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Ontario sod ready to perform at Pan Am Games

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The Ajax ballpark will be outfitted with Greenhorizons sod before the games begin. Torstar News Service

Burford, Ont. is sod country.

Plants there root into the Norfolk sand plain, stretching from Cambridge to Long Point.

Dubbed tobaccosand for the crop that once dominated the fields of southwestern Ontario, the loam covering the region is ideal for growing.

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Ginseng, corn, broccoli.

And Pan Am Games playing fields.

When a left fielder dives face first to catch a speedy grounder this summer, she will be eating a mouthful of turf grown at the Greenhorizons Sod Farms in Burford.

The company was commissioned to outfit the new York track and field stadium and Ajax ballpark ahead of the Games. Angus Glen Golf Course and BMO Field, which will also host Pan Am events, got the Greenhorizons sod treatment years ago.

Originally a golf-grass farm, specialized sport turf took root on the 100 hectare facility 12 years ago.

A team of five people, two working year-round, maintain the fields. On harvesting days, the team can expand up to 40 people.

There are things one can know without stepping foot on a sod farm.

For one, freshly washed grass with roots formed into rough, thick netting and the top cut uniformly tight looks and feels exactly like carpet.

Also, grass can be washed.

Each 26-square-metre roll of sod planted last summer at the new venues was washed clean. Traces of native soil removed to prepare it for life beyond Burford.

Once on site, the sports turf lives in a layer of engineered sand, derived from granite and shipped in from Huntsville. Ordinarily grass grows up to two and a half years in the sand before being harvested. But Games deadlines meant no time to slowly develop that layer.

Company vice-president Steve Schiedel could talk grass all day.

A 45-minute drive from his office near the Hamilton airport to the farm goes by in a flash as he touts the benefits of sand bases (won't get packed down like soil) and Kentucky bluegrass (everybody pooh-poohs it just because if other places in the world could grow bluegrass they would love it!)

For him, the grass is part of the sport and should be thought of as an athlete.

A sports field is the absolute highest level of performance. We need it to perform at its best. It's like a body builder. They need a ton of food and nutrition, because he's using [his body] a lot.

How the ball rolls, how players can grip and cut, all this Schiedel says, is wrapped up in the stuff under their feet.

And that stuff takes a beating.

When [soccer players] do a good turn, they rip the life right out of our grass, she said. But that's the nice thing about the bluegrass, it will heal that up very quickly.

Greenhorizons sports turf is made up of about three to five varieties of bluegrass chosen for their reparability, length and colour.

Disease resistance and winter hardiness are givens.

Real grass was used at the new venues by request of the sports federations, according to Games spokesperson Teddy Katz.

The grass will be one less thing for softball player Kaleigh Rafter and her team mates to think about when chasing balls.

When they hit on the [artificial] turf, they almost pick up speed, she said. You kind of have to adjust for that in the routes you take.

She admits there are pros and cons to both, but the team usually plays on grass, meaning no last-minute adjustments are needed.

It's not something you have to worry about or think about when you play.

After all, thinking about the grass is Schiedel's job.

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