

GROWTH

Paul Haines reports on the exponential growth of pitch installation specialists, Support in Sport (SIS), both in terms of projects and product portfolio.

Below: One of SIS's more unusual five-a-side pitch installations was recently completed for Powerleague Fives, on the top floors of a multi-storey car park in Canary Wharf, Central London. Here, five 3G synthetic turf pitches were installed across five different floor levels of the car park, each incorporating a unique freestanding framed fencing system with rebound board mesh panels and roof nets.



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or leading UK pitch installation specialists Support in Sport (SIS), 2010 was an extremely busy year, with new pitches laid across the length and breadth of Europe, covering a diverse range of projects from synthetic 5-a-side to full size natural grass at numerous Champions League clubs.

SIS Manufacturing Ltd

One of the primary drivers behind the company's recent growth has been the successful integration into the business of their own dedicated synthetic carpet manufacturing facility. When SIS acquired the factory in 2005 to form SIS Manufacturing Ltd, it's fair to say they had taken on something of a risk.

"When SIS took over the factory, we weren't known for our quality," explained Phil Nichols, Managing Director at SIS Manufacturing Ltd. "The word in the marketplace back then was that good carpet did not come out of this factory. But since September 2005, we've turned the business around and people now see us as producers of a very good quality product."

The key for Phil and his team at SIS Manufacturing has been to focus on the quality, and not quantity, of the products produced.

"There are plenty of other manufacturers out there, so we have to compete on quality and service," he continued. "We are not a factory that wants to be turning out thousands and thousands of metres of the same thing just to keep the machines going."

There is one other major advantage to this approach, as SIS Group CEO George Mullan explained: "The acquisition has been really positive because it not only allows us to control the quality of the synthetic carpets that we're installing, but it also allows us to be incredibly flexible and provide bespoke carpets for individual clients."

"In sport, we never find two installations the same, so we have to produce to order," continued Phil Nichols. "We

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have a variety of machines that can tuft from 8 to 85mm, so we are very flexible and can turn orders around very quickly. For example, we recently had an order for five 5-a-side pitches in December, and the last one was delivered just seven days later."

Synthetic Turf Construction Projects

Another key facet of the Groups synthetic business has been the growth in five-a-side football pitches.

"We have the manufacturing side, the equipment, and the personnel to manage the installations, which means that after the twelve weeks they know that their facilities will be ready, and 120 teams will be on those pitches playing five-a-side football," said Phil Nichols.

One of SIS's more unusual five-a-side pitch installations was recently completed for Powerleague Fives, on the top floors of a multi-storey car park in Canary Wharf, Central London.

"The Powerleague facility in London Docklands utilises external and internal floors of an underused multi-storey car park. So the pitch construction required an innovative approach to design and build in what is a unique environment for 5-a-side football," explained Powerleague spokesman Tony Scott.

Here, five 3G (see sidebar '3G Pitches') synthetic turf pitches were installed across five different floor levels of the car park, each incorporating a unique freestanding framed fencing system with rebound board mesh panels and roof nets. The constraints of the location did however present SIS with some unique challenges. The lower floors of the car park were still being used by customers and the limited space to manoeuvre within the site meant that all materials had to be crane lifted using a 45m boom. Due to the surface levels on the top floor being too uneven, a specialist lightweight fill material also had to be used to correct levels, ensuring bearing loads were kept to a minimum.

3G Pitches

SIS's commitment to ensuring surfaces conform to the highest standards and stress of competitive sport has led to the development of third generation (3G) long pile synthetic surfaces.

The surface was designed for the rigorous demands of rugby as a high impact sport, and a unique combination of fibres enables increased performance and excellent playing characteristics.

The advanced synthetic turf system also provides more protection to players impacting onto the pitch surface, by taking into consideration the particular demands of the game.

This includes factors such as the height players can fall during the match, and the consistent and prolonged periods spent directly in contact with the playing surface.

"The site was a logistical challenge but with team work, management and support from the client, it was possible to achieve great results," explained Simon Mroczek, SIS Contracts Manager. "We were very pleased with the result."

Full Size Synthetic

Despite growth in the 5-a-side sector, SIS Group have also been expanding into other synthetic markets, as Director of Operations Bob Taylor explained: "We have been trying to get away from our reliance on 5-a-side, which we are the market leaders in. We have a great deal of expertise there, so we wanted to develop that further into full-size rugby, hockey and football pitches."

The development of the new 3G long pile synthetic surface has been a major factor in this expansion, and SIS have now established themselves as the market leaders in the installation of synthetic rugby pitches, as Bob Taylor advised: "We installed a synthetic training pitch at Premiership club Newcastle Falcons and we've also got



Synthetic training pitch at Nottingham University, UK.



Installation at Burnage RFC.

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two others at Nottingham and Durham universities. It has meant that SIS has quickly become renowned in the industry for our rugby pitches."

The company have also just announced another new groundbreaking rugby deal, as Group CEO, George Mullan, outlined: "We have won the contract to install the new pitch for Saracens, which is going to be the first synthetic rugby pitch not only in the Premiership, but anywhere professionally in the world of rugby football. We got that contract because we were able to provide them with a bespoke pitch, not something that just comes off a run-of-the-mill production line."

The company have also achieved their goal of breaking into the UK hockey market. "Until two years ago we didn't have any hockey pitches," said Bob Taylor. "But we've recently completed three UK installations in Carlisle, Wigton and Armthorpe, so that's certainly an area where we see future growth."

Growth is also occurring in the full-size synthetic football market, and the first three months of the year will see SIS installing five new pitches, two out in Azerbaijan for FC Gabala, and another three in the UK. Two of those UK installations have been funded by the Football Foundation; a body that SIS have recently announced a major new partnership with.

