



## REBUILDING OF ROYAL ATHLETIC PARK, VICTORIA, BC

FOR THE 2007 FIFA U-20 WORLD CUP • KENNETH HILCHEY & GORD SMITH • VICTORIA PARKS

GOOOOOOAAAAAAAALLL!!! Cried the announcer as his exuberance echoed throughout the stadium and out to old AM radio transistors and rabbit-eared television sets around the world. The FIFA Under 20 World Cup had begun in Canada. Six major Canadian cities would host the second largest sporting event in the world (after FIFA's World Cup), and this resounding shout from the announcer came from a city that prides itself on soccer – sorry, football.

**T**he first time FIFA officials came to Victoria to see this venue in the heart of the downtown, the organizing committee chairman, after setting foot in the middle of the present soccer pitch at Royal Athletic Park (RAP) looked around and asked, “Where’s the field?”

Royal Athletic Park has always been the highlight of Victoria’s outdoor sports facilities. It has held world-class soccer games before. The once world famous Traveler’s fastball champions played here as well as Canadian football, Australian rules football and more recently the ever popular beer festivals. However, what you

really need to appreciate about this field is how it crests abnormally from north to south creating an illusion that one was in a formidable sinking abyss when looked upon from either end. One fan at a recent exhibition soccer match between Canada and Scotland commented that all he could see looking across to the far sideline were men’s torsos darting up the field towards the opponent’s goal. Now you begin to understand why the question, “Where’s the field?” was posed.

### Reworking a Classic

Well, after much reassurance of what could and would be done to the existing

field and the official’s appreciation of the old-fashioned styled stadium atmosphere of Royal Athletic Park, the City of Victoria was granted a pool for the 2007 FIFA Under 20 World Cup (other cities selected were Burnaby, Edmonton, Ottawa, Toronto and Montreal). Hence, after months of meetings, planning and around the world communication, work at Royal Athletic Park began in mid-April, a few short months prior to the Cup.

The elevation numbers in metres ranged from 11.09 to 9.49 from north to south and east to west and because of this huge discrepancy, it made determining the final cut and fill elevation very difficult.

However, 10.50 was decided upon as the grade level and because of that depth, surprises were quick to surface after the first excavator load of soil was displaced. Unmarked manholes were discovered as well as blue clay, piping, old and new drainage and irrigation lines, concrete, wood, filter fabric and lastly, a drain-rock pit, which was the most mystifying discovery to everyone involved. This pit caused delays because we needed to remove over 80 cubic metres of it. Since much of the rock had already been graded and spread over most of the field site, a couple of days were spent, with up to seven people, rock picking the entire layout.

Just to illustrate how much the optics of the field changed, at the east end, the new field began 18 inches below the original level and at the west end, it rose over one metre. The original depth of the irrigation lines on this west end of the field went from 16 inches to almost four feet. But AHHA! The field was now level as FIFA had demanded.

After weeks of excavating, including the addition of over 460 cubic metres of sand being spread evenly over the whole area, the Rotodarium was brought in to blend the sand and soil and to finish the final grooming for sod preparation. After another week, our final grade was met and now it was simply a matter of eagerly awaiting the sod.

### Unrolling the Sod (and a Surprise)

It was on May 10 and 11th that our turf (10% creeping red fescue, 50% perennial ryegrass and 40% Kentucky bluegrass) arrived in big rolls. The contractor hired to lay the turf was there in full force in their brightly coloured vests advertising their

company in time for all the media attention that day. Mayor Allan Lowe, representatives from the VSOC, as well as provincial government representative Ida Chong all played up to the cameras and press rolling out their own piece of soccer history for Victoria. It was a great day for everyone as another giant positive step was made towards the first FIFA soccer match to be held on Vancouver Island.

Unfortunately too, it was another important journey for thousands of unwanted hitchhikers wanting to visit the island from the mainland. As one driver of the seven trucks and trailers was brushing off his flat deck after his payload of 60 foot rolls of turf was unloaded, he yelled at the project supervisor and exclaimed: "There sure are a lot of worms in those rolls!" "Oh yeah! Chuckle! Chuckle!" was the polite reply from the supervisor as he figured the truck driver was just making conversation. However, after thinking about the driver's comment, and actually investigating what he was talking about, the supervisor took samples knowing full well what the worms really were. Yet he had to wait an agonizing weekend before it was confirmed that we had indeed imported leatherjackets in their larval stage. By the time all 10,000 square metres of turf was laid out, we were looking at a population of five to seven grubs per square foot.

Panic, disbelief, frustration, anger and that awful feeling of what do we do now crept into the hearts of everyone in the small circle of local organizers and field personal. Rip it out! Send it back! Call their competitor! Just spray it! Ha! That last suggestion was actually the one everybody knew would be the least likely solution to consider. As timing would have

it, days prior to this unfortunate discovery, City Council had just endorsed a by-law banning the use of pesticides within city limits. So the suggestion to spray it was definitely going to be one option that no one wanted to present to the politicians at City Hall. Well, to the credit of the mayor and council, our IPM Coordinator Michelle Gorman, and to the relief of City parks staff, the soccer association and local FIFA representative Jim Plasteras, an exemption for us to use pesticides and deal with the infestation problem was granted immediately. So after some very positive media coverage informing local residents, the local community association and beekeepers, the application of *Sevin* took place one early Saturday morning with no difficulties or setbacks.

