



# On the Soapbox

Paul Huxley explains why the synthetic trend is set to continue

**Synthetic surfaces for golf are proving ever more popular. They help extend the season, improve the member offer, and offer consistent, reliable practice and play. It wasn't always like this.**

Back in the late 90s there was considerable prejudice against synthetic turf largely because of poor installations and low quality surfaces. There was interest, however, as courses were struggling to cope with ever increasing amounts of play due to the growing popularity of golf. People who previously would put on their golf shoes in the car park and head for the first tee, now wanted to practise whenever they wanted throughout the year, even when the grass wasn't growing.

Despite maintenance programmes becoming mechanised, intensive and sophisticated, the UK weather meant courses found it difficult to meet the demand for year-round practice surfaces. Divots on tees and practice ground took weeks to recover during the growing season and many months during the winter.

We researched the specification and availability of suitable, purpose designed synthetic surfaces for golf and, much to our surprise, we found that it didn't exist.

Some courses had tried using turf that was designed for football, hockey or tennis. In most cases it was a disaster - too shallow to take a tee peg, like a sheet of glass to putt on and giving a ball roll that was frankly terrible. No wonder synthetic turf had a bad name. There was an urgent need for good quality synthetic surfaces to complement natural grass and provide the means for it to rest and recover.

We had heard that synthetic turf had been used for tees and greens in the USA, so we went there, made contact with friends in the golf industry and carried out extensive research.

We then purchased some American specification turf for greens and tees and paid for installation training.

This was a valuable exercise, but it soon taught us that turf specifications and installation methods in the USA were largely unsuitable for UK requirements and conditions.

The ball roll on typical sand-filled polypropylene greens, while not good enough for UK courses, was acceptable in the USA for 'backyard putting greens'. Maintenance was far too high, if any attempt was to be made to achieve a reasonable ball roll. Sur-

faces for tees were not quite so poor as for greens but still below what UK players would expect. So, back home, we were faced with the immediate challenge of producing new specifications of turf suitable for UK playing surfaces and introducing installation and maintenance procedures.

As the years went by, we learned more about maintenance methods and, importantly, what customers were happy to do and what they weren't. We found that many customers struggled to make time for staff to carry out even the modest maintenance procedures required for all-weather tees and practice ground areas. A better, lower maintenance solution would be needed.

We also began installing all-weather synthetic turf for golf course pathways, standing areas and some lawns.

Synthetic greens came next. We knew we had to provide surfaces that top players judged to be as good as the highest quality natural grass greens. We also knew that maintenance had to be minimal, unlike the

providing the required greens and tees that would be impossible with natural grass. There will be a continued growth of outdoor and indoor golf academies with synthetic greens and practice tees, allowing keen golfers to practise all year round. Both in the UK and overseas, there will be an increasing number of commercially run small golf courses with all-weather greens and tees which will allow juniors and beginners to play at competitive prices because of the low maintenance costs.

There will even be full size golf courses featuring synthetic grass in certain parts of the world where golf is required but where extreme conditions will not allow natural grass to grow, such as in high mountainous areas.

We do not attempt to replace natural grass, but we do help golfers to practise and enjoy their golf all year round on high class surfaces with minimal upkeep, so that natural grass can be more easily maintained and used when required.

## On a roll - the growth of synthetic surfaces for golf

sand-filled polypropylene greens we had seen in the US.

We invested a considerable amount of time and money in R&D to achieve the right materials, base construction and installation procedure and, when we were ready, we invited golf professionals to try the surface. We decided to focus on putting and chipping greens to start with, because we saw the biggest demand coming from short game practice surfaces.

The demand for premier quality all-weather surfaces is growing all over the golfing world. In the UK, it is now extensively used at St Andrews, Celtic Manor, Gleneagles and by the golf centres and training academies of the English, Scottish and Welsh Golf Unions.

So what does the future hold for synthetic surfaces in golf? There will always be a place for natural grass where conditions allow, but as golf becomes increasingly popular worldwide, high quality, low maintenance synthetic golf surfaces will play an ever more important part.

In countries where there is excessive heat, a shortage of water or excess rainfall, all-weather surfaces will be the only means of



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