

Chris Hague, Head Groundsman at the Parken Stadium in Denmark, was one of a number of groundsman hand-picked by Support in Sport, to work at the Africa Cup of Nations.

Here, he gives an overview of working in Africa



#### Introduction

The Africa Cup of Nations was first held in 1958. It was sanctioned by the Confederation of African Nations (CAN) and is a biennial competition between the top sixteen international teams in Africa. Angola was selected as host for the this year's tournament.

Support in Sport (SIS) was awarded the contract to design and build the football pitches.

The Republic of Angola is situated in south central Africa and was a Portuguese overseas territory from the 16th century to 1975. Following independence, an intense civil war was fought between 1975 to 2002.

The country's resources include oil and diamonds, however, its life expectancy and infant mortality rates are both ranked amongst the worst in the world. In August 2006, a peace treaty was signed with a faction of the FLEC, a separatist guerrilla group from the Cabinda enclave in the north, which is still active. About 65% of Angola's oil comes from that region.

I have enjoyed a successful relationship with SIS in previous years. George Mullan of SIS contacted myself, Alan Ferguson of Ipswich Town and Steve Bache of Hampden Park, amongst others, to ensure the tournament preparations were successful.

The scale of the project in Angola, considering the time frame, was immense. The brief to SIS was to design and build fifteen pitches. Stadiums at Benguela, Lubango, Cabinda and the capital, Luanda, would stage the matches, with training centres at each location.

SIS completed all pitches for the CAN 2010 in early November, with the tournament due to commence on the 10th January.

# In to Africa!

#### Angola

Arriving in Angola was like the first day at school, I did not know what to expect.

The flight from Copenhagen to Luanda was smooth, but then I had to connect to Lubango where I would be based. "Passengers" are given receipts and then have to "wait" for the opportunity to collect a boarding pass. Much of my childhood was spent growing up in licensed premises, and I imagine the desk attendants having the same feeling I use to get at last orders, with everyone in the pub demanding serving. In fear of spending the rest of your days in Luanda airport you have to lose the English gent's approach. Back to my school days I now have found a use for "British Bulldogs".

Telmo Manuel Pesserio greeted me at Lubango airport and we were given a tour of the grounds under our responsibility. Estadio Nacional Da Tundvala is a 20,000 seated main stadium. Nossa Senhora do Monte, Ferroviario and Benfica comprised the training grounds. At Benfica I met John Tate, a much travelled greenkeeper who, along with Telmo, had been establishing the pitches the previous few weeks. John had experience of working in Africa and understood the climate.

I arrived on 6th January, with training sessions scheduled for four days later and the first games on the 13th January. Most groundsman who have worked in tournaments will confess that the pitch is not always considered when scheduling fixtures. I am not a groundsman who gets overly concerned regarding the usage of a football pitch.

One strategy is to inform of the consequences of any proposals, and potentially educate the planners. It is also advisable to get the teams onsite, and we managed to achieve that in the first few days of training.

Cameroon, Gabon, Tunisia and Zambia were based in Lubango, and COCAN, the organisers, had scheduled morning and afternoon training sessions to be distributed across the three training facilities.

It became apparent that the schedules may not be accurate - I had been asked by Zambia, on day two, what time they would train the following day. Requesting more precise

information from COCAN, I was informed that "it was in the hands of the Gods".

Welcome to Africa!!

#### Turf

The grass cover on the pitches was excellent, with 100% rye grass. Complications, such as no water during the establishment, had reduced the grow-in period. A nutritional and irrigation programme had been advised which was designed to encourage rapid development of the plant. As a consequence of the programme, and the Mediterranean climate, disease was present. Pythium "damping off" developed, so we decided on a cultural control solution. Turning off the irrigation and fertiliser spreader we allowed the climate to enervise the grass. The pitches dried out and the attack was controlled. A preventative foliar of low N, wetting agent and fungicide was applied midway through the schedule.

The stadium pitch required different management. Soil and sand suppliers in Angola do not possess the range of products we are used to in Europe. The rootzones for all the pitches in Lubango were coarser than ideal. Stability was a consideration. Rooting was encouraging, but the texture of the soil inhibited binding.

The schedule for the stadium included four training sessions on 12th January with two matches, Cameroon v Gabon and Zambia v Tunisia on the following day. In total, the stadium pitch would stage six training sessions and seven matches between 12th and 24th January.

The maintenance plan for the stadium comprised match day preparations and allowing the pitch as much time as we could to rest and recover. The pitch was established from seed, but our techniques were similar to that used on a newly laid turf pitch. Wetting and rolling was the key, and worry about the consequences on 25th January! Giving the surface extra weight and firming enabled us to stabilise the pitch. The teams and management were extremely satisfied.

#### Resources

Machinery for the maintenance works was restricted until the last day of our programme. A truck arrived on the 24th, match day, and

off loaded a wide range of kit. All the machinery will stay in Lubango.

For the training grounds and the stadium we used two triples, one heavy, pedestrian 36in mower, spray linermarker, tractor with sprayer/spreader and a vertidrain.

