

# A World Cup Connection

Below is an article I came across about the man mainly responsible for the World Cup playing surfaces in South Africa this summer.

## **A good Counsel past pupil – they're everywhere.**

Media-shy Irishman Richard Hayden would be embarrassed if his name was mentioned beside top 20 World Cup drawcards like Lionel Messi and Wayne Rooney. But the 'pitch professor' is playing a crucial role by creating the 'green jewels' on which the serial goal poachers from Argentina and England and a host of other superstars can sparkle come June and July.

Hayden, who cuts a professorial air with his brown jacket, blue shirt, dark slacks and spectacles, is the man responsible for the 10 South African pitches that play host to the most watched global sport event. Leading World Cup official Danny Jordaan only has praise for a man whose knowledge of grass has seen him work at Wembley Stadium in London, former UEFA Cup holders Shakhtar Donetsk of Ukraine, and K Club golf course in Ireland which hosted the 2006 Ryder Cup. "We have employed possibly the best pitch specialist in the world and said 'go and inspect every pitch'. On that basis we took decisions where we were not convinced about a pitch to remove it and establish a new one." Mbombela Stadium in the eastern city of Nelspruit close to the world famous Kruger National Park was the greatest immediate challenge for a man from the southern Irish city of Kilkenny. When local and overseas media visited a stadium that hosts four first round fixtures they were stunned to discover a sandy, lunar-type landscape after a previous attempt to lay a pitch had not met the required standard. Differ Mogale, a Mbombela municipal official, is another member of the Richard Hayden fan club, proudly recalling the transformation of a pitch that once threatened to exclude Nelspruit from the quadrennial tournament. "We laid the pitch

on a Friday using rye grass and by the following Wednesday it was germinating. Our belief is that come the World Cup, the Nelspruit pitch will be among the best in the world. "In the past we relied on pitch consultants who made recommendations, but Richard and his team were on site with us every day, getting on tractors and showing our team what needed to be done," said Mogale.

Mbombela was one of five stadiums built for the first World Cup to be staged by Africa and apart from a now top-class pitch, the 40,000-seater boasts distinctive orange giraffe columns and black and white zebra seats. "We needed to get the Mbombela surface correct in terms of specifications, in terms of the sand you are growing it in, in terms of the drainage of the pitch, and then you seed," explained Hayden. A key decision made by the Irishman was to use thinner European rye grass instead of less thirsty African kikuyu at the 10 venues from Polokwane in the north to Cape Town in the south west corner of Africa. "June is a winter month in South Africa and kikuyu goes yellow. The decision is not a sinister European plot. We made our recommendations for the purpose of the tournament and they have been followed," said Hayden.

Rye grass needs more water and nurturing than kikuyu and ground staff must be on constant alert for disease, but it will provide a perfect green surface for the 32 national teams and a global TV audience counted in billions. With the Nelspruit crisis solved, Hayden has turned his attention to the World Cup countdown with the week before the June 11 kick-off crucial to him and his team. "In the run up we are going to be watching very closely how much water we place on the pitch. Particularly for day games, footballers like a spray of water to encourage the ball to be slick on the surface," he explained. "Ground staff will have to do some divot repairs at half-time and after the game we do a clean-up of loose grass and then mow it again for presentation, using huge cyclinder and suction mowers." His greatest wish is that no mention is made of the pitches during the 64-match football extravaganza because that will mean his mission has been successfully

completed. "A successful World Cup means a pitch is not mentioned. That is the definition of success. The focus should be on the players and the game, and the pitch should not be an issue."