

GROWING MARKET

Paul Haines reports on pitch installation experts, Support in Sport's recent work in Azerbaijan for Gabala FC.



Pitch installation specialists, Support in Sport (SIS), are well known in the industry for laying sports fields at some of Europe's leading soccer clubs, including Real Madrid, Benfica, FC Copenhagen and Ajax. But one of their most recent projects has taken the company much further afield, to the less well known country of Azerbaijan, and the city of Qəbələ (more commonly known as 'Gabala' in Western Europe).

Gabala FC

Gabala FC is a relatively new team, formed as recently as 2005, but they have already become an established part of the

SIS is building four natural turf pitches, one stadium pitch and one synthetic pitch for Gabala FC in a two phased project.

SIS at Gabala FC: The Facts

Three pitches: 105m x 68m with 3m run-off, tiered on three levels over the site

Pitch construction:

Drainage

150mm gravel raft — 3,700m³ total gravel

160mm sand sub-base — 4,000m³ total sand

140mm rootzone (sand & peat mixed onsite), 3,500m³ rootzone including inc 250m³ peat imported from Georgia

Fully automatic SIS design irrigation systems including complete pumping station

Pitches all laser graded with SIS supplied box grader

Pitches seeded with 75% ryegrass & 25% smooth stalked meadow grass seed mix



Azerbaijani first division and have recently begun work on a new stadium and training complex.

For SIS, the opportunity to install the pitches for the new development came as a direct result of their recent work in Angola. Group Chairman and CEO George Mullan explained: "We were approached after the work we did for the African Cup of Nations competition. There aren't many companies who are prepared to travel around the world building high quality pitches, and because we have a complete in-house team and all our own machines, kit and transport, we can move very quickly."

The contract to build four natural turf pitches, one stadium pitch, and one synthetic pitch was signed with Gabala FC in May 2010, with the schedule of work to be split into phases. Phase one involved work at the club's new training complex, and included construction of three of the

natural turf pitches and the synthetic pitch.

SIS's machinery and equipment was shipped from Europe at the end of June 2010, with overall responsibility for the project falling to International Contracts Director, Phil Blackwell. The team started work on site in mid-July, and they initially supervised the groundwork and drainage installations. Once their equipment had arrived, work started on the construction of the pitch profiles and the installation of the irrigation systems.

By the end of September 2010, the project had moved into a six week pitch grow-in and maintenance period, prior to the handing over to the nominated local maintenance contractor, who will nurture the pitches to playing condition ready for next spring.

Off the pitch, Gabala FC have been in the news for appointing former Arsenal FC and England Captain, Tony Adams, as their new manager in May 2010. His presence had an impact on the SIS crew, as Blackwell explained at the time: "Both myself and George [Mullan] have spoken to Tony Adams and met him a few times. He's very keen to keep an eye on what's going on, to see how things are progressing and if there are any problems. He's been really keen to help out wherever he can because he wants the best pitches for the team."

Learning the Lessons

The company's previous experiences of working in Angola and the Ukraine (where SIS laid the pitch at the new Donbass Arena, home of Shakhtar Donetsk) proved

invaluable in planning, logistics and getting the project completed on time.

Phil Blackwell explained: "In the past, we have had problems with customs clearance, getting our machines in and out, and also getting materials in and out. So, here in Azerbaijan, we flagged up these potential problems at the beginning. The Club promised us there would be no problems with customs, and there have been no problems at all."

In a break from the company's usual protocol, SIS also utilised Gabala FC's local knowledge to help source raw materials. "They supplied all the gravel and sand for the pitch construction," confirmed Blackwell. "Normally we supply everything ourselves, but we learnt in Ukraine that when we go to new countries where we have no idea who the suppliers are, or how much it's going to cost, there can be problems. Here we said at the beginning to the client, look, you've got the local contacts, you know the area, so we tell you what we want, we'll specify it, you supply it, and then we'll go and install it. That has worked very well, and it has also saved the client money."

It's not only transporting equipment and sourcing materials that can cause logistical headaches when working in new countries, as Blackwell highlighted: "From our time in Africa we learnt that there are some things you just can't get locally, like basic workshop tools, a sand testing kit, or even a good first aid kit. We tried to prepare ourselves but we learnt that we didn't take anywhere near enough stuff. Now we are much more self sufficient. We came out of Africa with a huge list, and whilst the project in Azerbaijan is on a much smaller scale, it has worked really well."

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Despite all the lessons learned, there have still been some unexpected challenges facing the SIS team, as Blackwell outlined: "It was very, very hot in the summer, over 40 degrees Celsius, so it's been quite a difficult environment to work in. It's also taken us a bit longer than normal to be honest, because we had to come off site for a week and wait for a local contractor to complete all the civil works. It's another one of those things you have to consider when you come and work in a different country."

Phase Two at Gabala FC

With phase one of the Gabala project nearing completion, SIS are now looking ahead to the next stage of the contract, as Chairman and CEO George Mullan explained: "From a company point of view, Azerbaijan is turning out to be an extremely good market, not only for our natural grass pitches but also for our synthetic turf — around 8,000m² of synthetic turf has been installed at Gabala's training academy, all manufactured by SIS's dedicated UK-based factory."

Mullan continued: "Next year we are contracted to build another new grass pitch at the training centre, plus a new stadium pitch, and there is also an order from a different football club for a full size synthetic pitch at the end of this year or early next."

Developing Opportunities

At a time when much of the Western European economy is struggling, and investment in stadium infrastructure is declining, the opportunities for SIS in new and developing markets are crucial for the future growth of the business.

Mullan highlighted: "We are trying to sell our expertise into viable markets. Two years ago 70% of our business was in Europe, now 70% is in Eastern Europe and Africa."

Blackwell sees this shift continuing, as the company seeks to capitalise on the projects they have completed in Angola,

Ukraine and now in Gabala. "We have found from this and the contract in the Ukraine that there is a huge gap in the market out there. We'd like to think in the next few years it can be open up for us, because there are no dedicated pitch construction companies in this part of the world," he explained.

For Mullan, future growth in the region will also have to be driven by basic economics — a prospective club's ability to pay for the higher quality of product and service that SIS can provide. "From our side it's about finding clubs that are prepared to pay a price for a job that we think will be done to a much higher standard than by local companies. We have all the necessary kit and we have a dedicated crew, including

irrigation and under-soil heating specialists. We can literally put our team on a plane, send out the trucks and equipment and in a matter of days we can be on site, self sufficient and getting on with the work," he said.

Despite the changing geography of their clients, the summer 2010 break was still busy for SIS across some of the leading venues in Western Europe. New pitches have been installed at Benfica's Stadium of Light, at the Råsunda Stadium in Stockholm, and at Real Sociedad's home stadium, Anoeta, whilst four new pitches were also installed at Real Madrid's Sport's City training centre. 🌟



Great pitches for great clubs

BENFICA: Estadio da Luz natural turf pitch

REAL MADRID : Natural turf training centre and Bernabeu Stadium

REAL SOCIEDAD: Anoeta stadium natural turf pitch

FC GABALA : Three natural turf pitches at training complex Azerbaijan

ARMPHORPE SCHOOL: New synthetic turf FIH approved pitch

BURNAGE RFC : New synthetic turf IRB approved rugby pitch

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