European Synthetic
Turf Organisation

ESTO REPORT

DEVELOPMENT OF RUGBY AND SYNTHETIC TURF IN FRANCE

INTRODUCTION

The development of "new generation" synthetic pitches is not something new in France; it has been going on since 2001. Today in France there are about 1800 synthetic pitches, which represents only 4% of all pitches in France. Although the development of synthetic pitches is continuously on the rise in France, it has to be recognized that they are more expensive to build than grass pitches, although they require a lot less maintenance. Another advantage is that they offer longer hours of utilization, as grass pitches are difficult to use when the ground is frozen or when they are waterlogged due to heavy rainfall periods. Moreover they also need "resting time", which decreases even further the length of time during which they can be used.

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Therefore, nowadays the "new generation" of synthetic pitches offers the best solution in terms of cost and usage. The specifications of these new synthetic pitches are closer to natural grass in terms of the flexibility, the rotational friction, and the ball bounce and sometimes even superior in the shock absorption and energy return. Also the technical specifications of these so-called synthetic turf pitches are such that it is less harmful for players when they fall, which reduces a lot of traumatic accident.

With regard to the use of these synthetic pitches for a sport such as rugby, World Rugby has developed the Rugby Turf Performance Specification to ensure that these new types of playing surfaces replicate the playing qualities of good quality natural grass, to provide a playing environment that will not increase the risk of injury to players and that they are of adequate durability (on the condition that they are well maintained). Revised in 2011, 2012, and again in 2015 the Performance Specification is a rigorous test programme for synthetic turf that assesses the ball surface interaction, player surface interaction and durability of products and has been modified to align the standard with that of the FIFA Quality Concept for Football Turf and ensure that there is continuous improvement as artificial turf develops.

Therefore Rugby Union was very quick to adopt new generation synthetic turf surfaces for the development of the game. World Rugby Regulation 22 was introduced in 2003 to ensure that 3G surfaces replicate the playing qualities of good quality natural grass. In accordance with World Rugby Regulation 22 any synthetic turf used for any form of competitive rugby (at all levels of the game) needs to comply with World Rugby Regulation 22 and the Rugby Turf Performance Specification.

The Organising Comittee for the 2007 Rugby World Cup in France generated 33 million Euros for the French Rugby Federation. From this 33 million, 25 million was used for the development of rugby and more importantly 5 million was used for the development of synthetic pitches around France, designated for rugby use only.

Over the last six years, over 277 synthetic pitches have been installed in 29 countries This exponential growth in synthetic turf pitches for use in Rugby has also coincided with a rise in the amount of dual use pitches for both Rugby and Football.

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CASE STUDIES

As stated above the use of synthetic pitches for rugby is not a new phenomenon in France. Most professional rugby clubs in France have access to a synthetic pitch for trainings at least, if not also for matches. In this section, using short case studies, we will examine how different Rugby clubs from different levels (professional to amateur) and for different age groups use these third generation synthetic pitches to develop the sport of Rugby.

CASE STUDY 1:
THE FRENCH NATIONAL RUGBY CENTRE (CNR)

Inaugurated in November 2002, the CNR is the biggest and most important training centre for Rugby in France. It is not only host to the training and formation of the youth teams but also the venue for all stages of preparation and recovery of male and female national teams. Since 2011 the CNR is equipped with a covered third generation synthetic pitch specifically designed for Rugby and approved by the World Rugby guidelines. This is an example of putting into practice the new technology (3G synthetic pitches) at the highest level of French rugby. As a result top French rugby players can practice safely and with the highest level of performance they need all year around.

CASE STUDY 2:
ROUEN RUGBY CLUB

Rouen Rugby Club is a local club in Normandy that plays in Federal 2 (equivalent of 4th division) and that has the ambition of become a big rugby club in France and to hopefully be part of the elite within a few years. Their strategy in order to do so is simple. In 2013, the president of the club Marc-Antoine Troletti decided to invest a lot of money (approx. 2.5 million Euros) into the development of the club and more particularly in the development of the infrastructure. His vision of the club being part of the French rugby elite starts with the development of proper infrastructure. For this the project is to renovate their stadium by including housing, a hotel, a supermarket, to increase the capacity of the stadium and of course the installation of a synthetic turf pitch. This project should be complete by the end of 2016. By then the president is confident that Rouen Rugby Club will be in the league above (Federal 1) and he believes that thanks to this project and also by recruiting intelligently within the next few years Rouen Rugby Club will be part of the elite in French Rugby.

CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDY 3:
RACING METRO 92

Racing Metro 92 is a French rugby club based in the region of Paris, which plays in the Top 14 (highest division in France, also considered the best championship in the world). The Racing Metro's Training Centre, approved by the Ministry of Youth and Sports and the French Rugby Federation, was created in 2007. After 7 years of hard work, it has just been awarded no.1 training centre for rugby in France, not only on sporting criteria but also academic achievement and quality of infrastructure.

In October 2012, the training centre for youth teams and for the first team was opened on new grounds in Plessis-Robinson. This included many new structures such as :offices, classrooms, weight room, a new housing building which offers studio or double room but more importantly for the game and the players it offers both synthetic and natural fields.

Racing Metro 92 go even further in the use of technology. By the end of 2016 they will play their games in a brand new high tech stadium called L'Arena 92. Besides having a giant screen of 2400m2 and a closed roof the Arena 92 will have a synthetic pitch which will make Racing Metro 92 the first club in France to play official games on a synthetic pitch. For all remarks against the use of synthetic pitch in rugby, president of Racing Metro 92, Jacky Lorenzetti states:

"For me, rugby isn't suppose to be a mud bath. These types of pitches (synthetic) are stable in all seasons, players get less injured and the game is quicker… the English rugby club Saracens mark twice as much tries since they have been playing on a synthetic pitch. On natural grass, you can play between 6 and 8 hours a week and it costs 150,000 euros per year to maintain. On a synthetic pitch you can play 24/7 and it costs 15,000 euros per year to maintain."

CASE STUDY 4:
STADE RENNAIS RUGBY CLUB AND RENNES ETUDIANTS CLUB RUGBY (REC RUGBY)

At the beginning of 2012, a synthetic pitch was inaugurated for both these clubs. Stade Rennais Rugby Club uses the synthetic pitch for trainings when climatic conditions do not allow the use of grass pitches and the youth team of REC rugby use it for both training and matches. For all concerned from both these clubs this new synthetic pitch is a breath of fresh air, especially when compared to the state of the grass pitch next to it, which is completely ruined by the cold weather and by the stamping of shoe studs. REC rugby U16 play at the national level and are first of their group. They play all the matches on the synthetic pitch. Their coach Mael Le Galloudec states :

" The kids don't imgaine the chance they have to play on this type of surface, they play in optimum conditions…"

He goes on saying:

"In winter, it is difficult to train on grass pitches which can sometimes lower the performance of the team. On synthetic pitches, speed is a plus and the difference between the players is more pronounced. It advantages players who are more technical…synthetic turf corresponds perfectly to our philosophy of the game which is to play in movement."

CONCLUSION

The above case studies clearly show that synthetic pitches are an essential tool in the development of rugby in France. Clubs from all divisons and from all age groups already use or are looking at installing synthetic pitches. Not only does it allow the use of the pitch all year round, given its highly resistant quality, but it also maximises game performace and minimises player injury.

In addition, climatic conditions in many countries where the game is played result in natural grass surfaces becoming badly worn and unsuitable for use in winter. In countries where the game is developing these surfaces offer an ideal solution when climate or resources make good quality natural grass pitches difficult or impossible to achieve.

In future it is hoped that the development of multi-use artificial turf pitches, where rugby and association football can be played, will provide a potential solution to facility operators wishing to maximise the use of their facilities through community use and to those struggling with stadium microclimates that make the maintenance and growth of natural grass difficult.

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ESTO

European Synthetic
Turf Organisation

THE INDUSTRY'S TRADE AND CONSUMER ORGANISATION

6, Avenue E. Van Nieuwenhuyse
B - 1160 Brussels

T: +32 2 676 74 72
F: +32 2 676 74 74

www.theESTO.com