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Soccer field partnership pays off

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No surprise: Soccer is the most popular youth sport in the US, attracting more participants than all other sports combined . . . more than 3 million!

Again, no surprise: Municipal field managers can't keep up with the demand for playing time on soccer fields.

In Modesto, CA however, the city has found an innovative solution that has delighted the soccer community while receiving applause from city and business leaders.

Located in the Central Valley, Modesto has more than 3,500 young people on soccer teams. In 2012 the parks department formed a partnership with the non-profit Modesto Youth Soccer Association (MYSA) in which the city built Mary Grogan Park, an \$11 million state-of-the-art soccer complex. Upon completion in June 2013, the facility was turned over to MYSA to operate.

The first phase of a three-phase project, the park has seven soccer fields with each field averaging 40 to 50 hours of play a week.

Created by Verde Design, a landscape architecture firm headquartered in Santa Clara, CA, Grogan Park features four natural turf fields and three Sprinturf synthetic fields.

"People in the soccer world love this park," says Dennis O'Brien, facility manager. "Grogan Park is a showplace for great youth soccer. We have leagues from throughout the state booking tournaments here."

An innovative idea

The partnership between Modesto and MYSA is one of the most interesting aspects of the project, reports Modesto Parks Project Coordinator Nathan Houx.

"MYSA pays the city about \$169,000 per year for park maintenance. MYSA then oversees the operation of the facility and receives revenue from a number of sources, including facility rental to soccer leagues, parking fees and concessions," he said.

"MYSA also receives 4,000 free hours of use at the facility in exchange for the payment of maintenance."

O'Brien explains that MYSA was involved in the design and planning of the park from day one. The facility has a special Championship Field, which is set about 3 feet below ground level for better viewing. Night lighting was installed and bleachers are on the plans.

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The revenue that the fields generate comes from several sources: soccer training camps; competitive leagues that travel around the state (Modesto alone has 30 competitive teams); recreational leagues; plus adult leagues. Senior leagues are in discussion and may soon be joining the roster. More than 400,000 people attended soccer events in Modesto the first year of operation.

"Bookings run six to eight months in advance," says O'Brien. "The Northern California Soccer League, for example, with 3,000 teams, has booked Grogan Park for their quarter-, semi- and tournament finals for 2015."

This activity has generated revenue far beyond the soccer field. Businesses in town report healthy hotel and restaurant bookings as a result of the soccer events.

What does it take to keep this high-demand park in great condition?

The synthetic fields feature Sprinturf CoolFill infill, which reduces surface temperatures up to 30 percent when used with green granules. CoolFill provides an alternative to traditional black crumb rubber infill and comes in a variety of colors that "feel" cooler while also complementing the color of the turf system fibers.

The safer playing surface and green colorant provides a realistic and aesthetically pleasing field that is UV-resistant, while reducing the temperature on the playing surface.

"By specifying CoolFill, we anticipate the green coating will knock a few degrees off the field temperature during games played in the heat of July, August and September," said Houx.

"The grass blades were specified to be 3/8" between tufts and 3/8" between rows, which is more densely packed than standard 3/4" blades, and this helps to lower the field temperature and make the grass look more real."

The synthetic fields are groomed once or twice a week, depending on use, with a Greens Groomer Litter Kat synthetic turf sweeper and Spring Tine rake.

An important part of the maintenance is a weekly wash down by Mirage M-160 sprinklers from Underhill International. The M-160 sprinklers have a 174-foot throwing radius. At Grogan Park the M-160s run for five minutes per station, or 30 minutes to wash down the entire field.

Known as "piston-driven water cannons," M-160s are installed at grade and disappear when retracted. They provide full or part-circle coverage.

"At Grogan Park, six heads were installed on the sidelines of each synthetic field," said Derek McKee, principal at Verde Design. "They were placed completely out of the area of play for safety reasons. Four heads on each field are set for 90° of coverage and two heads are set for 180° of coverage.

"The high volume of water does a good job of scrubbing down the fields."

Underhill's M-160 measures 23.7 inches high and has an above-grade pop-up height of 2 3/4 inches. The arc of coverage can be adjusted from 30° to 360° and the rotation speed from 100 to 240 seconds. The head has a 23° trajectory, and a range of nozzles from 16 mm to 26 mm is available for efficient water distribution. The M-160 operates at 60 to 120 psi and handles from 96 to 300 gallons per minute.

Grogan Park draws water from an on-site well. Because the M-160s run at 140 psi, a booster pump was installed to maintain consistent water pressure. When the park first opened, facility staff found that well water particulates were clogging the filters. By stepping up the maintenance program and cleaning the filters about every six months, the problem was easily resolved.

"Another plus is that the M-160s help reduce static on the fields," said Houx. "Polyethylene turf can create static, especially when it is hot and dry. Once the fields are wetted down, the static disappears and players don't experience 'shocking' during the games."

O'Brien says that last year's World Cup generated huge interest in soccer among youngsters and parents.

"It's a wonderful sport that doesn't require a lot of equipment or expense to play . . . and enthusiasts of all ages have a chance to participate.

"The city found it fitting to name the park after Mary Grogan, who was director of the Parks and Recreation Department in Modesto for 29 years. She was a driving force in creating 75 parks in the city and largely responsible for Modesto's reputation as the 'City of Trees' with more than 300,000 trees. She was also a leader in the California Parks and Recreation Society and served as president. Mary passed away in 2010 . . . I think she would have been very pleased with her new park."

This article was supplied by Hardwick Creative Services, Encinitas, CA on behalf of their client, Underhill International.

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