

Natural Turf Pitches

Policy Development Proposal to the Facilities Trust

RUGBY FOOTBALL LEAGUE



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Authored by: Carol Doran

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Natural Turf Pitches

Policy Development Proposal to the Facilities Trust

Recommendation

- Establish standards and specifications for the construction and maintenance of natural turf pitches to support all-year-round performance at community club through to elite level
- Develop a PQS (Performance Quality Standard) document including a test methodology for use by Club Grounds Staff and Local Authorities to assess the quality of Rugby League pitches in partnership with TGMS (natural and synthetic turf consultants), IOG (Institute of Groundsmanship), Labosport (sport research organisation), SAPCA (Sport and Play Constructors Association) and Sport England
- Develop a Rugby League Pitch Guidance document with recommended schedules for maintenance to support playing program
- Establish a Training and Development Framework for voluntary and professional Rugby League Grounds Staff
- Host an Annual Rugby League Grounds Staff Conference with relevant partners
- Include the standard of pitches and the qualifications and professional development of Grounds Staff at professional level within the Licensing criteria
- Include the training and development of Grounds Staff within Clubmark Gold criteria
- Become members of the Institute of Groundsmanship to enable clubs to benefit from the support available
- Work closely with other grass pitch sport NGB's, Sport England and the IOG to improve standards, increase understanding and ensure that pitches are at the forefront of thinking when developing sports strategies
- Further develop the Grass Pitch Remediation program and assess the potential of revenue stream funding for pitch maintenance work.

Introduction and background

Whilst the RFL currently has no documented evidence, it is reasonable to assume that natural turf pitches have a greater impact on the Rugby League playing program than any other facility type or, indeed, any other issue that may occur within the game. The loss of pitches due to weather conditions, poor maintenance or a general lack of availability not only affects training and match play, but can also drive down participation and have a damaging impact on the financial sustainability of a club.

It is therefore essential that we provide clear guidance to the game on making the best possible use of this important asset.

The RFL does not currently define standards and specifications for the construction and maintenance of pitches or hold detailed information on the general quality of pitches within the sport. It is therefore difficult to assess whether the pitches used are fit-for-purpose. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that the majority of pitches are poor, inadequately maintained and in some areas clubs have to train and play on several pitches across a whole Local Authority area. Even at Superleague level a lack of access to quality pitches can result in the team and coaching staff having to be nomadic to meet their needs.

The role of Groundsman is one that can often be underestimated within sport; however the impact of a competent groundsman can be very significant. The RFL does not currently provide training and development opportunities, include Grounds Staff specifically within its own Volunteer development programs, Clubmark criteria or have any communication and support framework specifically targeted at Grounds Staff.

Research carried out by the Sports Industry Research Centre at Hallam University found that Low pay, poor progression; the structure of training for grounds staff and the ageing grounds maintenance workforce are all noted as being concerns for the industry. It is equally true of the community game that there are few young volunteer Grounds Staff.

Research carried out by the ECB has found that the pitches that are maintained by their professional or volunteer Grounds Staff are significantly better quality than those maintained by the Local Authority. The ECB have developed an extensive training program for their Grounds Staff and there are over 1,000 attendees at all courses over the year. This has clearly had a significant impact on the quality of cricket pitches.

In the current economic climate pitch maintenance programs carried out by Local Authorities will come under increasing pressure. Lack of investment could have a significant impact on the Rugby League playing program; however developing volunteer Grounds Staff to enable clubs to take on the responsibility for ongoing maintenance may not only improve long term quality but may also offer an opportunity for clubs to request greater security of tenure in return. It is likely that asset transfer and asset disposal will be higher on the agenda of Local Authorities and Rugby League needs to be prepared to work within this new environment in order to improve the future security and quality of pitches

Standards and Specifications

The RFL is currently conducting research into the qualities that make a good Rugby League pitch as part of its ongoing development of a specification for Artificial Grass Pitches. The pitch selected as representative of a good quality playing surface is the KC Stadium pitch in Hull. Feedback from elite level players is that it has good grass length, is level and firm and supports a dynamic style of play. Four additional community pitches have been selected for testing; ranging from good to very poor. This work will form the basis for the development of a specification.

The existing PQS (Performance Quality Standards) for Rugby Union will not cover Rugby League as the differences in the way both codes are played means that Rugby League has a different performance standard requirement from natural turf pitches.



