

Football League Consultation on Artificial Surfaces

Introduction

The Professional Footballers' Association is the representative body for all professionals and scholars in the Premier League and Football League and our membership constitutes 100% of the 4,384 players who play in the four professional leagues.

In response to the Football Leagues consultation on the possible reintroduction of artificial pitches we have consulted widely with our members and would like to make the following comments.

Overview of Artificial Turf

It is recognised that since the introduction of first generation artificial pitches in the 1980s and its subsequent final withdrawal in 1995, that the technology of artificial pitches has improved significantly. Many artificial pitches are used in community complexes for youth and leisure training purposes and provide an all weather alternative to natural grass pitches.

It is also recognised that FIFA has been a long standing proponent of artificial turf and now has specific standards in relation to FIFA 1 star and FIFA 2 star artificial turf pitches which are licensed and tested regularly against specific performance criteria.

Football is a global game and in countries with extreme weather conditions such as Africa, Scandinavia and Russia, artificial turf pitches are a good alternative to natural turf pitches because of the lack of water to hydrate turf in hot countries or below-freezing temperatures and snow in cold climates. It is also noted that artificial turf is used for matches by a growing number of clubs within professional leagues in a number of countries in the UEFA territory.

We also recognize the possible commercial income that could be derived from the rental of the pitch to third parties and possible cost savings in pitch maintenance although we think that the outline business plan in the consultation document is overly optimistic and have reservations as to the overall benefits to a football club.

There have been a number of surveys comparing short term injuries to players playing on natural turf pitches and artificial turf pitches, and also the way the game is played on the two surfaces. Many of the surveys conclude that there is little difference between injuries sustained and the quality of football played on either surface.

PFA Survey of Members

As previously mentioned the PFA has consulted widely with its members regarding artificial turf. Despite all the surveys which have been undertaken and the conclusions derived from the data, we believe it is vitally important that the opinions of the very people who have actually played on the surface, and who understand how the game is played at the highest level and how their bodies react, should be listened to before any major decisions are made on this matter.

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In the survey we spoke to players at all levels of the professional game. We first of all asked them whether they had played on the latest third generation artificial turf pitches and not the old first generation pitches, which were far firmer and widely recognized as being of a poor standard. 97% of those surveyed said they had played on this type of surface, mostly in training.

We asked them for their experiences of playing on artificial turf and many advised of an increase in fatigue, aching muscles and joint problems with regard to ankles, knees, hips and lower backs. Others had suffered injury problems such as tendinitis in achilles and knees and also turned ankles on the surface.

Some of the typical comments that were voiced were *'It is ok to train on now and again but it hurts my knees and ankles', 'I am very reluctant to make sliding tackles and feel I don't play with 100% commitment on the surface and definitely wouldn't want to play games on it', 'some of my team mates complain of stiffness after playing on 3G particularly if they have had knee ops'.*

Goalkeepers talked about the bounce of the ball not being consistent compared with grass pitches and that the black rubber pellets used in artificial turf pitches have gone in their eyes. They felt that it was much better for a goalkeeper's joints to train and play on a natural turf pitch.

There were many comments about burns and grazes when going to ground. Some players said that their studs caught in the ground compared with natural turf pitches, where there was some give, and when their studs held firm there was a more likely chance of joint injury.

It was asked whether these types of injuries or fatigue could also be attributed to natural grass pitches but there was a clear perception from players that these were injuries that occurred on artificial turf rather than natural turf pitches and therefore could have been avoided.

One particularly thoughtful comment from a player was *'I answered no to playing matches on artificial surfaces as I feel that it would not be a good idea for most players from about the age of 25 onwards. Once you get to mid-twenties and you have played lots of football you start to feel the effects on your joints. I really think that artificial surfaces would reduce the number of 30+ professional footballers. Training is fine on these surfaces when the pitches are waterlogged or frozen but apart from that there is no need.'*

Is the game played any differently on artificial turf?

We asked players whether the way they played the game was any different when they played on artificial turf compared with natural turf and again there was a clear majority commenting on the game being played very differently on an artificial turf pitch. Comments ranged from players staying on their feet and not going to ground due to safety reasons, the ball reacting differently and negatively compared with natural turf pitches and players not being able to turn as quickly or closing opponents down as quickly. Some stated that the game was much slower and others stated that it was like playing in a pre-season game.