### Watching the Grass Grow

Thereafter, it was simply a matter of watering, fertilizing, and literally watching the grass grow. There was also the constant task of replacing divots every morning because of the feeding frenzy upon the grubs by the crows and two pesky raccoons. Not only were these two raccoons lifting up tufts of turf looking for an easy meal, but they were also using our new field as their washroom facilities. Yes, we did hire a trapper and he had his marshmallow filled cages at all suspected routes of travel, but for all the weeks the traps were out, they consistently ignored them. We even chased these two pests off the field one morning as they scampered past the traps without even a glance at the delicious smorgasbord of fatty white puffs of sugar inside. (By the way, we never did catch them, and we continue to clean up after them to this day.)



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However, not everything was happening on the field. Royal Athletic Park off the field was a buzz of activity. New stadium lights were being installed and miles and miles of power cords, telephone and television cables were being laid. The 8,200 seat bleachers were being set-up on the north end. Meanwhile the VIP tents along with the press area, and media tents were being set-up on the south and east end. There were also the added players' dressing rooms, concession tents, and souvenir tents being put together, and all the while, the entire field was being closely guarded by staff like the perimeter of a high security prison. No one but no one, apart from a select few, were going to as much as smell the grass without being pounced upon and berated for trespassing on sacred ground.

For the next six weeks, the newly transformed field was being pampered with regular feeding, nourishing and tender loving care. A regimented fertilizing program was scheduled which included 13-26-6 (Quick Start) to 21-0-0 to 23-3-23, and two applications of Knife, an iron compound. All this brightened the grass blades to a near perfect and glimmering green, while at the same time invigorating it to grow centimetre by centimetre almost hourly.

Watering proved to be our most frustrating cultural practice, as many parts of the field had little filtration once the water leached past the first 4-8 inches of soil. So because of that, we were left with standing water in these particular areas. It even got to the point where all we could do was syringe the field with water, instead of long periods of deep watering. Also twice on the west end and in parts of the east end, to assist in the drainage we deep-tined these portions using 1/2 inch tines on the Verti-Drain. Yet because of the compaction under our main growing medium, many of the tines were bent so badly they were turned into metal boomerangs, and not very good ones at that. And of course, our two most problematic areas were in the goalmouths. Several times we had to re-patch sections of these areas, using sod from our temporary turf farm at our main yard.

At this time too, we took on a very extensive top-dressing program to hide the

many seams between the newly laid turf. Days were then spent by our staff taking wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow loads of soil and a ryegrass seed mix and carefully spreading it, hoping for quick germination in those small crevices of unsightly space. We also top-dressed the entire field later, covering it with a 1/2 inch layer of top-dressing sand.

### **FIFA Perfection**

The grass cutting finally began using at first a Toro rear bagger, cut at 2 1/2 inches. Eventually, we got it down to the 1.1 inches or 28 mm as stipulated by FIFA, using a Toro Reelmaster triplex mower. Once we established that height, the field was cut daily by two of our staff switching off every second day. Their most difficult task was cutting in straight lines, and not dozing off under the hot sun. We did eventually, two days prior to the July 1st matches, end up string lining the field for mowing accuracy, striping it north to south at 18-foot widths.

Using the *Pitch Management Manual* from the World Cup in Germany last year, regulations demanded following exactly what was outlined concerning the goals and their set up, the grass height, divot replacement, the field marking line density and width, the amount of field staff on site on game day, and how the communications would filter down to the field boss (Gord Smith) and his staff.

Also on each game day, the field had to be game ready five hours before each match. Therefore, for two days of the tournament, we had mornings when we began at 5:00 a.m. and finished by 9:15 a.m. for matches that began at 2:15 p.m. These were long days, but on Saturday July 1st, 2007, under blue skies and before 11,800 extremely excited spectators, the first kick-off by the Japanese team against the Scottish on our field left us with our hearts in our throats knowing that the world was watching our field.

Okay, maybe they weren't exactly watching the field, but as everyone always said throughout the preparations, no field, no soccer game. So guess what? That was our field the world was watching.

### **Lights, Camera, Action!**

Admittedly, the field crew did get to watch each and every game, but our rants, shouts and bantering weren't directed at the players, linesmen or referee. Instead our attention was drawn to every bit of turf that flew for a few metres in the air after a sliding check or a goalie's left to right dive. Even the "streaker" during the second game got our attention for the wrong reasons. The thought of this naked man on our pristine groomed field made us all groan in utter disgust. Oh! And by the way, the football was pretty good too!

Throughout the tournament though, the field was constantly hailed as one of the best in the world. We heard that from FIFA officials, fans, politicians, our fellow workmates and our peers in the industry. Whether it was really that good or not, we all took great pride in what we had accomplished and the end result was a world-class soccer pitch.

We also had great support from our employer, the City, and the positive feedback from the local media just added to our pride for what was accomplished in just six weeks. Despite our water problems, the leatherjackets, the record setting 35°C weather, the raccoons, and some unsightly areas (to us anyways), the soccer gods were very good to us. The field looked great – especially on TV. The playability on it was outstanding and the reviews received were almost embarrassing. In the end, seven games were played on the 68 m x 105 m soccer pitch, including one exhibition game between the stadium crew and the much older field crew. And just to reiterate just how favourable the gods were, the field crew's victory over the under 24 stadium crew by a score of 7-4 just cemented how well the whole experience went for us. As Gord Smith, supervisor for the whole project prophesied before our friendly game, "We will not lose!" and indeed we did not lose anything at all. From the first official FIFA ball to cross the goal line to the last unofficial torn and half deflated ball to cross the goal line, we were able to put the City of Victoria and Royal Athletic Park on the World Cup Soccer map for at least two weeks during the summer of 2007. ♦

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