



COMMUNITY AND CLUB DEVELOPMENT DUNDALK FOOTBALL CLUB



FIFA Quality Concept for Football Turf



Introduction

In August 2005, Dundalk Football Club installed a FIFA RECOMMENDED 2 STAR Football Turf in its stadium, Oriel Park. This was one of the first FIFA RECOMMENDED installations at professional level.

FIFA "Case Study Approach"

FIFA chose Dundalk as one of the first case studies to highlight the benefits of Football Turf by using the FIFA RECOMMENDED 2 STAR playing field. The idea of the "case study approach" was to communicate to the football family the many potential strategies and benefits of installing a FIFA RECOMMENDED 2 STAR field which may well be considered by other clubs in future. The case study at Dundalk Football Club highlights a very positive community and club development, strategy, with the FIFA RECOMMENDED 2 STAR Football Turf playing a crucial role.

Dundalk Football Club

Dundalk Football Club plays in the second flight of the FAI league. History has shown them to be the second most successful club, with nine league titles and nine FAI Cups to their name. However, for the past decade, Dundalk has been struggling financially to keep the football club moving forwards and what is even more alarming, the community

has been moving further away from the club, with potentially new supporters not interested in the opportunities Dundalk Football Club could provide for them.

The installation of the FIFA RECOMMENDED 2 STAR Football Turf was a timely and major breakthrough, helping Dundalk to develop as a "club" while building long-term strategic initiatives with the "community".

Thus the FIFA RECOMMENDED 2 STAR Football Turf was a step forward for Dundalk Football Club to become very much a community club.



Club Development – Overview

To really develop a football club and to provide football opportunities and progress as a small semi-professional club, the club needs to adopt an important role in

the community. This club strategy enables all ages and genders to be part of "one club" and to ensure a constant buzz. In addition, a club development strategy allows players in the club pathways to progress, and a strong club culture ensures players develop together as friends. Younger players (aged 12-15) were dropping out because clubs only went up to a certain age group or had limited teams in those age groups. This had three effects. The weaker players left because there were no opportunities and they wanted to play with their friends, inevitably never joining another club. The stronger players then left after a while because they wanted to be with the "weaker players". Hence the importance of a strong club culture. Finally, without pathways to progress, both stronger and weaker players at this age level took different routes away from football. Such a fragmented provision leads to unnecessary drop-out rates as other entertainment and social options are prevalent at this age, making their come back to football, in whatever manner, even harder.

Ease of Access

As General Manager Peter Halpin remarked, Oriel Park was the "San Siro of Dundalk". What he was saying was that, for the local community, Dundalk Football Club was their club and it meant: "We as the local football club have to involve the general public in both the stadium facilities and football teams." Therefore what better way than to offer the community the opportunity to play on the FIFA RECOMMENDED 2 STAR Football Turf in the stadium? The excellent durability and resistance of the surface meant that this was a feasible option and





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the quality of the playing surface would not deteriorate. As a consequence, many were interested in playing in their stadium and living their childhood dreams. This was instantly popular, as all sectors of the community were involved. It meant members of the community who had never been to Oriel Park were now going there. Furthermore, past supporters were coming home and this in turn relit their fires and renewed their interest in the football club. Present supporters were certainly not going to miss their opportunity to play on the hallowed turf. This strategy forged a closer brand equity between supporter and club. In all, it portrayed to the community that Dundalk Football Club was open to the community and at the heart of all things football. And open not just for match days but seven days a week – thereby maximising its resources and fully involving the community. The major difference was that young players did not have to play on an inferior, muddy pitch but now had an opportunity to play on a good playing field, which in turn attracted new children, both boys and girls, to the club.



Community Club – Before the FIFA RECOMMENDED 2 STAR Football Turf

Prior to the installation of the Football Turf in Oriel Park, the home of Dundalk Football Club since 1942 had become a sterile and dull environment. While the club itself maintained a loyal following for league matches, the old ground was becoming less and less appealing to sponsors and the local community alike. A small number of local cup finals were played every year, yet hosting these games was becoming problematic as the condition of the grass pitch had deteriorated over the years. Oriel Park had one of the worst pitches in Ireland and there were even concerns that the club would fail its UEFA Licence due to its poor state.

It was therefore difficult for a club the size of Dundalk to really be part of the community. It had limited resources and could only involve the community once a

fortnight - on matchdays. A club of Dundalk's size and community catchment really needed to work together with all sectors of the community to really prosper as football club. **The switch to the FIFA RECOMMENDED 2 STAR Football Turf meant that the opportunity had arisen to change the outlook and future of Dundalk Football Club.**





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Community Club – After the FIFA RECOMMENDED 2 STAR Football Turf

Fast forward to August 2006 and Dundalk Football Club's synthetic surface has been in place for over a year. The pitch is now available seven days a week. The club is now able to offer the pitch to a variety of clubs and competitions in the community. Furthermore, **the club earned a further 2,500 euros a week through the installation of the FIFA RECOMMENDED 2 STAR field – valuable extra income to develop both short- and, more importantly, long-term planning and to help Dundalk achieve their vision, firstly, at the heart of the local sporting community and, secondly, as a successful football club.**

This year, the local schoolboys' league has played many of its matches from under-10 to under-16 age groups. With the Irish weather leaving many of the town's pitches

unplayable during the winter months, many of the local junior clubs are now able to use Dundalk's primary and most famous football venue for their matches. One of the most important sporting outlets in the community, the Dundalk winter league has block-booked Oriel Park for many of its matches while a number of school finals have also taken place. Earlier this year, Oriel Park hosted two Ireland youth Internationals and was also able to provide training facilities to Dundalk Rugby Club and the Co. Louth Hurling Team! The new surface has breathed a new lease of life into Dundalk Football Club and has made Oriel Park the foremost sporting venue in the community again.

Dundalk Football Club has been closely involved with community activities, especially in recent years with the evolution of the sport in Ireland and across the border as a result of the improved political situation in Northern Ireland. Spearheading this change, both Dundalk and Linfield football clubs

have bridged the sectarian divide with the creation of the Dunfield project, which has seen children with different religious backgrounds from both the Dundalk and Belfast areas coming together to play football in a competitive yet friendly environment.

With the establishment of the Football Turf surface at Oriel Park in 2005, both local rugby and Gaelic sport organisations have availed themselves of the facilities to conduct their training sessions, especially during the winter period when local inclement weather conditions did not allow them to practise on their own pitches. Their feedback has been encouraging and the club hopes to welcome them back in the future.



Naturally, local football clubs have gained the most from the installation of the Football Turf pitch, with winter league, summer league, youth and school teams all actively availing themselves of the facilities to play evening matches midweek and also at weekends, outside the fixtures set aside for Dundalk Football Club's own teams at league, youth and ladies' levels. Further





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training sessions and summer soccer schools are also planned in conjunction with the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) during the traditional holiday period.

The transformation would not have been possible if it wasn't for the Sports capital grant from the Government's Arts, Sports and Tourism as well as the support from Football Association of Ireland.

With such an infrastructure in place, the club has been able to embark on a development plan to upgrade the floodlight system in Oriel Park as well as on the redevelopment of three sides of the stadium. Further enhancements to provide improved changing facilities and off-pitch entertainment are also being considered for future implementation. **What used to be the exclusive preserve of the first team for training sessions and subsequent competitive league matches has truly become an opportunity for more teams to participate year round.** In addition, Oriel Park has reinforced its position in the community with a prestigious facility – the FIFA RECOMMENDED 2 STAR field, whilst generating a small but steady income from the use of the pitch.

