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Synthetic turf in tennis court installations: an emerging market

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By Mary Helen Sprecher

Tennis whites and green grass courts have long been associated with Wimbledon, and with the elite players who qualify to play there. Of course, it's not just the image of the well-moneyed strawberries and champagne crowd that has kept most people from attempting to put those courts in clubs and schools across the US—it's been the thought of the upkeep.

But given the increasing use of synthetic turf in athletic installations, maybe it's time to re-examine that idea. Tennis court builders say there is merit in using synthetic in a variety of situations. All the idea needs is a push.

"We are installing more and more every year and I think it's a great product," says Eric Loftus of Cape & Island Tennis & Track in Pocasset, MA. "I play on it once a week myself."

The option of a new synthetic turf court is something many players may find attractive. Its drainage system allows it to be playable minutes after a heavy rain (alas, not something you'll find at Wimbledon) and multiple matches can be run across it without it needing rest. It's also softer than asphalt and cleaner than clay.

An additional bonus is the ability of the owner to select an appropriate color. While many courts are the green that is associated with Wimbledon, it's also possible to create an effect that simulates the mowing patterns. A dark brown or dark red carpet will give the appearance of clay, for those yearning for a French Open-inspired design.

According to Rick Burke of NGI Systems in Chattanooga, TN another advantage of turf is its ability to be tailored to allow for maximum return on investment.

"Technically, the face weight (amount of yarn per square yard), gauge of the product (width of rows at which the product is tufted) and the type of yarn utilized in construction will dictate longevity and durability of the product. Therefore, a slightly shorter and denser construction means the infill is more contained, allowing for better traction and less abrasion to the surface fibers. The court will generally wear better and play more consistently. This is true for all turf courts, aggregate infilled and artificial clay infilled construction."

Additionally, he says, the depth and type of the infill used creates the cushioning effect of the surface and also determines the ball speed and playability of the surface. Various infill materials are available on the market; facility owners should speak with the builder about the type of play the court will host, and what the preference of the playing crowd might be.

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Burke also notes that among the innovations on the market is the ability for the user to choose between polypropylene (PP) and polyethylene (PE) yarns.

"PE yarns, although more expensive, are a more durable fiber system as opposed to a PP (plastic) yarn," he states. "Comparative test results show that the newer PE product has a better wear feature as evidenced through wear (taber) abrasion tests and stud testing. The "stud test," completed at 15,000 wear cycles has proven the PE yarns improved wear ability over PP to be 500 percent better wear."

Use of turf as an overlay

Often, a turf court is used as an overlay for an existing facility, such as that made out of asphalt or concrete, which has become badly weathered or cracked. It is essential to note, however, that a turf court is only as good as the pavement it is laid on; therefore, a cracked pavement must be leveled to insure planarity. If it is not, the turf will wear unevenly and the cracking will be visible as uneven areas in the playing surface. Once that type of wear becomes apparent, the surface must be completely replaced; resurfacing is not a possibility.

"It is a great option as an overlay for an older asphalt court for two reasons: it adds cushion and is a middle of the road project price-wise when considering repair vs. reconstruction," notes Loftus.

Turf courts are also viewed as excellent options for difficult installations, such as those on rooftops.

As with turf facilities used for other sports, there are multiple advantages, including the ability to permanently line the facility for play, including youth play. There are also the disadvantages including the warmer playing surface, the need to keep the turf clean of impurities, and the higher cost to repair damages caused by improper use, vandalism, etc. In fact, because of that cost, it is not recommended as a tennis surface in installations that will not be supervised, or which might be subject to vandalism.

Other sports on the courts

While many fields can be marked with lines for other sports (leading to one field with three, four or more sets of lines on it), it's not often one sees a tennis court lined for other play, at least not outside of municipal settings. And there's a reason for that. According to the rules of the sport, courts for sanctioned play must be lined for tennis only, meaning they cannot include lines for basketball or any other sports. (In recent years, however, the rules were relaxed to allow youth tennis lines for shorter court play to appear on a court; however, they cannot appear in white, and it is recommended they be lined in a color that can be seen against the court surface, but will not pose a distraction to players.)

If a turf court is set up on a field where other sports are hosted, it is essential the court not only be built using proper dimensions but that all clearances behind baselines and outside sidelines be observed. If net posts will be removed to allow play for other sports, the postholes must be capped to eliminate the risk of injury to field sports players.

Maintenance

Maintenance of a turf tennis court is not unlike that of a sports field:

Preseason maintenance will include looking for standing water (a sign of non-functioning drains) that can result in slick areas, and ascertaining that playing lines are still bright and visible.

Regular maintenance includes brushing to make sure infill is distributed consistently over the court surface, and to keep the turf fibers standing up. Periodic watering will assist in compacting the fill uniformly and keeping the courts cool for comfortable play. (Just as with a sports field, a turf tennis court will hold heat.) Club courts should be brushed every week to maintain optimal playing quality.

Regularly remove debris including leaves, pine needles and more by using a leaf rake and shovel, a leaf collector or a blower. Courts may need to be checked for torn or loose seams, repaired as necessary, and to have algaecide and/or fungicide applied as necessary.

Manufacturers of specific turf systems will be able to provide directions indigenous to their brands, including instructions for cleaning, stain removal and so forth.

Whether it's a new court or a rehab of an existing project, the bottom line is the same: You want a good facility that is going to be enjoyable to use. For this reason, the planning part of your project is as important as the construction.

All tennis courts, when built, must conform to the rules of the sport, as promulgated in the U.S. by the United States Tennis Association. (A publication, [START ITAL]Tennis Courts: A Construction & Maintenance Manual[END ITAL], is jointly published by the USTA and the American Sports Builders Association, and can provide owners with information regarding design, construction, amenities, accessories, lighting and more.)

In addition, invest time wisely by finding the right partner. Seek out a tennis court professional who has worked with turf installations; experience is very important since tennis court construction requires specialized knowledge of the sport and its facilities.

Mary Helen Sprecher wrote this on behalf of the American Sports Builders Association (ASBA), a non-profit association helping designers, builders, owners, operators and users understand quality sports facility



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construction. The ASBA sponsors informative meetings and publishes newsletters, books and technical construction guidelines for athletic facilities including tennis courts and sports fields. It also offers voluntary certification programs in sports facility construction and maintenance. Available at no charge is a listing of all publications offered by the Association, as well as the ASBA's Membership Directory. Info: 866-501-ASBA (2722) or www.sportsbuilders.org

Image courtesy of Pro-Sport Construction, Inc., Devon, PA

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