

Artificial pitch concerns

This document addresses a number of concerns raised by a group of supporters regarding the possibility of installing an artificial pitch at Twerton Park.

1. Viability

One of the key arguments made in favour of artificial pitches is the ability to hire out the venue and raise non-matchday revenue. It is however unclear how lucrative this would be and the group would like to understand the financial model being used to forecast the revenue earning capability of such a pitch.

Installation/ replacement costs

The estimated costs of installing a 3G pitch range from around £400,000 - £500,000. Maidstone United and Sutton United are reported to have paid at the upper limit of this, whilst Carmarthen Town's surface laid in 2017 cost around £565,000¹. Given the topography of Twerton Park, it is unlikely that an artificial surface would be a cheap installation. The slope from the southwest to northeast corner would require a considerable amount of levelling with either the pitch at the Bath End needing to be raised almost above the height of the current perimeter wall or significantly lowered at the Bristol End to achieve an even plane.

It is therefore questioned whether the potential revenues would offset the initial outlay especially when considering the experiences of other clubs with heavily used 3G surfaces. It was reported that Maidstone United's pitch would need to be relaid after five years of use, stating "*maybe you will only get four or five years out of the pitch if you want to use it in a reasonably intensive way (50 hours a week) and keep the FIFA 2 Star standard*"². Based on these projections, a 3G pitch would need to turn a profit of at least £100,000 per year to justify its installation cost.

Sutton United manager Paul Doswell who is a vocal supporter of 3G pitches announced in the press recently that even with its intensive use the surface is not as profitable as many think: "*Let's put this fallacy of revenue to bed now. We don't make very much profit on what we do. Once you've taken out the 3G manager's wages, floodlights and all the usage costs, plus you repay the loan, there isn't a massive profit.*"³

Operating costs and competing pitches in the area

It is understood from recent Board Meeting minutes, that if an artificial pitch was laid at Twerton Park, it could be available for up to 35 hours per week of which 20 hours would be reserved for the club. The remaining 15 hours would therefore have to be priced at a level to ensure money is recouped on the installation, maintenance and management of the pitch.

In order to remain attractive to fee paying customers the prices charged would need to be comparable with other full size 3G pitches in the area, namely two at Bath University, Odd Down, and Keynsham Town FC. Odd Down for example charge £72 per hour for use of their full size pitch⁴.

1 <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/carmarthens-new-560000-3g-football-13179278>

2 <https://www.thenonleaguefootballpaper.com/latest-news/conference-south-step-two/14518/maidstone-united-expect-to-need-3g-replacement-in-next-two-years/>

3 <https://www.thenonleaguefootballpaper.com/features/21913/paul-doswell-we-are-in-this-together/>

4 <https://www.better.org.uk/leisure-centre/banes/odd-down-sports-ground/prices>

If Bath City FC could successfully hire out the pitch for the remaining 15 hours per week, based on Odd Down prices this would raise £56,160 per year revenue. This is before factoring in maintenance costs, stated by The FA as requiring one hour of attention per every 10 hours of play⁵ and the assumed appointment of at least one full time member of staff to manage bookings. Even if the club were to achieve an extra 30 hours of revenue earning slots resulting in £112,320 revenue, the annual profit is likely to be well under £100,000 per annum.

The viability of such a facility and the demand from outside groups to regularly raise the players needed to hire a full size pitch is therefore questioned given the number of full size pitches already in the area.

2. Effect on players (injuries)

One of the key complaints raised from voices within the game regarding artificial pitches is the tendency for injuries to be aggravated and the increased recovery time for players between games in comparison to grass pitches.

A BBC Scotland investigation showed that the majority of players north of the border do not favour playing on 3G pitches over grass. The Scottish PFA spokesman cited a 2013 survey of 700 players in which 73% said they would prefer to play on a "deteriorating grass pitch" than a plastic one⁶. Whilst conducted five years ago, pitch technology has still remained broadly the same. Some views of the staff interviewed are noted below:

Managers:

John Hughes - Inverness CT

"At first I was all for it but now I think we should all be playing on grass. It's not great for football unless it's wet, you know it's sticky, it's bouncy. Players are not happy with it."

Tommy Wright - St Johnstone

"The game is about players. If the figures they are talking about are a high percentage that are unhappy with them, then it's quite right that something has to be looked at. Artificial is certainly different but I think it is wrong in a sporting sense. For example, we can't play Steven MacLean on it due to medical advice."

