

GoffonRugby: Turfed In!

Written by Alex Goff

Tuesday, 22 January 2013 18:47

Artificial turf in rugby is a funny thing. It's been legal for years, and been approved for test matches by the International Rugby Board, and yet we in the game remain very reluctant to use the surface for high-level games.

The NA4 was supposed to be played on artificial turf in 2008, but at the last minute the surface was deemed not up to snuff. The ARC was played on fake grass this year, which was a bit of a milestone, and around the USA clubs, colleges and high schools routinely play on the stuff. The Super League final was played on turf.



Turf makes sense for a lot of American teams because it's durable, and organizations such as park departments and colleges who don't know how rugby wears a field don't get nervous when the turf fields are used in rain.

But with a couple of exceptions, we haven't seen turf embraced at the higher end – the major championships, internationals.

And I think the reason is because we in America seem to spend so much time apologizing for

GoffonRugby: Turfed In!

Written by Alex Goff

Tuesday, 22 January 2013 18:47

ourselves, for our undercutting of what is traditional and classic, and artificial playing surfaces is a classic example – the image of neon-uniformed baseball players playing on a carpet under a roof springs to mind.

Baseball, and then football, used turf extensively long before other sports around the world embraced it. Donald Honig published his series of short baseball biographies, titled *When the Grass was Real*, in 1975 – 38 years ago artificial turf was deemed to be here to stay.

So we crass Americans ruined good sport by taking the mud and grass-stains out of it and putting it on plastic. If we did that to our hallowed games of baseball and football, we sure as heck weren't going to do it to rugby. We needed someone else to do it.

And that is where Saracens comes in. At 139 years old, Saracens is one of the oldest and most respected clubs in England. But their home ground has not been up to snuff. USA fullback Chris Wyles, who is a regular starter for Saracens, was diplomatic recently when discussing Vicarage Road with RUGBYMag.com, saying: "it's no secret that the atmosphere is not the best."

So Saracens decided to build a new stadium, and in doing so decided to put artificial turf in as the playing surface.

This has shaken up observers in the halls of traditional rugby. Playing good, proper, muddy English rugby on synthetic grass with ground up tires (sorry, tyres) for dirt? Unimaginable!

Except that it has been imagined. Such a surface will make Allianz Park essentially immune to the bane of English winter sports, the frozen ground, and will make snow or rain a minor nuisance.

Wyles also pointed out to RUGBYMag.com another benefit of the new pitch – because turf is so durable, it will be used constantly.

GoffonRugby: Turfed In!

Written by Alex Goff

Tuesday, 22 January 2013 18:47

“It will be a venue for the community,” said Wyles. “It won’t be something that has to be saved just for game day.”

Local clubs and youth teams could use it, even the night before a big game or the Sunday after. Suddenly Saracens has remade itself with this bold move into a community club, not just a pro team, but something more.

Could Saracens open the door for acceptance of turf on the international stage? And if so, could this open doors for stadia in America? Consider that the City of Las Vegas is looking into building a massive new multi-purpose sports stadium. The original plan for the USA 7s would be to do what they do now – import sod for the weekend. But what if that’s unnecessary? What if by the time that stadium gets built, the rugby world is ready to accept what I believe is inevitable – the Sevens World Series will play somewhere on turf?

A while ago I might have said this would never happen. But if Saracens can do it, maybe we in the USA shouldn’t be so timid about it. While it should be understood that the IRB won’t give the OK to any old artificial surface – they have strict specifications – but there are venues in the USA that could host major rugby events that use man-made grass. I expect, now that Saracens have broken the ice, we will see them in use before long.