Each day, a collection of local workers would be waiting at Ferrovia training ground. Working with the local men and women of all ages gave me an insight into the lives of the local people. I was privileged to be accommodated in a villa with cooks, cleaners,

drivers and security guards. Many of the locals live in shacks with no water or electric. The women generally work harder than the men, but are paid less. I did not want to upset that theory, so ensured I did not break sweat for the duration!

Working with the locals at times was inspirational, and you do find yourself taking a step out of the 9-5 and considering how we live our lives. The locals offered me a new title and I was now, officially, Mr. Chris.

The final game finished with a penalty

shoot-out and, from a football perspective, that's about as exciting as it got. The standard of football was disappointing, especially when you consider the quality of some of the players in the tournament. The crowds, although not high in numbers, were high in spirits and a real sense of Africa was felt inside the stadium.

I appreciate that this report does not contain much grass science or technical data, but hope it offers an insight into my experience working in Angola.

Cheers, Mr Chris.



Nossa Senhora do Monte



Ferrovia



Benfica



#### **How did you become involved and when where you awarded the contract?**

SIS was approached by both the Confederation of African Football and the organisers to carry out a review of the pitches and training centres in Angola. We have installed pitches at FC Porto, Benfica and Sporting Lisbon in Portugal, and there are very close connections between Angola and Portugal as it is a former Portuguese colony.

#### **How many pitches/stadiums were you involved with ?**

We built fourteen pitches in total - four stadium pitches and ten training pitches.

#### **What was the total cost of the pitch builds?**

SIS had two contracts in Angola, the construction contract was for \$16.0 million, and this included all pitch constructions and the sales of construction equipment. The second contract was for the maintenance of all pitches before, during and after the tournament until the end of March. The value of this contract was \$10.0 million.

#### **What was the timescale?**

The project was due to start in May 2009, but did not actually start until July. We completed all pitch constructions by the end of October.

#### **What logistic problems did you have in terms of labour, machinery, materials and water?**

In total we had twenty-two SIS staff working full time on the project, plus we hired another twenty plus locals to work with us. Importing machines was difficult due to red tape. The supply of sand and gravel to sites took longer than expected (80,000 tonnes of sand and

22,000 tonnes of gravel) as we were located in four cities. Water was a key issue on some sites.

#### **How many British groundsmen did you employ and what was their role?**

During construction we had all SIS staff but, for the tournament, I brought in Alan Ferguson (Ipswich Town FC), Chris Hague (Parker Stadium, Norway) and Stephen Bache (Hampden Park) to manage the stadium pitches, coordinate the training programmes for the teams and, in general, bring a professional approach to this aspect of the tournament.

#### **How many local people were employed and what was their role?**

Twenty in construction and about forty in maintenance. Our objective was to train a group of locals in maintenance so that they could carry on when we departed in March. So far this has worked.

#### **Where did you source your machinery and materials?**

We sourced all machines and materials from Europe. We purchased eleven tractors, plus trailers, sprayers, mowers etc. through the UK, Portugal and Holland. In all we purchased over £1.0million of equipment.

#### **What was the general spec of the pitches?**

All pitches were Bermuda Princess grass, with the exception of the city of Lubango which was ryegrass. Construction was standard - 100mm of gravel, 250mm of sand and 100mm of rootzone. The rootzone was mixed on site and the peat imported.

#### **What problems, if any, did you encounter during the building of the pitches?**

I could write a book here but, suffice to say, it was the greatest challenge any of us has ever had.

#### **Maintenance of pitches - what was the height of cut, mowing frequency, feeding etc?**

The Bermuda was cut daily to 23mm, with

feeding every eight days. It was very intensive

#### **Were there any disease and turf issues?**

No major issues.

#### **Were the organisers pleased with the final product?**

Yes, very pleased, even though they did their best to destroy the main stadium pitch by having 9,000 people dancing on it for three nights before the opening game! All pitches played well and Samuel Eto'o was quoted as saying "The best pitches he has ever played on in any Africa Cup of Nations".

#### **How did they perform?**

They all played well, but the tournament had only four stadiums, and each stadium had nine games, nine training sessions, a warm up session of four hours - and all of this is in twenty days. That is too intensive for the Angolan climate - we were lucky we brought Stephen, Chris and Alan over with us.

#### **What did you learn from this experience?**

We have written a four page document on how to do it again. The bottom line is everything takes much longer. You need patience and be prepared to think outside of the box. It is difficult working in an environment where you are surrounded by poverty and people dying.

#### **It must have been very rewarding to see the pitches in action?**

Absolutely, and the feedback was excellent. We have gained considerable expertise and have been invited to four countries to discuss their existing stadiums and facilities.

#### **What will happen to the pitches now and who will be looking after them?**

We have trained local people. I hope the pitches will survive after we leave as we have put a huge amount of work into them. You can never know, but they have all the machines and the knowledge, so fingers crossed!

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# Project Angola ...

Support in Sport won the contract to build the pitches for the Africa Cup of Nations tournament held in Angola. In a Q&A session their Managing Director, George Mullens, gives an insight into the complexities of the project