

REAL REVENUES

FROM ARTIFICIAL SURFACES

Durham City Football Club created a new model for boosting pitch revenue when it switched to artificial turf. Bill Bedford explains



Durham City FC's 3G pitch generates revenues of £160,000 per annum



Sport and leisure is set to bear the brunt of austerity cuts as councils cut discretionary services and question the viability of keeping community pitches open. The private sector, too, is suffering - particularly smaller clubs faced with mounting utility bills and other overheads, as well as the spectre of falling attendances as the paying public tightens its belt.

So, any moves to maximise revenue from existing outdoor playing surfaces will come as a blessing for both beleaguered sectors.

A solid business model will always look to increase revenue wherever possible, yet community and club sport is only now starting to make the turfgrass assets sweat, despite using indoor facilities to host venues for corporate and private events.

Bolstering revenue from indoor facilities can be a straightforward strategy, but for clubs whose primary asset is natural turf, the process can be a fine balancing act between hiring out playing areas to third parties such as local rugby and football teams, and compromising pitch quality and integrity through overuse. The struggle to utilise pitches while striving to retain a high standard of maintenance remains an issue in the UK, despite our renowned grounds care practices.

Throughout mainland Europe though, the policy of utilising artificial surfaces instead of, or alongside, natural turf is well established due to the significant advancements in the quality of artificial turf since the late 1970s. Past poor experiences of artificial turf have until recently put off many clubs from exploring the virtue of these surfaces for match use, even though they have gained approval from governing bodies such as FIFA, UEFA, the FA and the RFU for use in both the football and rugby World Cup matches and UEFA's Champions League.

Long used in the private school sector and for top-flight hockey, for example, artificial surfaces are making inroads into grassroots sport as clubs and authorities recognise the hefty revenues they can generate from hiring or loaning them out.

Durham City FC presents a fine example of the sort of strain clubs come under in meeting the demands of a season's play and how increasingly clubs are looking to artificial surfaces to ease the burden. On its old natural turf surface, the club averaged 76 games a season with no training, equating to around 152 hours' use in any year. Many professional clubs, football or rugby, are likely to play at most 25 games a season and many will run an alternative training venue, so the intensity of use is substantially less.

The costs associated with maintaining Durham's natural turf were also mounting. At the start of each season, the club paid more than £10,000 to raise pitch quality to a level suitable for play, and was paying a groundsman £100 a week (plus materials) to carry out the work.

The expense of training facilities was proving a drain on resources, too, with the club forced to fork out for senior and youth team training sessions, and hiring out other facilities in the area at a cost of over £6,000 a season. In addition, a series of wet winters meant cancelled games, which caused the club acute problems of having to reschedule fixtures and losing revenue while surfaces weren't in use.

Durham decided to look into the value of replacing the natural turf pitch with an artificial one, a route that eventually brought in the involvement of the Sports and Play Construction Association (SAPCA), which represents constructors and designers of sports playing surfaces. "We'd been looking at the feasibility of installing artificial sports pitches in stadia for some time," explains Dr Colin Young, SAPCA's Technical and Training Manager.

"Our research had led us to investigate the potential value that artificial pitches could offer small and larger clubs; organisations that either had problems maintaining natural turf to a high standard or wanted to explore the use of artificial turf," he continues.

"Durham had been through the planning and feasibility stages with the local representatives from governing bodies. These work with clubs in the early stages to gauge the likely successes and whether there would be a financial benefit to investing in artificial turf. It is at this later stage when our members usually get involved."

While a cost analysis is not part of the service offered by SAPCA, its research and work with clubs around the UK has allowed it to gather vital case study evidence and guidance notes which help raise the profile of artificial pitches and the benefits they can offer. "By collating our findings we can allow clubs about to embark on pitch development to see examples of successful cases and how they can be financially highly rewarding," Colin adds.

Durham has invested in a long-pile third generation (3G) artificial pitch - installed by SAPCA member, Support in Sport - of the specification approved by FIFA in preliminary rounds, and for competitive rugby matches for any event up to a cup final.

"In the UK we've been put off using artificial surfaces since the 1980s when we were one of the first nations to trial them," explains Colin. "After a number of notoriously bad test cases, which found the first generation pitches to be far too hard and unsympathetic for competitive games, clubs have since always been cautious - yet this needn't be the case any longer."

Durham's new surface allows the club to use the facility for all competitive matches and as a training venue, something it didn't do previously. The pitch is used for 30 hours a week (combined 1st team, reserves and youth teams), which includes training and match days. The volume of use possible since the switch has not only substantially reduced maintenance costs but it also generates weekly revenues of £3,200 (about £160,000/annum). Durham hires out the full pitch to local teams at £400 a match, which is about two hours' use per game, and on average it is rented out three times a week. Pitch rental is also offered to five-a-side and seven-a-side teams for 10 hours a week at a cost of £200 an hour.

As well as use by all sections of the club, demand is also high from the local community, so the club has opened up further potential for revenue by splitting the pitch into quarters, which can be hired out separately.

"Durham represents a great example of how, if approached in the right way, artificial pitches offer a longlasting valuable revenue stream, will reduce the cost and need to outsource to other venues and will cut down the maintenance costs," Colin Young concludes.

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