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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.

Alternatively we asked them whether it was appropriate to train on artificial turf and 63% were against training on artificial turf pitches on a regular basis. The reaction, although negative, was tempered with the view that training on the surface was appropriate during adverse weather conditions and on a short term basis due to non-access to a good natural turf training surface. However, their views of training on these pitches on a regular basis were extremely negative.

A number of older players said that they could not train on the surface at all or, when they did, they could not train for the next few days. Some players said that if they had a previous injury or were nursing an injury, the surface would 'find it out' and cause further problems.

Some players, however, did think that an artificial surface was good to play on as it was a flat surface which was better than some of the poor natural turf pitches that they were currently using to train on.

There is a general view that there might be an unfair advantage to clubs which play on artificial turf compared to clubs which play on natural turf pitches. In our view this is very difficult to prove but in reality would have to be an issue taken into consideration. There would, however, be a question mark and worry over the possibility of injuries due to playing on one surface and then changing to another.

Views from Abroad or other Sports on Artificial Turf

Through the PFA's membership of FIFPro, the worldwide representative organisation for all professional players, we speak regularly with other countries on issues that affect players. One area of regular discussion is their experiences of artificial and natural turf.

In 2012 in Denmark, the Danish Players' Union carried out a survey of their country's professional players and results showed that 86% of respondents were against playing on artificial turf and 96% preferred to see clubs invest in natural grass pitches. 83% of Danish players believed the game changes fundamentally when played on artificial turf, citing the speed and bounce of the ball and the lack of sliding tackles as being the differences. 71% of players also believed that clubs which play on artificial turf have an unfair advantage.

In 2012 in Holland, the Dutch Players' Union carried out a survey of their country's professional players and results showed that 92% preferred playing on grass to artificial turf. There are six artificial turf pitches used by professional clubs in Holland, of which two are in the Premier League, and players rated all pitches on a ten point scale. Real grass pitches used in Holland were on average rated 8.4 compared with artificial turf pitches, which were on average rated a 5.

Through the PFA's membership of the Professional Players' Federation, we speak regularly with player associations in other sports regarding issues that affect players.

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In Rugby League, Widnes RFLC has this season played home matches on an artificial pitch which is a FIFA 2 Star standard pitch. 1eagu3, the Rugby League Player Association, has been inundated with questions and queries from its members in relation to their safety when playing on the artificial turf. In the first match of the season many of the players suffered cuts to their elbows and knees due to the abrasive nature of the pitch on their skin. This was blamed on below-freezing temperature which affected the pitch and, subsequently, players have been allowed to wear upper and lower body skins to protect against such cuts, burns and grazes.

Although it has been alleged that the Widnes players are not allowed to make any negative public comments about the artificial pitch, many players at other clubs have voiced concerns, not only on the abrasive nature of the pitch, but about the lack of give in contrast to a grass pitch, and the grip of the pitch when stopping and turning quickly causing joint problems. At this juncture it is too early to make a judgement on the Rugby League experiment, but at this time the players have many reservations as to its suitability to the sport.

In 2010 in American Football, the NFL Players' Association carried out a survey on their professional players. The results showed that 82% believed that artificial turf contributed to injuries, 89% that the surface caused more soreness and fatigue and 90% believed that the surface would shorten their careers. After a brief spell where clubs were installing artificial turf in their stadiums the vast majority have now returned to natural turf pitches due to the greatly improved technology of these pitches. The survey clearly showed that players in American Football believed that artificial turf is worse for their health and much less desirable to play their sport on compared with natural turf.

Commercial Income/Cost reduction

It is recognized that extra commercial income could be derived from the rental of an artificial pitch to third parties and that there could also be possible cost savings in pitch maintenance. This aspiration has to be tempered with the high initial capital cost of the installation of a FIFA 2 star artificial pitch at approximately £500,000.

In a recent Playing Surfaces Committee meeting, which has representatives of the Premier, League, Football League, Professional Football Association, Football Association, Institute of Groundsmanship and Sports Turf Research Institute in attendance, the outline business plan in the consultation document was discussed and the general majority consensus was that it was overly optimistic.

FIFA 2 star artificial pitches deteriorate very quickly if used too much and therefore renting the pitch out to third parties on a regular basis would seriously reduce the chances of the pitch being able to adhere to the strict conditions required for its annual license to be renewed.

