



With this year's turf conference being held in Brisbane, it was fitting that the crew from one of the city's iconic arenas was bestowed the ASTMA Sports Turf Management Team of the Year Award.



Suncorp crew salutes

The grounds team at Suncorp Stadium in Brisbane was officially recognised for their efforts over a hectic two-year period at June's National Turf Industry Awards, collecting the 2024 ASTMA Sports Turf Management Team of the Year Award sponsored by Repco Commercial. In front of an audience of more than 320 at the gala awards dinner held at the Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre on the opening night of the Australian Sports Turf Management Conference, Suncorp Stadium grounds

manager Matthew Oliver accepted the award on behalf of his crew who have helped raise the bar in what has been a career-defining couple of seasons.

Suncorp Stadium is one of Australia's most recognised arenas, one which has played host to some of the most iconic sporting moments in this country's history. It entertains multiple national and international sporting competitions and fixtures annually in addition to hosting sell-out concerts. It is home ground for four major tenant clubs including the NRL's Brisbane Broncos and Redcliffe Dolphins,

Super Rugby side Queensland Reds and A-League side Brisbane Roar.

Despite the prominence of the venue and its large number of events, the Suncorp Stadium crew boasts just three full-time crew members – Oliver, senior groundsman Rob Saxby and groundsman Michael Gilman – who are complemented by a dedicated group of match-day and event staff.

Adaptability and resilience are two of the key strengths that the Suncorp Stadium team possess in spades and no more has that been evident than over the past two years. In 2023 alone, they prepared Suncorp for 61 separate events and are already well on track to surpass that number in 2024. All this in addition to a raft of works including full and partial surface replacements, irrigation upgrades and infrastructure improvements.

"We are absolutely thrilled to receive this award," says Oliver, who has been in charge at Suncorp Stadium since October 2022.

One of Australia's iconic sporting venues, Suncorp Stadium is home ground for four major tenant clubs including the NRL's Brisbane Broncos and Redcliffe Dolphins, Super Rugby side Queensland Reds and A-League side Brisbane Roar

"We are really proud to do what we do on a weekly basis and we do get a real thrill out of preparing our little patch of grass for four of Australia's premier sporting clubs, two of those being in the NRL which continues to go from strength to strength. We are in a really good spot at the moment and that is because of the efforts of all the crew here. They go above and beyond for me and the support from them has been unwavering throughout."

A QUEENSLAND ICON

From its original incarnation as Lang Park through to its redevelopment and subsequent renaming, Suncorp Stadium is Queensland's premier rectangular stadium boasting a long and proud history. It is owned by Stadiums Queensland and managed by ASM Global, providing Brisbane and southeast Queensland with a 52,500-plus seat capacity world-class stadium capable of hosting a range of events, including;

- Rugby league – Brisbane Broncos and Redcliffe Dolphins home games in the NRL, NRLW games, annual State of Origin games, international Test matches and the Queensland Rugby League's Intrust Super Cup Grand Final;
- Rugby union – Queensland Reds home games in the Super Rugby competition and international Tests featuring the Wallabies;
- Soccer – Brisbane Roar A-League home games and local and international matches including 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup matches featuring the Matildas and World Cup qualifying games featuring both the Socceroos and Matildas;
- Concerts – over the past two years Suncorp has hosted the likes of major international artists Guns 'N' Roses, Elton John, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Ed Sheeran (three shows), Paul McCartney, Motley Crue/Def Leppard, Foo Fighters and P!nk (three shows);
- Boxing and extreme sports (including Nitro Circus and Nitro World Games BMX, FMX, scooter and skateboarding).

Originally from Melbourne, Oliver took over the turf management reins at Suncorp Stadium ahead of the 2022/2023 A-League season after long-serving grounds manager Mal Caddies took up a new role with the Kai Tak Sports Park precinct development in Hong Kong. Prior to moving to Suncorp, Oliver was ground manager at the Queensland Sports and Athletics Centre (QSAC) for four years.

His turf management career spans more than two decades and began in Melbourne



Suncorp Stadium grounds manager Matthew Oliver (right) with Gary Downs from award sponsor Repco Commercial at the National Turf Industry Awards

where he completed an apprenticeship at PGA Links Sandhurst. That was followed by stints at Marvel Stadium, Melbourne Grammar School and Carlton Football Club (Princes Park). For seven months between 2016 and 2017 he was also seconded as a project operations manager to oversee the grow-in and establishment of the new playing surface at the National Football Stadium in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea.

