

PITCH MANAGEMENT

The Local Organising Committee (LOC) and FIFA have developed a set of guidelines and recommendations to ensure the quality and performance of the 2017 FIFA Confederations Cup and 2018 FIFA World Cup™ pitches – a key aspect for a competition to be considered successful by players, referees and football fans in the stadium and those watching on TV all over the world.

The 12 stadium teams involved in the 2018 FIFA World Cup™ delivery have access to the Pitch Management Handbook, and maintain a close relationship with the LOC team to guarantee the appropriate selection of materials and techniques. This exchange includes workshops, such as the first one that took place in Moscow at the beginning of 2016, meetings at the LOC headquarters and technical visits to all of the venues throughout the lead-up to the FIFA Confederations Cup in 2017 and the FIFA World Cup™ in 2018.

It is important to highlight, however, that not only should the pitches of the 12 FIFA World Cup™ stadiums meet high-level international standards, but also the ones where the 32 national teams and the match referees will train during the competitions. Therefore, managers of Team Base Camps (TBCs), Venue-Specific Training Sites (VSTs) and Referee Base Camp Training Sites also receive similar information and host technical visits by LOC pitch experts.

The team responsible for drawing up the technical guidelines for pitches is composed of international specialists, who provide consultancy services on stadiums and pitches to the LOC. The first round of inspection visits took place in October 2015, with a team of specialists visiting 114 pitches that will potentially be used during the tournament. Periodic technical visits are already underway and will continue to take place until the FIFA World Cup™ in 2018, as will several workshops with the teams in charge of managing the training pitches and stadium turf.

Legacy

Nearly all of the 2018 FIFA World Cup™ stadiums will be renovated or built from scratch, which represents a unique opportunity for the pitches to experience significant growth in terms of quality and performance. If applied correctly, the FIFA and LOC recommendations and requirements will put the Russian pitches on a level that will ensure ideal conditions for players and referees, so that fans and TV viewers can witness a state-of-the-art spectacle.

The recommended long-term management and day-to-day maintenance of the pitches is also part of the knowledge shared with the pitch managers, making sure that the high-quality pitches produced by the technical support represent one of the greatest sporting legacies left by the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia™.

It is worth pointing out that there is more than one method of creating high-performance pitches like the ones required for the FIFA World Cup™. When making their choice, the stadium authorities should evaluate the options available according to the business concept of each stadium after the FIFA World Cup™ – football-exclusive or multi-purpose arena, for example.

Technical aspects

In view of the climatic differences between the venues, the Technical Pitch Specifications and Guidelines were tailored to each of the sites hosting matches or training sessions. The technical recommendations were developed after detailed studies had been carried out on the temperature, climate, microclimate, precipitation, groundwater, soil, sunlight and shade relating to each pitch. The aim is that adaptations according to the specificities of each venue will lead to uniformity and quality across all of the FIFA Confederations Cup 2017 and 2018 FIFA World Cup™ pitches.

Among the main recommendations (tailored to each venue) for delivering a high-quality pitch are:

- Pitch performance requirements must be met at each venue to ensure the continuity and consistency of the playing surface. Local climatic variations are taken into consideration to ensure that we will achieve these objectives and that the playing surface will be comfortable for the players and referees.
- Turf strength is essential to withstand the rigours not only of the game but also of training sessions on the day before the match for both teams and pre-match warm-ups.
- Vegetation should be homogenous, stable and capable of staging a football match without any interference to the bounce of the ball or creation of holes, difference in grass height, sections without grass, etc.
- It is becoming increasingly difficult to provide natural grass for the bench area and whole pitch surround and it has therefore been accepted that FIFA RECOMMENDED 2 STAR football turf can be used.

Considerations for pitch construction and maintenance in Russia

The basic steps of the pitch construction are: preparation of the sub-base, installation of the sub-surface drainage system and vacuum drainage system, placement of the layer of gravel ("drainage carpet" – recommended in some cases), installation of undersoil heating and the automatic irrigation system, placement of the lower sand base, installation of the upper sandy root zone, reinforcement and maintenance.

Russia presents a unique challenge in terms of constructing and managing pitches to the highest standard and delivering them on time. The ground and weather conditions will hamper pitch construction and management, due to the extreme cold, frost and snow in some of the cities, and these must be in the forefront of pitch managers' minds when developing a sensible timeline for pitch installation and establishment.

According to turf experts, instead of relying on average temperatures, pitch managers should adopt a pessimistic view to be on the safe side. It is also important that they take full advantage of the spring weather conditions that start between April and May and run through to October/November at the very latest – seven months at best.

It is often said that good pitch construction is fundamental to the provision of a quality pitch, which is true. But of equal importance is the need to ensure that the pitch is well maintained, using the correct machinery, and that the right fertilisers, irrigation and management regime are deployed so that the best possible playing surface is delivered, whether for training or the next match. Daily divoting, alongside quality repair and renovation, are essential.