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The Kassam Stadium

In another league

Jane Carley reports on a new hybrid pitch from GreenFields that has transformed Oxford United's Kassam Stadium and seen the team gain promotion to Football League One in their first season playing on it. In this article, she talks to the GreenFields team charged with its maintenance, Grounds Manager Ben Grigor **and Head Groundsman Paul Currier Snr**



Oxford United FC has a lot to look forward to this season, with promotion to League One and home games on a new pitch at the Kassam Stadium which has proved to offer significant improvements in quality and consistency in its first season.

Leicester City, who played their only English pre-season friendly against Oxford United in front of a 9,000-strong crowd in July, and who know a thing or two about rising fortunes, were highly complimentary about the new XtraGrass pitch, just seven weeks after its first annual renovation.

XtraGrass supplier GreenFields (Sports Surfaces) UK Ltd installed the new pitch in summer 2015, and is closely involved with its ongoing maintenance as part of the contract with Oxford United's management.

It is a hybrid system which features the reinforcement of natural grass with artificial turf, generating a high wear capacity capable of delivering up to 1,000 hours per annum, whilst providing a consistently stable playing surface to significantly reduce the number of injuries.

The stadium, which has a 12,500 capacity, is named after Firoz Kassam, a businessman and former chairman who purchased the club in 1999, and hosted its first football match on 4th August 2001. As well as being the home to Oxford United, the stadium has hosted a rugby club in the past, and the durability of any new pitch to cope with dual use - should it be required - was an important consideration.

At the end of the 2014/15 season, the full sized 114m x 73m (8,322m²) carpet was installed widthways over the contours of the pitch in 3650mm wide rolls, with the rolls then seamed together by GreenFields specialist seaming team. Grass seed was then applied which, when fully grown, constituted up to 93% natural grass per m². For a professional finish, synthetic turf was used to provide logo mats around the pitch which incorporates the GreenFields logo and the club's classic ox head logo.

The quality of the new pitch at the Kassam Stadium has been recognised by more than just players - it was chosen by the International Football Pitch Advisory (IFPA) as the most improved pitch from the 2015/16 season in League Two.

Getting the best out of XtraGrass requires high standards of groundsmanship, and clubs need to recruit and retain experienced, top quality groundsmen



The stadium has an open aspect, which allows more light in but also makes the pitch more vulnerable to winter conditions


Head Groundsman Paul Currier Snr

Other accolades include a nomination as one of the best three playing surfaces in this league from the STRI (Sports Turf Research Institute), by whom the Kassam Stadium and GreenFields Head Groundsman, Paul Currier Snr were 'highly commended'.

The nomination was based on a combination of match reports from referees officiating at the ground and marks awarded by the away managers. Also taken into consideration were the pitch marks given by the Playing Surfaces Committee, who recorded an average mark in January 2016 of 4.35 out of a possible score of 5 with a divisional average of 3.91.

"These awards are all down to Paul and his dedication to his role," comments GreenFields Grounds Manager Ben Grigor. "Getting the best out of XtraGrass requires high standards of groundsmanship, and clubs need to recruit and retain experienced, top quality groundsmen."

The hybrid system combines the positive properties of natural grass with the synthetic fibres, giving the visual impact needed for the television cameras - even in the depths of winter - whilst maintaining stability and minimising divoting, he points out.

The pitch is constructed in a conventional manner, using a rootzone layer over a gravel raft or other drainage system, with the synthetic carpet installed 50mm deep and the chosen infill placed in a 35mm layer before the grass seed is sown into it using a tractor-mounted seeder.

Grass mixtures and maintenance regimes are tailored to the needs of the individual stadium.

"Every stadium has its own challenges - the Kassam is quite open so there is more light than at an encapsulated stadium, but it is also vulnerable to the cold," comments Ben.

"Waterlogging was also a huge issue. But the improved infiltration offered by this system has overcome this without having to invest in additional drainage."

"The previous pitch was very muddy on one side," recalls Paul, "and lost fixtures were a regularity. But, with correct maintenance, the new pitch has completely turned this around and we did not lose a single fixture

Waterlogging was also a huge issue. But the improved infiltration offered by this system has overcome this without having to invest in additional drainage


Manoeuvring the synthetic carpet



Synthetic mats incorporate the Greenfields and Oxford United logos ... and Ben Grigor

There is never any standing water on the pitch and, whilst there may be scars in areas of high wear, it doesn't divot so it is much easier to repair after a match

last season. In fact, when supporters were phoning the club in the run up to Christmas to see if the match was still on after prolonged wet weather, I was watering the pitch!"

Paul's tender loving care was needed to get the pitch established when he was recruited to Oxford United from Northampton Town in August 2015 but, with judicious watering and fertilising, the playing surface was produced to optimum condition in just three weeks.

"There is never any standing water on the pitch and, whilst there may be scars in areas of high wear, it doesn't divot so it is much easier to repair after a match," he comments. "I was confident about XtraGrass from the start and it has totally transformed this pitch."

Aeration is carried out as needed at various depths and, in the peak growing season, Paul can be mowing on a daily basis with cut heights at 24-30mm.

"Good groundsmanship is key, such as knowing when to swap to a rotary mower if conditions dictate that traffic management on the pitch is needed. There's no undersoil heating, so growth from October/November has to last until the grass starts growing again, thus avoiding turf damage is important," says Ben.

He mainly plays a support role at the Kassam, and Paul has built a strong working

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Small scars from player traffic can be seen, but there is no divoting which makes renovation easier



Removing the previous surface before the XtraGrass surface was installed

XtraGrass specification

- Patented grass reinforcement system where natural grass grows through a specially woven synthetic carpet, constructed from pre-formed synthetic turf with partially bio-gradeable backing
- Fabric: V-shaped and oval fibres
- Integrated hot melt coating
- 100% recyclable - materials from same product family (polypropylene/polyethylene)



relationship with the Oxford United management, so back-up for labour intensive jobs, such as laying and removing frost covers, can be sourced from the junior team.

"The club also understands the importance of protecting the pitch, by not using it for too many non-football activities," Ben comments.

Renovations this summer included stripping off the top layer before aerating, topdressing and seeding in three directions and an application of fertiliser.

"As the pitch is only used for football, wear tends to be in a 'diamond' pattern, although the stadium also loses grass cover where the main stand blocks sunlight," he explains. "One benefit of the fibres is that they improve appearance in worn areas at the end of the season, which is useful in such prominent positions. But, most importantly, traction and surface stability is also maintained throughout."

"Using XtraGrass means that clubs with limited budgets and resources can still produce good pitches - even if the turf is worn, the pitch remains safe, stable and flat to the end of the season."

He points out that the ever tighter renovation windows also put pressure on ground staff to establish new turf in time for early fixtures but, here too, the stable base provided by the synthetic reinforcement fibres ensures a quality playing surface from the first match.

Ben adds that, whilst this type of pitch may represent a significant investment for a smaller club, it is still considerably less than many of the alternative systems.

"XtraGrass can perform just as well as a more costly pitch, as long as it is well maintained. It also has a long lifespan - the pitch at The Kassam Stadium is guaranteed for ten years, but research has shown that its life expectancy could be far in excess of this. System replacement is also much easier, as it's simply a case of replacing the top 40mm of rootzone."

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Sand is applied to the newly laid pitch