Further work will be required to establish a construction specification, pitch standard and the ongoing maintenance schedules required to ensure continuing quality. Sport England and TGMS Ltd will work with the RFL, commencing in October 2010, to develop the construction specification in support of the Grass Pitch Remediation program. The program will include a thorough assessment of 24 Rugby League pitches by Agronomists in the first year and will also support the

development of maintenance schedules in partnership with TGMS. The results of the tests carried out by Labosport will be fed into this development work and further advice will be sought from the IOG

The resulting technical guidance documentation will be a major step forward for Rugby League in both understanding and improving this key sports facility and in being able to establish and provide training and development for its workforce of volunteer and professional Grounds Staff.



The work currently taking place is outlined below:

- Labosport are conducting tests on 5 selected Rugby League pitches to define the standard for pitch performance for AGPs
- Specification of construction and pitch performance is being developed with TGMS and Sport England for natural turf
- Development of a PQS document for Rugby League natural turf pitches which includes, the standards and specifications, test methodology and PQS tables in partnership with TGMS, IOG, SAPCA and Sport England
- The first phase of the Grass Pitch Remediation is being delivered over the next 18 months
- Discussions with IOG commenced in order to explore the development of bespoke training schedule

Training and Development Framework

It is essential that the work of Grounds Staff within Rugby League is recognised for its enormous contribution to the sport and that it becomes a core factor in the development of the game.

In order to develop a Training and Development Framework the following should be carried out:

- Training and developments needs analysis
- Training requirements and records system established
- Career development path established
- Program of monitoring and evaluation established
- A system of recognition established that rewards excellence



Training Courses

The IOG has developed training courses for Grounds Staff and can tailor courses specifically for Rugby League. The following courses are recommended as the basis for the RFL's Training program

- 1 Day Foundation Course – basics of preparation and maintenance Spring/Summer
- 1 Day Foundation Course – basics of renovation and maintenance Autumn/Winter

Both of the above courses should be attended by Grounds Staff as part of the Clubmark Gold criteria

- 1 Day Introduction to the theory of Turf Culture
- 1 Day Advanced Theory of Turf Culture
- 2 Day Management of Sports Turf

All of the above courses should be attended by professional club Grounds Staff as part of the Licensing criteria. The courses can also be attended by volunteer Grounds Staff should they wish.

- 1 Day Management Course

The above should be attended by Superleague club Grounds Staff as part of the Licensing Criteria

- Maintenance of Artificial Grass Pitches

The above should be attended where relevant to the organisation

Framework

In order to ensure that Grounds Staff are adequately supported and valued it is recommended that a Grounds Staff Steering Group should be established to share best practice, raise issues and to provide a communication framework.

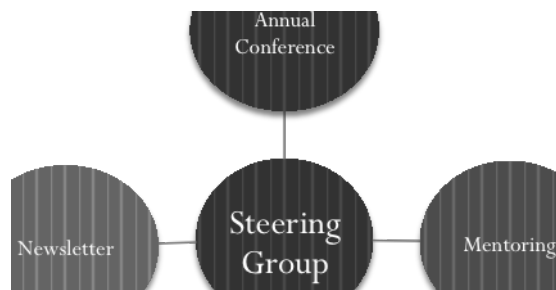
A mentoring system for younger practitioners would also support the sharing of knowledge, skills and experience

FIGURE 1 RFL GROUNDS STAFF TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK



The distribution of a Groundsman Newsletter could be used to inform Grounds Staff of new developments, best practice, and future training and conference events with contributions from partner organisations. The communication framework could be further developed by the hosting of a Rugby League Ground Staff Annual Conference

FIGURE 2 COMMUNICATIONS FRAMEWORK



Further Research Requirements

It is recommended that the RFL conduct the following research:

Research Aim: To develop a clear understanding of the specifications and standards required of natural turf pitches in a Rugby League environment and of the training and support needs of all Grounds Staff within the game

Research Objectives:

Objective 1: Investigate a suitable and appropriate Test Methodology for the assessment of all standards of Rugby League natural turf pitch

Objective 2: Conduct Grounds Staff training and development Needs Analysis in order to develop appropriate training schedules and guidance documentation

Objective 3: Investigate more thoroughly the quality of existing Rugby League pitches and the current impact on the game

Objective 4: Monitor the impact of improved pitches and maintenance standards

Further information

- [Institute of Groundmanship](#) – IOG Website
- www.sapca.org.uk – Sports And Play Constructors Association website
- www.tgms.co.uk – TGMS website
- [Sport England - Natural Turf Pitches](#) – Sport England Design Guidance Notes which includes a document for Natural Turf Pitches