Armthorpe School's installation was one of a trio of hockey pitch contracts won by SIS in the UK.



Key Framework Partnership

In December 2010, SIS signed a four year deal to be part of a new Key Framework Partnership between the Rugby Football Union (RFU), the Football Association (The FA) and the Football Foundation (FF). The agreement will see 132 synthetic rugby and football pitches built for training across England, with the contract valued at £57m.

"It's a new initiative between the three main funding bodies in the UK to pool their resources, and we went through a very intensive interview process and were delighted to be selected," said Group CEO, George Mullan.

SIS were one of six companies chosen to provide the design, manufacture, installation and maintenance of pitches for the Framework, and as Director of Operations, Bob Taylor explained that the company is in a unique position: "We are the only manufacturer who also installs within the Framework. All the others are partnerships between manufacturers and installers, so we feel that we are in a very strong position because the others have to rely on a partnership."

"For the SIS Group it has two big benefits," continued CEO, George Mullan. "As a best quality UK manufacturer it gives us a lot of credibility when we are up against the multi-nationals. It also opens up a whole new market for us, because we had done very little work for those funding bodies. It has shaken the whole industry up, because it was very much a contractor led industry and if you're not on that list, you lose out on a large chunk of business."

Artificial Grass Limited

While sports pitches are the major part of the SIS Group's business, their synthetic grass carpets have numerous other applications, including for ski runs, tennis courts and in gardens.

Increasing baseline sales and profitability requires a diverse outlook, and SIS have also been looking away from sport, as Phil Nichols, Managing Director at SIS Manufacturing Ltd, explained: "We launched Artificial



Grass Limited (AGL) in 2006 as a web based business, and we sell to everybody from cruise liners to conference centres, garden centres to the man on the street."

"We need to be as flexible as possible and we need to have as many legs of income coming in as we can get to make the business profitable," added Group CEO, George Mullan. "AGL is something that's been developed in the last four years and is now a key part of the business. It has allowed us to open up a whole new internet market, in particular selling residential landscape turf directly to homeowners, which is a huge growth market."

Eastern Europe

The establishment and success of SIS Manufacturing has also been a major factor in the Groups successful expansion into new markets away from the UK.

"We've had a lot of new business In Eastern Europe, where they don't just want natural pitches but synthetic pitches too," explained International Contracts Director, Phil Blackwell. "So the demand to manufacture, supply and install the carpet as one package, which we do, is a huge advantage for us."

"One of the major advantages of having our own factory is that we can go to them and say, this is what the client wants. If we have to meet a certain set of regulations and none of our products at the moment meet that specification, then we can come up with an entirely new product to meet their standards."

High-Profile Contracts

While it's not the biggest part of SIS Group's business, there is no doubt that pitch installations at major clubs across Europe is the headline grabbing part of the business. ➔



Work at Real Madrid (bottom inset), Athletic Bilbao (top inset), and Real Sociedad in Spain (main picture), as well as Benfica (second from bottom inset) in Portugal are some of SIS's headline-grabbing clients, joining the list are Porto, as well as the National Stadiums of Sweden and Denmark (second from top inset).

Athletic Bilbao



SIS responded to a last minute decision taken by Athletic Bilbao on 4th January 2011 to install a new pitch, once they had played their Spanish Cup game against FC Barcelona the following day, on the 5th January.

SIS mobilised crews and equipment to arrive onsite within 36 hours of the decision being made, with the work scheduled to be completed over the 6-7th January.

The existing pitch surface was removed in 8 hours using SIS's unique SISavator machine. The rootzone was loosened and then graded using a tractor mounted, laser controlled box grader prior to 40mm thick cut turf from Bordeaux in France being installed. Twenty-three trucks were used to transport 7,600m² of turf from the South of France to Bilbao, with the turf being rolled out in place to provide a true finished level to the installation. The pitch was prepared the following week, and staged its first match against Racing Santander just nine days later, on 16th January.

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"We had a good year," said George Mullan about 2010. "We've been doing pretty much all of Real Madrid's work in Spain, along with Real Sociedad and Athletic Bilbao (see above sidebar 'Athletic Bilbao'). We've installed pitches in Portugal at Benfica and Porto, we're doing the national stadiums in Sweden and Denmark, and we have re-turfed the Amsterdam Arena too."

"It's invaluable to have some of the biggest names in Europe," added Phil Blackwell. "When we speak to potential customers they see some of the names on the list and it immediately grabs their attention. It makes them want to listen to us and lets them know they are dealing with a company well thought of in the industry."

Turkish Delight

Another new contract signed for 2011 is for the pitch maintenance at Galatasary's new stadium in Istanbul, Turkey. It marks the beginning of a major new involvement in the country, which has seen the establishment of SIS International, a new branch of the SIS Group.

SIS International are based in Ankara, Turkey, and headed by Ilyas Kobal, who brings with him the current contracts for pitch work at Fenerbahce and Galatasaray.

"We see the Turkish market spending a lot of money on football stadiums and sports facilities in the future," said George Mullan. "To expand our business there, we needed to have local knowledge and offices in the region, and we are confident that Ilyas and his team will expand the sales of our natural grass and synthetic turf."

The proximity of Turkey to other key growth markets for SIS was another reason in establishing the new business.

"We have completed projects in Russia, Ukraine and Azerbaijan in the last two years, and to expand on that side of our business we needed to have local knowledge in the region," added Mullan.

SIS International has also won its first pitch construction contract in Turkmenistan. SIS will work with one of the largest Turkish construction companies, Polimeks, to construct the pitches at the Ashgabad Stadium. The project will commence this March and be completed this June.

It all adds up to another exciting year ahead for the SIS Group. 🌟