



Under the Microscope...

VGA Lawn Bowls Surfaces Study



The newly constructed surfaces at the Darebin Bowling Club which will host lawn bowls at the 2006 Commonwealth Games

With the rise in popularity of synthetic surfaces, the VGA recently conducted a major survey of lawn bowl surfaces in Victoria. ATM looks at the main findings of this wide-ranging project.

On February 18 at the Bentleigh Bowling Club, the Victorian Greenkeepers' Association (VGA) launched its long-awaited study into lawn bowls surfaces in Victoria. With funding from Sport and Recreation Victoria, the project report released concerns and issues regarding lawn bowls surfaces and the benefits of each, including:

- Lifetime cost analysis of natural and synthetic greens (costs of construction of new natural turf and synthetic greens and resurfacing; cost of maintenance of synthetic greens compared to maintenance expectations)
- Life expectancy and depreciation of natural turf and synthetic greens.
- Construction and maintenance of natural turf and synthetic greens.
- Preferred surface underlay of synthetic greens.
- Type of surface preferred by bowlers in various age groups.
- Number of days (on average) a synthetic green and natural turf green can be used.
- Good practice models for clubs with more than one bowls green regarding maintenance, usage, and types of greens.
- Provision of access and usage issues for people with a disability on natural turf and synthetic greens.
- Issues of concern regarding safety/vandalism for natural turf and synthetic greens.

- Benefits of alternative types of natural turf not currently used in Victoria.
- Chemical use on natural turf and synthetic greens and long-term environmental impact.
- Use of recycled water on natural turf and synthetic greens.

As part of the project 100 greenkeepers, 300 bowlers, and 50 club secretaries throughout Victoria were interviewed as well as suppliers of synthetic bowls surfaces.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

There are a total of 543 bowls clubs registered with the Royal Victorian Bowls Association and these clubs have a total of 1017 greens (687 country, 330 metropolitan). The majority (852 or 83 per cent) of greens are natural turf and 165 (17 per cent) are synthetic.

Distribution of Synthetic Greens

Climate appears to play a role in whether clubs have synthetic surfaces with more than 95 per cent of greens being turf north of the Great Dividing Range.

Player Preferences

Eighty five per cent of bowlers prefer to play on natural turf. While the quality of newer synthetic greens is better than even five years ago, surface hardness of synthetic greens is a big issue, as is glare and heat.

Players also mentioned a number of other issues they have with synthetics, although many of these reflect older products or perhaps greens that may have been poorly laid or maintained. These issues include sand (too high) scratching bowls, susceptibility to tracking and playing oddities such as 'straighteners', variable draw and pace.

Management of Greens

The report found that there are a number of issues related to clubs moving to and managing synthetic greens. These include:

- Many clubs have moved to a synthetic surface primarily because they could obtain assistance to do so, but can't for the restoration of natural turf greens.
- A number of small clubs go to synthetic surfaces for the wrong reasons due to desperation and use all available cash when this may not be viable in the longer term.
- There is a major lack of information and advice about maintenance of synthetic greens and perhaps about new base construction techniques and species, and managing turf for the long term.
- Issues related to the number of greens clubs have, the number of members and club management, are key issues exacerbated by a change of green surface
- The technology in synthetics is increasing which is leading to better quality surfaces that will be easier and more cost effective to maintain.
- There appears to be a considerable variation in the advice provided to clubs about maintenance requirements and no suppliers provide standard maintenance regimes with product specifications.
- More research and more rigour is needed in maintaining synthetic greens to ensure the quality of surfaces are maintained. There seems to be a lack of information and expertise among clubs and greenkeepers in maintaining synthetic surfaces, and this needs to be addressed.

The report recommended that clubs should ensure they have an endorsed maintenance schedule from suppliers for their synthetic surface before accepting a quote, or plan to pay for a buy-in service to ensure the product is maintained to manufacturer's specifications. The VGA could also work with the industry to provide training for its members in the maintenance of synthetic bowling greens.

It also suggested the RVBA and the VGA could work with suppliers to develop some basic principles concerning management of synthetic greens for each club, as well as a checklist of things to ask a supplier, budget for works and the like.

Costs

- Synthetic greens are not maintenance free, as many clubs expect. However, they may be cheaper to maintain than a natural turf green if human resources are limited and clubs have personnel with skills to do it themselves.
- Synthetic greens are more expensive to install and replace and will not be viable for many clubs.
- Overall the probable costs of natural turf and synthetic greens are likely to be much the same over a 10 or 20-year life cycle.
- The cost in the order of \$20-30,000 pa that clubs with a synthetic green would have to raise is substantial.
- Clubs need to address costs, average player age etc. Surfaces are not a solution to poor financial and turf management.

Recommendations regarding costs included councils and the RVBA helping clubs with financial and business planning and ensuring that prior to resurfacing works a plan is in place to address the cost of surface replacement.

Greenkeeping Expertise

The quality of the club's greenkeeper is likely to directly correlate with the quality and longevity of the both a natural turf and synthetic surface. Clubs need to invest in more strategic turf management advice, but feel that they can't afford to. Many clubs are not in the best position to make strategic decisions about greens resurfacing, development or management.

The report's recommendations included that clubs should be encouraged to call on the services of a trained greenkeeper if only for strategic advice or to contract such a service on an "as needs" basis.

It also commented that the VGA should address the low level of professional guidance sought by many clubs, through marketing, and by providing more cost benefit information about such advice.

The Installation and Performance of Synthetic Greens

There appears to be a considerable variation in the quality of installation and the performance of synthetic surfaces (as there is with natural turf). There are no Australian standards concerning the manufacture, installation and performance of synthetic green products.

The RVBA should encourage clubs that have multiple greens, not to have a synthetic green unless they have a sound membership base, and a financial plan that shows they can raise at least \$30,000 per annum.

Bowls Australia and the RVBA should investigate the development of a set of standards for the installation and performance of synthetic greens that can be benchmarked against standards worldwide.

A full report on this project, comprising the 52-page Lawn Bowls Surfaces Study: Issues and Actions document and the 77-page Appendices can be downloaded from the Victorian Government's sports and recreation website: www.sport.vic.gov.au