Players:

Ross Draper - Inverness CT

"For me I'd much rather play on a poor grass pitch than an artificial one. We've had a couple of injuries, I'm not saying they're linked but you'll never know. Dean Brill did his knee at Hamilton. I did my ligaments away at Kilmarnock. The ball doesn't run right, there a different check on the ball, things like that. I'd much rather every pitch was grass. I personally would think twice about signing for a club with an artificial pitch."

Shay Logan – Aberdeen

"I do get a bit stiffer a few days after playing on an artificial pitch. The ball bounces differently than on a grass pitch but after five or 10 minutes of playing you forget about

5 *The FA Guide to 3G football turf pitch design principles and layouts*, p17
file:///C:/Users/customer/Downloads/ftp-tech-guide%20(2).pdf

6 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/35551542>

what ground you're on and it just becomes a football pitch. I prefer to play on grass but it's not always the way."

Stephen McManus – Motherwell

"They're not for me. We take our under-17s to train on it and to develop young kids it's great. It's not for me in the professional game. Anybody who says it's a positive only says that (because of) financial restrictions in the club. I can understand it, but I don't think Scottish football should play professionally on it. I feel the effects of it if I play on it on a Saturday, in comparison to grass. Players are the ones who need to be listened to on it, because they play on it week in, week out."

At present artificial surfaces are banned from England's top four divisions, a reason in itself for questioning their installation for a club aspiring to Football League status. There is growing pressure on the Football League to allow them, primarily applied by Non League clubs with such facilities. The Professional Footballer's Association (PFA) however, specifically consulted their 4,384 members who play in the four professional leagues on the possible reintroduction of artificial pitches in 2012. The report states; *"We asked them whether they would be in agreement with the introduction of artificial turf in professional football matches and 90% said that they were not in favour."*⁷

In the Netherlands six teams in the top tier Eredivisie play on 3G surfaces with the PFA report noting that 92% of players canvassed by the Dutch Players' Union preferred playing on grass to artificial turf. Based on their playing experiences, the captains of the Eredivisie's twelve other sides (who still play on grass) lodged an unprecedented official complaint with their union, urging the Dutch FA (KNVB) to organise top flight matches on natural grass only⁸.

3. Health Concerns

Of even greater concern than the apparent increase in injuries caused, are studies in the Netherlands and the USA which have potentially linked 3G pitches to cancer cases based on prolonged exposure to the rubber crumb used to infill the plastic turf. These shreds of rubber are typically made of recycled car tyres which can contain hazardous toxins harbouring carcinogenic properties⁹. In 2016 the Dutch public broadcaster NPO discovered serious shortcomings in the 2006 study carried out by a Dutch health institute upon which the crumb was declared safe and began a boom of 3G pitch installations.

Following outbreaks on those who have played extensively on 3G pitches in the USA and Europe (including the UK), the football academy at Ajax Amsterdam removed its 3G pitches and saw the Dutch Health Minister order a new more detailed study into the rubber used. The FA claim that the crumb passes all safety requirements and has been tested by British government bodies DEFRA and the Health & Safety Executive¹⁰. With the FA having backed and funded hundreds of 3G pitches across the country however and the long term health implications unknown, there are still concerns.

4. Footballing Ethics and Tradition

7 <https://m.thepfa.com/-/media/Files/PFA---Football-League-Consultation-on-Artificial-Surfaces.pdf?la=en>

8 <https://www.fifpro.org/news/dutch-players-say-no-more-artificial-turf/en/>

9 <http://www.skysports.com/football/news/11095/10154596/report-claims-link-between-3g-pitches-and-cancer>

10 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/football/2016/10/15/why-3g-pitches-are-being-ripped-up-in-holland-over-health-fears/>

It is a popular view among supporters that the traditional environment and atmosphere of Twerton Park is one of the great attractions of Bath City FC. It is real football played by local players in a famous old ground a world away from the all-consuming reality TV show that is the Premier League.

For Bath City to install an artificial pitch would signify a resignation from the traditional values of the game and cost the club one of its great selling points. The variations that occur on grass pitches with the changing of the seasons would be lost and a sense of sterility would prevail as the game loses its authenticity.

As something not even the corporations in the top flight would contemplate so it should be asked how can the wider public be persuaded that Bath City and non-league is the heart and soul of football if the team plays on an artificial pitch?

5. Summary

It is hoped that the points raised will be given due weight in the considerations of the board and assist them in their final decision.