As Oliver's right-hand men, both Saxby and Gilman take great pride in their work and were extremely supportive of Oliver during the transitional period after Caddies' departure. Over the near two years since, the trio have developed a strong working bond and the strength of that relationship can be seen in the exemplary surfaces they continue to produce week in, week out.

Saxby has been part of the grounds team at Suncorp for 16 years and Stadiums Queensland for 24 years in total, having also spent eight years previously at QSAC. Saxby is a superb groundsman with a wealth of knowledge and expertise carved out over a long period. His career highlight to date was being involved in the 2021 NRL Grand Final which Suncorp hosted after it was moved outside of NSW due to COVID restrictions. Gilman, who was recently elected vice-president of STA Queensland, has been at Suncorp for four years and is an extremely passionate soccer fan who revelled in the chance of preparing the surface for last year's 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup.

In addition to the full-time crew, Oliver is fortunate to be able to call upon a pool of experienced casual staff who assist on match and event days. These include Shane Biddle, Ben Engels, Adrian Onvlee, Tim Pflingst, Manuel Halicos and John Wolfenden.

Although casuals, a number of them are experienced turf managers in their own right. Biddle is the long-serving turf manager at the University of Queensland's St Lucia campus, while Engels (turf manager) and Pflingst (groundsman) are stationed at Queensland Rugby Union's Ballymore ground. Onvlee is a greenkeeper at St Margaret's Anglican Girls



Pictured left is the Suncorp Stadium full-time crew of Rob Saxby, Michael Gilman and Matthew Oliver. Pictured right, Oliver has a pool of experienced casual staff who assist on match and event days including Shane Biddle, Ben Engels, Adrian Onvlee, Tim Pfingst, Manuel Halicos and John Wolfenden



School and current STA Queensland treasurer, while Wolfenden is a groundsman at QSAC.

Event days are where the Suncorp Stadium grounds team shine, with this core group having worked match days at Suncorp for a number of years now. They have become a well-drilled unit when it comes to the differing match day requirements of each code and have their pre-game set up and post-match recovery processes and practices down to a fine art.

COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE

By nature of the venue they maintain, having a commitment to excellence is central to the role of the Suncorp Stadium grounds team. Having major tenant clubs such as the NRL's Broncos and Dolphins, the Queensland Reds Super Rugby side and the Brisbane Roar A-League side, these professional multimillion dollar franchises, which boast some of the highest paid players in their respective codes, demand exemplary and, most importantly, safe playing conditions. This was especially the case during last July's FIFA Women's World Cup where the crew had to present the ground to the exacting requirements set by FIFA.

The objective of the Suncorp Stadium grounds team is similar to that of any professional sports turf management outfit maintaining elite-level sports turf – provide the best possible playing surface for all end users of the ground, regardless of event stature. Due to the high number and different types of events the stadium hosts, Oliver and his team do a lot of things that go against most conventional turf management manuals. That is simply the reality of being a multipurpose venue, but it is up to them to produce the best surface they can in the circumstances and with the resources they have.

The past two years in particular have seen a large amount of work undertaken to the Suncorp playing surface in addition to hosting a high volume of sporting fixtures and concerts. It has arguably been one of the busiest periods in the stadium's history. As noted earlier, in 2023 the stadium hosted 61 separate events, including eight matches as part of the FIFA Women's World Cup, which was a significant jump from previous years.

The increase in fixtures was attributed to the Brisbane Roar upping their A-League home games from three to 12, as well as eight additional rugby league fixtures with the Redcliffe-based Dolphins franchise entering the NRL competition. Also, the Queensland Government announced in 2023 it was increasing Suncorp's quota of concerts annually, up from 10 to 12.



Since May 2023, Suncorp Stadium has had SISGrass synthetic fibres stitched into the playing surface to help maintain its integrity and reduce damage

In 2023, Suncorp hosted 28 rugby league games (NRL, State of Origin, state rep matches, Q Cup and Confraternity Cup), 10 soccer games (A-League men and women, Football Queensland finals), eight FIFA Women's World Cup matches, eight concerts and seven Super Rugby and Women's Super Rugby games. What makes this tally even more impressive is that there was a four-week gap between late-June and late-July leading up to the World Cup matches where FIFA's mandated 'Pitch Protection Period' was enforced, meaning the venue could not be used. That effectively meant the 61 events were held across a 48-week period, with a number of doubleheader and tripleheader weekends, not to mention the lengthy bump-in and bump-out of eight concerts, preparing the ground beforehand and then turning the ground back around post-concert.

