city of Yaroslavl. The aim is to increase the number of football infrastructures in the region and to increase the number of participants and promote a healthy lifestyle through football activities in the Yaroslavl region.

This project tends to confirm forecasts of the CEO of the 2018 FIFA World Cup Local Organising Committee Alexey Sorokin. “What we’re now seeing is how preparations for the first World Cup in Russia are becoming a catalyst for important changes in all sorts of areas of life” Sorokin said. “We will influence not only the football development in this country but certainly in the whole region where Russia is situated, and export it to all our neighbours” he added. On his side, the Yaroslavl project main coordinator argued that “this (new sports centre) will be left to the people, and will serve them for decades. It will facilitate a healthy way of life”.

The legacy of the 2018 FIFA World Cup will continue and overlap the legacy that follows the last 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. An obvious and important link between both major events can be found with the Fisht Olympic Stadium. This ultra-modern 40,000-person-capacity stadium was primarily built for the 2014 Winter Olympics. But as the FIFA World Cup follows 4 years later, what better opportunity was there to host some World Cup matches at the stadium? One prominent legacy opportunity was therefore evident with the Sochi Olympic stadium.

The World Cup having a base in Sochi, it also involves the opportunity to develop football in the surrounding areas of the Olympic complex, while investing in synthetic turf to support a sustainable legacy in this regard. This would join what Russia’s Andrey Arshavin made of this unique opportunity that the World Cup constitutes for his country: “We are building pitches, football centres, schools and training sites in the most remote areas of our country, growing the game and providing opportunities for the next generations”.

To sum up, the success of the 2018 World Cup in Russia will not only depend on how well it is organised, but also on how effectively the various resulting developments will deliver a sustainable legacy for Russia. Such task should be supported by diverse investments, among which synthetic turf may play a central role in supporting the post-world cup Russian legacy.

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