

ENCORE PERFORMANCE PLUS— WORTHY OF A CELEBRATION



By Suz Trusty

The question: What is an encore? Answer: It's a repeat performance enthusiastically encouraged by an audience that recognizes excellence and wants to experience it again. So it's only fitting that natural turfgrass, Celebration Bermudagrass at many sites, will be on stage in multiple stadiums for the 2016 Olympics following its excellent showing in the 2014 World Cup matches.

Roberto Gurgel is executive director of research for Sod Solutions, Inc. (www.sodsolutions.com), an international turfgrass research and development company. Sod Solutions is the patent holder and worldwide licensing agent for Celebration and numerous other turfgrass varieties.

Gurgel reports the World Cup organizers explored the options in bermudagrasses seeking the combination of properties for best performance in the high-shade, high-use venues. "Celebration was the top performer in shade, according to a research study conducted by Clemson University and the University of Arkansas and our field testing," he says. "Its aggressive growth provides quick recovery from stress, including high traffic. And it's drought tolerant, a big plus in sustainability."

Celebration was selected for five of the stadiums used for World Cup play. Four of those have also been selected as sites for the Olympics men's and women's soccer games. They are: Arena Fonte Nova in Salvador, Estadio Mineirao in Belo Horizonte, Arena Mané Garrincha in Brasília, and Estadio Maracanã, in Rio de Janeiro. Estadio Maracana was the venue for the World Cup finals. It will host multiple events throughout

the Olympics, including the men's and women's soccer finals, the opening ceremonies on Friday, August 5th; and the closing ceremonies on Sunday, August 21st.

Estadio Joao Havelange, nicknamed Engenhão for its location, is also in Rio de Janeiro, and is the fifth Celebration field. Arena Corinthians in Sao Paulo has a perennial ryegrass field and Arena Amazonia, in

August 20th. For men's soccer, four groups of four teams each will play a total of 32 games within that time span. For women's soccer, there will be 3 groups of four teams each and 26 games. Schedules for the games have long been posted on FIFA's website, www.fifa.com, just waiting for the team selection.

Details of the competition in all the sports that will take place at all 33



Roberto Gurgel, executive director of research for Sod Solutions, checks out the Celebration bermudagrass at Estadio Maracana, site of the finals for men's and women's soccer.

Manaus, has a Tifway 419 field. "Soccer is a strong proponent of natural grass, as one of the few sports that is not getting completely seduced by artificial turf," says Gurgel. "Professional soccer players are adamant that natural grass is the best playing surface for their game and they are bold in standing up for it."

The soccer venues are the home fields of professional teams that have adjusted their schedules to accommodate the Olympics. The soccer competition actually begins on August 3rd, before the opening ceremonies, with the finals on

venues are posted on the official website of the Olympic organization, <http://www.olympic.org/rio-2016-summer-olympics>. For additional background on the different sports for the Olympics and the Paralympics, check out the official website of the Brazil's 2016 summer games, www.Rio2016.com. At Rio2016, you can even become an instant expert on all of the sports with their sport-by-sport infographics.

And that's just the beginning of the sources that will be encouraging potential followers to tap into the action. This is a huge opportunity for

our industry to showcase the positive benefits of natural turfgrass, so spread the word to your friends, neighbors and customers.

Laying the groundwork

Gurgel's international background put him in prime position to play a key role in preparations for both the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics in Brazil. He earned a B.S. degree in agronomy in Brazil and spent eight years working on soybean breeding; then nine years on turfgrass breeding while living there. He joined Sod Solutions in 2003 and since then has been working in the U.S. with Tobey Wagner, co-owner and president. Gurgel developed EMPIRE turf while working in Brazil.

Fluent in both Portuguese and English, he has kept in touch with his former employees and other industry contacts there, which has helped advance licensing of the Sod Solutions varieties in Brazil. Gurgel says,



The heavy shade contrasts sharply with the sunlight on the pitch of Estadio Maracana.

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Paulo Antonia Azeredo (left), one of the owners of Itogress; and Fred Ottino (right), field manager for Estadio Maracana, collaborate on the Celebration field.

“We have five licensed producers of Celebration; two of Geo Zoysia and one of Discovery bermuda. The last few years we’ve also been working with two companies that install and maintain athletic facilities in Brazil, Greenleaf and World Sports.”

Looking back, Gurgel reports his role in the preparation for the World Cup arenas actually started in 2012 with trips to Brazil to collaborate on the sod being grown by Itogress for the projects. “The goal was to produce sufficient supplies of Celebration for the multiple stadium sites, insuring that it was grown and maintained to meet the specifications and withstand the demands that would be placed on it,” he says. “The team of TPI member Itogress has done a tremendous job throughout the entire span of production, starting back then and continuing through all the Olympics-related development and beyond.”

