



News Brief: Pitching Fake Grass to the Soccer World

MICHAEL GRANGE

A Canadian company has developed what has long been thought impossible—an artificial surface that looks and plays like natural grass.

And with the help of sportswear giant Nike, the surface invented and manufactured by Montreal-based SynTenniCo. will be introduced to the international sports community at the World Cup.

The exposure is the result of a decision by Nike to use the grass substitute, called FieldTurf, as part of the soccer-based theme park being set up at the Parc de la Défense in downtown Paris.

Part of the Nike display is a pitch suitable for six-a-side soccer that opens to the public tomorrow. It features the Montreal company's surface.

The temporary park will be up throughout the month-long tournament. Located outside Paris's Stade de France, site of the World Cup final, the park will receive hundreds of thousands of visitors each day.

But most important for SynTenniCo., included among the visitors will be the elite of the international soccer community.

As part of tomorrow's opening ceremonies, Brazil—one of eight teams sponsored by Nike at the World Cup—will conduct a warmup on the surface. The other Nike-sponsored teams will do the same in coming weeks.

"For a little Canadian company, it's an amazing marketing opportunity," said John Gilman, the company's chief executive officer. "It saves us having to go all over the world. We've invited every international federation to come see (the turf) for themselves, put their cleats on and go out and play on it, to put their team on it."

Gilman is confident that when soccer players and officials use the turf, they'll recognize it as a low-maintenance, durable grass substitute that lacks the often abrasive qualities of typical artificial turf.

The cost, about \$600,000 for an installed soccer-size field, is cheaper than existing artificial surfaces and comparable to installing a new grass field, Gilman said.

And impressing the soccer community is vital to gaining footholds in other major sports.

While artificial turf is used by professional football teams and baseball teams in North America, soccer people abandoned it after ill-fated experiments in the 1980s. They found the surface changed the nature of the game. The ball bounced higher, rolled faster, and aggressive tackling was hampered by the abrasive surface.

In North America, grass is still considered the ideal surface, but artificial turf is tolerated for its convenience, despite evidence it may contribute to muscle and joint injuries because it doesn't give.

A surface that combines the safety and

playability of grass with the convenience and cost-effectiveness of artificial turf would seemingly generate plenty of interest, and Gilman knows it.

"We want to cover the world," Gilman said.

The surface's benefits come from the way it mimics real grass.

"I never in my lifetime thought I would hear myself say this, but in many ways it's better than grass," Kevan Pipe, chief executive officer of the Canadian Soccer Association, said in an interview last week. The CSA hopes to have FieldTurf installed this summer at their training facility at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, B.C.

"It most closely resembles a natural surface as anything we've ever seen," Pipe said. "And not only that, it never wears out."

English soccer legend Bryan Robson, manager for Middlesborough, a team that will be playing in England's Premier League next season, was impressed enough to order the surface installed at the club's Rockliff Park training ground last September.

More FieldTurf pitches are expected to be added as the club competes an \$11.9-million renovation of the Facility next year.

"[The FieldTurf] was frequently used by our first team, the players are quite happy with it," said Dave Allen, a spokesman for the club.

Turf's Up: A Canadian company has invented a playing surface touted as good as the real thing—it looks and plays like natural grass!

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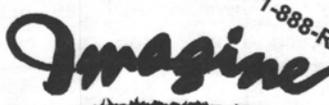
After the Canadian Olympic soccer team trained on a FieldTurf pitch in Portland, Ore., in March, Bruce Twamley, the team's head coach, described the surface as a "revelation for soccer and athletic fields throughout the world," in a letter to Pipe, adding that "this synthetic surface is the way to go with regard to athletic fields in the future."

Mimicking real grass

FieldTurf is made up of a dense weave of soft-to-the-touch, seven-millimetre-wide blades that splinter 32 times, giving the surface a bushy feel. Between the blades, which are four and a half centimetres tall, is about four centimetres of infill—essentially artificial dirt—made up of a fine grind of rubber and silica sand. The blades bend like real grass, supporting the maximum torsion point of an athlete stopping or changing direction, but release to prevent injuries. The infill provides the cushioning effect of dirt. ♦

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