



‘What makes the STC unique, is that they represent the whole value chain in artificial turf’

The STC establishes a European chapter

Whereas US President Donald Trump’s policy is primarily aimed internally, the American Synthetic Turf Council wants to expand outside the United States. Arnoud Fiolet has been appointed to establish the European branch. Fieldmanager spoke to him about the plans and ambitions the STC has for Europe.

Author: Guy Oldenkotte



TECHNICS

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pot when he was elected chairman of the Europe chapter. It didn't make him instantly rich, nor does he expect to become wealthy by it in the long run. 'It is a position that will not be remunerated, but I expect that it will be very demanding. I have no doubt, however, that the industry in Europe will benefit from a large, strong and proven organization like the STC. We have formulated four objectives that will form the core of the activities by the European chapter. The first one is that we want to network more often. Secondly, we want to provide more information to the industry. Thirdly, it is our ambition to represent the industry legally, and finally, we intend to promote the artificial turf industry at large.' Fiolet believes that the industry will benefit from the informed and thorough approach for which the STC is renowned. He takes the discussion about the safety of SBR granulates, that currently dominates the news in many markets, as an example. 'Last year, attempts were made in seven of the the United States to adopt legislation which links SBR granulates to carcinogenicity. These were attempts to prohibit the material. The STC lobbied on behalf of the industry and pointed out to the senators and policy makers the existence of 90 international studies. They also made it clear that all these studies have proven the opposite. The discussion about the safety of SBR granules is a topic in Europe as well, and in the Netherlands in particular. However, the response here is much too fragmented. It could have been dealt with in a better way.'

Since its interception in 2003, the Synthetic Turf Council (STC) has been representing companies in the artificial turf industry on the American continent exclusively. In 2017, the STC represents more than 200 companies. A motion adopted at the 2016 convention will now see this changed. Arnoud Fiolet explains this development: 'The STC has decided it wants to represent the industry globally. This is because it has many members operating all over the world, but also because

the members are dealing with organizations that have a global influence, such as FIFA, FIH, World Rugby and so on. The members see that the STC represents their interests well in the US, and made it clear that they want to benefit from a representation outside the US market that is just as good. This encouraged the STC to roll out plans to establish chapters on each continent. A presence in Europe is the first and most obvious step.' At the recent STC congress in Las Vegas, Fiolet scored the jack-

Co-existence possible

The remark that the discussion about the safety of SBR granules in the Netherlands and Europe could have been dealt with differently and in a better way, should not be regarded as criticism towards the various associations representing the industry in European countries, Fiolet emphasizes. 'Certainly not. I know for a fact that the Dutch BSNC has worked hard behind the scenes to guide the debate about the safety of SBR granulate in



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the Netherlands. They made extensive use of the STC's information. That is what distinguishes the STC: they closely monitor all scientific research that is being done and inform their members through press releases and other publications about the results of these studies. These publications can serve as useful information sources. The sharing of such information is very important to the industry. We want to do the same thing for the European industry.' He also points out that the STC represents the artificial turf industry exclusively. 'Membership of the Dutch BSNC has a much wider scope. They also represent companies engaged in the construction of athletics or sports fields, for example. The STC focuses purely on artificial turf. Nevertheless, I believe the BSNC and the STC can exist alongside each other. It could even lead to an interesting cross-pollination.' The BSNC is an organization especially for the industry in the Netherlands. On a European level, the European Synthetic Turf Organization (ESTO) claims to represent the industry in Europe. The decision to establish its own chapter instead of working together with the STC is remarkable. 'The STC approached the ESTO a long time ago, but their lukewarm response made the STC decide to push ahead with its plan to establish its own chapters all over the world, including Europe.' Fiolet doesn't think this will cause any friction. 'The STC's ambitions have always been an open secret. The ESTO was one of the speakers at the STC conference last year and the STC presented a paper at the ESTO event. I believe this can continue to work in the future. The ESTO and STC memberships differ significantly. The ESTO membership mainly includes artificial turf manufacturers and predominant suppliers to the industry. Suppliers of shock pads are particularly well-represented. What makes the STC membership unique, is that they represent the entire value chain in artificial turf:



Arnoud Fiolet

from yarn manufacturers to installers of artificial grass systems for both the sports and the domestic market. The installers in particular are not properly represented by the ESTO. However, it is precisely this group that can benefit from the information and a legal representation that the STC offers.'

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More innovation

Fiolet expects that better information and the exchange of knowledge will also lead to more innovation within the industry. 'Currently there is very little innovation in the artificial grass industry for sports. We believe innovation will be stimulated by encouraging people to look elsewhere and improving international relationships. Dutch companies can learn a lot from countries such as Italy or Scandinavia, and in turn, companies in these countries can reap what we do here in the Netherlands. Seeing and understanding what is done elsewhere could lead to the development of new concepts. The market should keep an open mind by considering what the end user expects from a synthetic grass field, instead of looking at the preconditions to be met. When this will be the case, I am convinced that the artificial grass systems and the industry at large will benefit.'

Another way for the STC to improve the quality of the products and the industry, is to better distinguish companies dedicated to the industry from those that can be considered fly-by-nights. 'The industry is approximately 40 years old. Since 2010, the number of players aiming for a piece of the pie has grown significantly in many European countries. It has become very difficult for the end-user to determine which companies are dedicated to the industry. Members of the STC endorse the codes of conduct and declare to agree with certain principles. In addition, the STC has its own accreditation system. In other words, companies that are members of the STC offer a better guarantee and stand for quality. That will certainly serve the interest of the market.'

Not exclusively Dutch

The first chairman elected by the STC, Ron van Gelderen, had strong ties to the Netherlands. His surname leaves little doubt. The fact that the STC

has now chosen another Dutchman to realize its European ambitions is therefore ironic, but also understandable. Dutch companies involved in the design, construction and maintenance of artificial grass sports fields as well as their colleagues in the natural grass industry are the absolute top in the international industry. Much effort is made, however, to prevent the European chapter of the STC from becoming a Dutch affair. 'The STC has elected eight people to form the European branch. This group must represent the different industries in the market, but also the different markets. Therefore the group consists of people from different countries: myself, Stefan Diderich (Mattex), Xavier Nicolau (Labosport), Rob Moors (Schmitz foam), Andy Shuttleworth (Permavoid Ltd) and Leon van Zijl (Signgrass). We still have five vacancies for the board, which we intend to fill with representatives from other European countries. An international composition is important.' The United States are big, but they are one nation. That is different in Europe. 'That is why it is important to have representatives from different countries and parts of Europe. This will help to identify problems faster and consider solutions that work elsewhere.' At present, about 25 European companies are already members of the STC. 'The event we organized to announce the European branch of the STC was visited by about 100 guests, representing about 50 companies from the industry. If the STC manages to have 40 to 50 European companies as members by the end of the year, I believe this will definitely give us a critical mass.'

The first opportunity for the industry to engage with the STC will be the FSB Show in Cologne, Germany, in November this year. 'The board of the STC has been there many times as a visitor. This year they will have their own booth for the first time.'

The saying 'sport unites' is commonly used all over the world. While the US President is working hard to isolate the United States, the STC clearly takes this phrase at heart by uniting the artificial turf industry internationally.