2024 is tracking along similar lines and between January and the end of August the ground had already hosted 42 events, ranging from NRL (including Magic Round and the series-deciding State of Origin III game), Super Rugby, Rugby Championship, A-League and three concerts. During that time the Suncorp team also replaced 5658m² of turf, 'stitched' 7140m² of the playing surface with SISGrass (more on that below) and oversowed the surface with more than 4500kg of ryegrass.

Perhaps the biggest event over the past couple of years (and arguably the venue's history) came last July and August when it was one of the primary venues for the FIFA Women's World Cup, the first time the tournament had been held in Australasia. Suncorp, or Brisbane Stadium as it was known for the duration of the tournament, was one of six Australian match-day venues along with four in New Zealand. Of all Australian venues

Suncorp had the honour of hosting the most games – a total of eight which included five Group games, a Round of 16 match, a Quarter Final and the 3 v 4 Playoff.

Ahead of the World Cup, Oliver and his team first had to navigate the playing surface through a steady stream of concerts, rugby league, rugby union and soccer fixtures as well contend with a planned full surface replacement. Following three Ed Sheeran concerts in mid-February which attracted in excess of 173,000 fans, the entire Legend couchgrass surface was replaced, with the last maxi roll of turf laid by Twin View Turf on 1 March, just four days out from the opening round of the 2023 NRL season. No sooner had the surface been laid, FIFA came in to carry out an inspection before the new Dolphins franchise played their inaugural NRL match against the Sydney Roosters.

From that point onwards, the ground was on weekly rotation. Across the 16-week period from 5 March to 25 June it hosted 33 fixtures across three codes, including the NRL's Magic Round and State of Origin. After Magic Round, the crew re-turfed about 300m² in high wear areas. A rugby league doubleheader on 25 June would be the last matches played before the ground entered the mandatory exclusivity period in the lead-up to the World Cup.

The heavy schedule during that period was in part due to the World Cup. With the venue out of action for two months (26 June to 19 August), the Broncos had to schedule seven of their home games in the first 11 weeks of the NRL season. The new Dolphins franchise also played a number of its home games there, including the inaugural derby with the Broncos. That placed additional pressure on the surface, which wasn't helped by a particularly wet and humid stretch of weather.



For the World Cup, the Suncorp Stadium crew had to adhere to FIFA's exacting requirements which detailed everything regarding ground presentation, even down to the equipment used and width of the mowing stripes

Suncorp's World Cup campaign kicked off on 22 July with just under 45,000 filling the stands to see world No.4 ranked England defeat Haiti 1-0. It hosted a further four group matches, including the Matilda's Group clash with Nigeria and Brazil's match up with France, both games attracting crowds in excess of 49,000. It then hosted the England v Nigeria Round of 16, which England won on penalties, and the Matildas' quarter final against France which the home side won after a dramatic penalty shootout. Its last game was the 3 v 4 playoff between the Matildas and Sweden which attracted a crowd of just under 50,000. Across the eight World Cup fixtures nearly 350,000 fans attended Suncorp.

IMPROVEMENTS AND UPGRADES

To ensure that the Suncorp Stadium surface continues to provide an exemplary stage for elite-level sport and major events, the grounds team, in conjunction with stadium management, have made some significant infrastructure improvements over the past two years to aid its performance and integrity. This has been necessary due to the increase in content which has placed further pressure on the field.

To assist with turf recovery, the stadium has invested in additional lighting rigs to light high wear areas instead of just the heavily shaded areas. The stadium now has a total of six of the large SGL360 rigs and a smaller rig specifically for deployment in goal areas. Three units were recently acquired second-hand from AAMI Park in Melbourne.

Heading into the Women's World Cup, last May the Suncorp surface was 'stitched' with SISGrass fibres by HG Turf as part of FIFA's requirement that all venues hosting a World Cup event have a form of hybrid pitch. Originally scheduled to be the last of the World Cup venues to be stitched, Oliver requested to have the date moved forward so that the fibres would be in the ground ahead of the 21 June State of Origin clash. HG Turf were able to reshuffle their schedule and over a nine-day period starting from 29 May their team completed a 'tournament stitch' (where fibres are inserted to a depth of 90mm) of the 7700m² soccer pitch area.