The amount of cost reduction which could be achieved in pitch maintenance was also queried, as artificial turf does require a good degree of upkeep, but it is accepted that there would be a degree of cost saving in this area.

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An area which might well have been overlooked is a view held by a number of players in respect of clubs losing key players because of injuries incurred when training and playing on artificial surfaces. This could result in squad sizes having to be increased to compensate and players not being available with the resultant cost of medical treatment and the unseen cost of the loss of a player's availability.

There is a clear perception from a lot of players that their careers would be curtailed by a number of years if they had to play and train on artificial turf on a regular basis.

Improvement of Natural Turf Pitches

It is widely recognized that the technology and development of artificial turf pitches has significantly improved over the last twenty years and that these pitches are a good alternative to natural turf pitches in countries that experience extreme weather conditions. However, what has not been clearly communicated is the knowledge, technology and development of natural turf pitches over the same time period.

In the Premier League and the Football League Championship, a number of clubs now have a hybrid system installed which combines 70% natural turf with 30% artificial turf fibres stabilised with an artificial fibre mesh. The quality of the desso grassmaster pitches and other systems such as fibre elastic and fibre sand pitches are there to be seen on our televisions every weekend. These types of pitches can cost anything between £150,000 to £500,000.

Understanding that the budgets for Football League clubs are varied and usually much smaller than Premier League and some Football League Championship clubs, good natural turf playing surfaces can be produced. The Institute of Groundsmanship and the Sports Turf Research Institute both estimate that once a good drainage system and structural base for a pitch is laid at an approximate cost of £70,000 then every summer all that is needed is for the groundsmen to 'koro' the pitch to remove all the vegetation and then reseed again. Typically this will only cost around £7,000 per year and it is down to knowledge and attention to maintenance that are the key ingredients to keep a naturally seeded turf pitch in the very best condition.

Conclusions

The vast majority of professional footballers in the Premier and Football Leagues are against the reintroduction of artificial pitches for matches in the Football League. Although it is understood that there could be financial benefits of installing such pitches, many of the assertions as to how much income can be derived through third party rental and reductions in overhead costs are, in our and other knowledgeable people's opinions, overstated.

The main reason for the players' opposition is, despite the short term surveys that state that injuries are the same on both artificial and natural turf pitches, their experiences of playing on modern third generation artificial turf pitches is of increased fatigue, aching muscles and joint injuries. The long term effects of playing on artificial surfaces has not been investigated by any survey of note to our knowledge and this is an important area in relation to player safety and career longevity.

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The players believe the game changes significantly when playing on the surface with the ball reacting differently, not being able to turn or close down quickly, no sliding tackles, and the game being played much slower and more like a pre-season match. This feedback should be taken into consideration, as the product that is currently being provided to supporters by clubs is clearly well received as can be seen by Football League attendance figures. In changing the surface that professional football is played on, it will without a doubt change the way the game is played and could adversely affect the product that Football League clubs provide to their customers.

There are a number of surveys which state that there is no difference between artificial turf and natural turf in relation to injuries and the way the game is played but the professional players who actually play on the surfaces overwhelmingly state that there is a difference and not in a positive way.

On a short term injury basis, the majority of players are saying that they do not want to train or play on artificial turf pitches, as in their opinion it will lead them to miss more matches than they would normally on a natural turf pitch. This type of feedback definitely increases the older the player is and to the point where players comment that they cannot train or play on artificial pitches at all. There is no specific scientific data to our knowledge to evidence these comments but is drawn from the experiences of players when playing or being unable to train on artificial turf pitches.

The PFA believes that the industry has to have an extensive survey on long term injuries comparing both artificial and natural turf to see what its impact has on players plying their trade in professional football. Many players believe if they had to play on artificial turf on a regular basis then their careers would be curtailed by a number of years. On a health and safety basis then, this area would have to be explored far more comprehensively so as to avoid the potential for many possible future expensive legal claims.

Players overwhelmingly believe that professional football should be played on a good natural grass turf pitch or on the many hybrid systems, which have been developed. The PFA advocates that the knowledge, technology and development of natural turf pitches has more than matched the development of artificial turf pitches and it is this path that the Football League should be looking to take when reviewing the playing surfaces on which professional football is played.

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On behalf of the members of the Professional Footballers Association

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