

Tiger feat

An artificial pitch is proving to be a big hit for football, rugby and hockey players alike at one Worcestershire school. SARAH MIDDLETON reports



The new surface for hockey at Lacon Childe Sports College

POOR draining rugby and football pitches at Lacon Childe Sports College, in Cleobury Mortimer, near Kidderminster, have been replaced, as part of a large-scale project to develop its sports facilities, with both natural and artificial surfaces.

The scope of the works, carried out by Kestrel (Contractors) Limited, involved construction of

a full specification natural grass football pitch and a rugby pitch, as a small grassed area that's used for training and warm ups.

And a third-generation Tiger Turf Challenger rubber-crumb filled, long-pile synthetic surface was also installed for pupils to play both football and hockey on. "And it's one of the best pitches I've ever seen or played on," says the college's

facilities manager Richard Meredith.

This pitch, which was laid on a specially engineered base, is unique because it allows both football and hockey to be played on the same surface. "It has approval at both FA and IHF levels and I believe that we are the first school in the UK to install such a pitch," adds Richard.

The new pitches replaced a single field that

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was used for football and rugby, as well as cricket and athletics during the summer months.

“The rugby and football often overlapped, which caused problems in itself and the pitches simply were not good enough. Drainage was so poor that games were often cancelled and because the football pitch was not full size, county games were also being played elsewhere or not played at all,” explains Richard.

It’s a very different story today. “We can play all year round, thanks to the vastly improved natural grass pitches, but more importantly the 60 x 40-metre artificial pitch,” he says. “The only thing that stops us now is snow!”

Fencing and floodlights were also installed so these facilities can be used in the evenings after school and at the weekends.

Floodlights mean that play continues in poor light and on dark winter evenings. “The pitch is in use from 9am through to 10pm most days and it really is fantastic to play on.



Superb scenery surrounds the college playing areas



Sports surfaces meet the most rigorous tests

“There are no problems and there is very little maintenance – just brushing – to be done. We have five-a-side, seven-a-side, rugby training and hockey matches on it. It’s a very flexible surface and ideal for a sports school of excellence, such as this. It has something to offer everyone.”

To ensure that all sports really are catered for, two multi-use games areas have also been built to allow other sports, such as tennis, basketball and netball, to be played. It comprises four tennis courts, which are all floodlit.

Cricket practice nets, with facilities to plug in electric bowling machines, and a skateboard park with ramps have also been constructed to complete the overhaul of the college’s facilities.

“The skateboard park is an unusual step for the college, but it was the ideal solution to a growing problem. There’s nowhere for youngsters to skateboard in the area and many were using the school grounds.

“As a result, benches and paths were getting damaged. I saw an opportunity to get some funding

to build a park to solve this problem and the whole thing snowballed from there,” explains Richard.

He secured £75,000 to build a full-size skateboard park, so that was also part of the project, which was brought together by Shropshire County Council and took more than seven years of planning.

To help ensure that the dream became a reality with as few hiccups as possible, the Council appointed the STRI for the natural sports turf construction specification and MSC for the synthetic works.

The site is on the side of a hill, with a variation of more than six metres from the highest to the lowest points, so more than 30,000 cubic metres of soil had to be cut and filled to create three separate platforms for the different sports surfaces. This now reduces the variation from one surface to another to just four metres.

The specification of the natural grass pitches involved installing drainage into the sub base floor followed by a geo-textile separator. The

next step was to lay a stone carpet to a depth of 100mm, followed by a layer of local topsoil to 200mm depth, which had 100mm of imported sand mixed through the upper-soil profile.

In between all these works a full specification irrigation system with in situ sprinklers was also installed.

To ensure good drainage, forced sand slits were also installed before fertilising and seeding was carried out.

“Trying to strike the right balance between ensuring that the surface was manageable with the budgets available, while at the same time giving as much opportunity for play throughout the year, was a challenge,” said the STRI’s Jonathan Smith.

“Installing the forced sand slits into a high sand content soil strikes a balance between achieving drainage while retaining moisture. The objective here was to build high-specification pitches that were not only sustainable but also cost effective.”

One problem that arose during the construction was the frequent thunderstorms, which occurred not long after the seeding took place. With the natural grass pitches built on a series of plateaus with embankments of 1:4, washout was an issue. A Koro Field Top Maker was utilised to remove the offending material on more than two separate occasions.

The pitches are now growing in nicely under the expert hand of the college’s grounds staff and play on them began in April. The pupils and staff can’t get enough of the artificial pitch.

And being a relatively small community, it is not just the school’s 570 students who are benefiting from the college’s new facilities. In the evenings, the surfaces are available for hire to the wider community. And the mix of natural and artificial surfaces removes some of the worry about over-use and surface damage.

“The artificial pitch is proving very popular. It really is one of those pitches that you see and you’re itching to get on it and kick a ball around,” adds Richard.