Installation and post-installation maintenance brought in another group of collaborators. Gurgel reports that Itogress works in partnership with both World Sports and Greenleaf. He says, “I helped oversee the installation in a few of the arenas, starting in 2013. One of the two companies would be designated as responsible for the installation of each site. My

role was to insure the preparation and installation were handled according to the specifications, which were developed by either the authority for the individual sport (FIFA for soccer) or by the Olympic Committee group designated for that sport.”

Gurgel reports personnel from both companies have attended TPI events, including field days in the U.S.A. in Florida, Texas and the Carolinas, along with Sports Turf Managers Association (STMA) conferences and the Golf Industry Show (GIS). “They are proficient in maintenance,” he says. “Professional teams are the primary users of all the Olympic soccer venues, so the standards were already high. The main concentration was fine-tuning their maintenance program for optimum performance of Celebration within the specific conditions of each stadium.

“Though the U.S.A. is wrapping up the summer months in August, winter is winding down in Brazil. Some of the soccer pitches will be overseeded with perennial ryegrass.”

Natural turfgrass scores beyond soccer

Major new construction for the Olympics took place in the Barra de Tijuca (Barra) zone of Rio de Janeiro, site of the Olympic Village. Gurgel reports Itogress was the supplier of much of the turfgrass, primarily



Lucas Pedrosa is field manager for the Celebration fields of Estadio Mineirao, one of the sites for Olympic soccer, and Arena Independencia, both in Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

Celebration, surrounding the new venues and the turf of the landscaped sections within the complex.

The Olympics will draw 10,500 athletes from 206 countries. With all the athletic staff members, Olympic staffers, dignitaries, media personnel and spectators—the numbers swell for those experiencing natural grass up close and personal. Add in the anticipated 2.5 billion viewers devoting screen time to the games, and the potential impact for natural grass is enormous.

The Paralympics, which run from September 7 through September 18, will bring in another 4,350 athletes from 176 countries, along with their own set of related support personnel, media, spectators and viewers.

Golf is making a comeback at the 2016 Olympics—after a 112-year absence. The development of the new course has a story of its own. (See article, “Golf is Back for 2016 Olympics,” pages 15-17.) Getting golf back in the Olympics is another victory for natural grass.

Rugby sevens, with seven players per team rather than 15, the second sport new to the 2016 Olympics, will be played in the new Deodoro Stadium, with Celebration supplied by Itogress providing the field surface. As with all the venues, this field will get a workout. It will host several of the modern pentathlon events during the Olympics—and soccer for the Paralympics—as well as all of the rugby matches.

Another major installation for natural grass was the development of the equestrian cross country course. It’s the outdoor component to the trio of events that make up the equestrian competition. (Dressage and jumping are the two arena events.) The cross country course is 6,840 meters (4.25 miles) long, with hills and valleys and obstacles—including logs, fences and streams—creating approximately 45 jumps for the horses and riders to maneuver.



This outside view of Arena Fonte Nova, in Salvador, Brazil, shows the high-walled construction typical of stadiums with high seating capacities and a prime factor in the shade issue.

Gurgel says, "Obviously, there were unique challenges impacting the construction. The turfgrass had to be something that would not be too expensive to put in and something that could withstand the heavy traffic from the horses. Celebration was chosen because of its aggressive nature and fast recovery."

With such a large area to cover for the cross country course, the developers could not afford to sod everything, so sprigs were used for the majority of the project. "A good irrigation system was essential, as well as an effective weed control program, so the sprigs

could take over and fill in," Gurgel says. "With all the variations in terrain and the surrounding vegetation, there were a lot of little challenges with the irrigation, both during the installation and in developing and managing the irrigation efficiency once the system was in place. Having the experienced team of Itograss and its contractor partners and their willingness to work through the challenges made it all successful."

Gurgel reports the turfgrass is doing well in all the new outdoor venues and the landscape areas. Positive reports from the media and the athletes point to the quality of the

playing surfaces that are being tested by onsite competition prior to official Olympic action. The soccer arena fields are meeting the high standards anticipated—and expected—for professional-level play.

"While we're very excited that Celebration is the choice for so many venues, the most important point is that natural grass is dominating the Olympics," says Gurgel. "The only artificial turf playing surface is for field hockey."

Preparations for the 2016 Olympics have faced other challenges, related to economic conditions, government bureaucracy, environmental protests, construction snafus and fears related to the Zika virus. Despite all that—there will be excellence—among the athletes—and with the natural turfgrass. For this Olympics, green may very well be the new gold.

Suz Trusty is co-editor of *Turf News*.

All photos courtesy of Roberto Gurgel.





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