

Start to plan for when your hockey fields reopen

With many hockey facilities currently closed due to social distancing restrictions introduced to limit the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak, it is important that facility operators start to think about and develop a recommissioning plan for when restrictions are lifted. Before undertaking any maintenance works, however, it is particularly important that you check your national regulations allow you to do so, and that all works are undertaken in way that does not expose the maintenance staff or others using the facility to unnecessary risks.

Many fields will have seen no activity for several months, and this may mean:

- Debris, including leaf litter, bird and animal droppings are lying on the surface
- Weeds have established in the playing surface, particularly those having some form of infill, as a result of wind-blown seeds
- Moss and algae have established within the pile of the hockey turf, especially if parts of the field have been in shade from walls, buildings, or overhanging trees. Algae will make the surface slippery when wet and also cause the field to look dirty. Moss can also be slippery and will also restrict drainage. If left untreated this can become an ongoing problem that is difficult to eradicate.

A wide, soft broom or a rubber-tined rake is ideal for removing vegetable debris and other rubbish. Better still, a mechanical leaf-sweeper or vacuum cleaner will greatly speed up the operation. The equipment should be well maintained and carefully operated to avoid contamination of, or physical damage to, the surface. Bird droppings can normally be washed away. If the droppings have dried onto the surface, do not try to pull them off as you might also pull tufts out of the hockey turf. Apply warm water and allow it to soften the droppings before washing away. Occasionally large areas can be affected; when this occurs power washing and disinfecting is recommended.

Small numbers of weeds can be removed by hand, ensuring the roots are extracted and not broken off – some weeds are more prolific if they are simply cut off at surface level. If the weeds are deep-rooted, the roots may have penetrated the backing of the surface, meaning it is advisable to kill them off with an appropriate weed-killer. Localised areas of weed seedling infestations can be treated with domestic weed killers.

If algae or moss have become established, it is important to treat the affected areas with a good proprietary moss-killer or algaecide. More than one application may be required. Any good quality proprietary product should be satisfactory provided that it is not oil-based; In all cases the treatment's manufacturer's application instructions should be closely followed. For severe problems high-pressure



cleaning equipment is available, but its use is a skilled process best undertaken by a specialist maintenance contractor.

Whenever a chemical treatment is applied directly or indirectly to a hockey turf, the manufacturer of the surface should be consulted in advance to ensure that the chemicals will not damage the surface or invalidate the manufacturer's warranty.

It is possible that the sand infill on sand filled hockey turfs will have developed a crust due to rain fully on the surface and no agitation through use. This crust may be abrasive to players falling on the surface and it might impede drainage. A thorough grooming of the surface using a stiff mechanical brush will break up the crust, agitate the sand and return the surface to its optimum condition.

Many facilities will have been closed with little or no decommissioning, meaning the risk of Legionella and other harmful bacteria establishing in the water systems used to supply changing room showers and field irrigation systems is much greater than normal, especially when ambient temperatures have been warm.

Any water system that has the right environmental conditions can be a potential source for bacteria growth. During the recent periods of low or no use there is an increased risk of biofilms forming on the internal surfaces of supply pipes, shower heads, sprinkler nozzles and other irrigation equipment. Once integrated into a biofilm, the bacteria obtains protection from disinfectants and other methods of control that are normally used. Additionally, the biofilm provides an important nutritional source for the bacteria and once established they are extremely difficult to eradicate and can rapidly colonize other parts of a water distribution system.

When it is time for recommissioning, the procedures used when the irrigation or plumbing system were originally installed should be followed (i.e. the system should be thoroughly flushed, cleaned, and disinfected before returning to use). This may require specialist engineers to service the water systems.

With little activity taking place, the risk of vermin damaging external pipework and irrigation tank lids will have increased. When recommissioning, make sure insect and vermin screens on overflows and vents are intact and in good condition. If damage is found it may be necessary to empty and clean the tank prior to use.

Once a field is brought back into use, some will worry about the possibility of the COVID-19 virus contaminating the surface if infected players drop bodily fluids on the surface. At present it is unclear if and for how long the virus might survive on a synthetic turf surface, but they are made from similar plastics to those used for packaging and studies are suggesting it may survive on bags etc for a number

of days. National guidance and government advice should be considered when deciding on whether there is a risk of cross infection and if treatment of a field is required. Disinfectants are being marketed that will treat a number of bacteria and viruses. These are normally spray applied. The frequency of application differs product to product and will depend on whether the field is subsequently watered (by irrigation or rain). Regular treatment is likely to be time consuming and expensive. Ensuring players maintain good personal hygiene etiquette through play will help reduce any risk. As disinfectants are chemicals it is, again, important that the manufacturer of the surface is consulted in advance to ensure that the chemicals will not damage the surface or invalidate the manufacturer's warranty.

Hockey activities should only recommence and be held in accordance with national health regulations and guidance.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has also published guidance for sports federations/sports event organizers planning mass gatherings in the context of COVID-19. This is available at https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331764/WHO-2019-nCoV-Mass_Gatherings_Sports-2020.1-eng.pdf.

Like all of you, the FIH hopes people will be playing hockey again soon. With a little forward planning, ensuring your hockey field is ready for action, as soon as conditions allow, will be possible. If you have any questions, ask the manufacturer of your hockey turf. Contact details for all the leading manufacturers can be found on the FIH Quality Programme pages of the FIH website at www.fih.ch/hockeyturf.

The FIH acknowledges the assistance of the European Synthetic Turf Council in producing this guidance.