The Suncorp team wanted the stitching in earlier so as to have the most stable surface for State of Origin. The team certainly noticed a difference with the SISGrass installed – the field felt more consistent walking across it, while there was a significant reduction in debris that had to be removed after the game.

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Suncorp Stadium hosted eight matches during the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup, the most of any Australian venue

After an NRL or Super Rugby fixture, the Suncorp team would normally remove between 1.5-2 cubic metres of debris. After the SISGrass fibres went in they only pulled about a quarter of a cubic metre off due to the surface holding together much better.

Following the Foo Fighters concert last December, the Suncorp surface was again completely replaced and in early January 2024 the majority of the soccer pitch (6250m²) was re-stitched with SISGrass in preparation for the NRL and Super Rugby seasons. The northern 1150m² of the soccer pitch was also re-stitched after a third P!nk concert in March due to concert turf replacement. Both stitchings were again to a depth of 90mm and in 20mm square spacings.

The Suncorp surface currently has around five tonnes of synthetic fibres in the surface and the assistance it provides in maintaining a stable surface has been significant. As an example, over the three nights of Magic Round 2023 (prior to the surfacing being stitched), the Suncorp team removed 21 cubic metres of debris off the surface, whereas for this year's Magic Round they only removed six.

In addition to the incorporation of synthetic fibres, at the conclusion of the 2023 NRL season a new state-of-the-art irrigation system was installed. The new system is a Rain Bird IQ4 with IVM controller and individual head control on the 8005 Series sprinkler heads. A new 75mm ring main was installed, along with 40mm pipe to every sprinkler. All sprinkler lines were mole-ploughed in. The new system gives the Suncorp team the ability to better control

irrigation inputs, use water more efficiently and report on real-time water usage set against the stadium's forecasted evapotranspiration rates.

At the same time as the irrigation was being installed, the Suncorp team took the opportunity to expand the artificial turf perimeter on three sides of the field of play to 3.6 metres in width to give them greater flexibility accessing the arena. Previously, the western perimeter was 3m wide and the northern and southern strips just 2m. The eastern perimeter will also be extended after the 2024 NRL season.

As well as the infrastructure improvements, from a turf management perspective, the Suncorp grounds team have adopted a much stronger nutritional program using mainly Floratine products to ensure the playing surface is in healthy condition and can recover from the heavy use it receives. They have also instituted a monthly preventative fungicide program which is critical in Brisbane's moist and humid climate.

COMMUNICATION, ENGAGEMENT AND PROMOTION

Communication and engagement with stakeholders was never more important and evident than during last year's Women's World Cup. Having earlier in his career worked at the U20 Women's World Cup in Papua New Guinea, Oliver knew the demands that the tournament would put upon him and his crew. He was able to prepare them for what was to come, in particular the level of testing and precision which FIFA demands.

The Suncorp team had to adhere to FIFA's dedicated 25-page Pitch Preparation Guide which fastidiously details everything from the width the stripes on the field need to be cut, cutting heights, mowing equipment used, irrigation regimes, fertilising, the use of artificial growth lights, surface testing parameters and line marking to name just a few. Due to these exacting requirements the Suncorp team were in constant contact with FIFA's pitch management chief Alan Ferguson as well as FIFA's official surface testing company LaboSport (represented by Keith McAuliffe).

The surface was tested multiple times ahead of the tournament, with key parameters measured including traction, surface hardness, surface moisture content, ball roll and ball rebound height. On all occasions the Suncorp Stadium surface was well within FIFA's recommended ranges, with daily testing undertaken during the tournament to make sure they stayed within them.

Given the stadium's high profile, the Suncorp team takes very seriously its role in sharing expertise and knowledge with their fellow turf industry colleagues. An example of this was in early May 2024 when, in conjunction with Nuturf, the Suncorp grounds team extended an invitation to 13 members of the sports turf management crew from Ipswich Council to visit the stadium and gain an insight into its management.

During the behind-the-scenes tour, the Suncorp team shared the meticulous process behind event and game preparation, covering everything from mowing to line-marking,

seeding and fertilising. Oliver delved into the intricate logistics of managing Suncorp Stadium's turf, including surface replacements post-concerts and the transition between the different sporting codes they host.

Posting on LinkedIn after the tour, Nuturf's Matthew Kinnear, who had helped to organise it, commented: "A heartfelt thank you to Matt for his ongoing generosity in sharing his expertise and time with the turf industry. The team at Ipswich Council had a fantastic time learning from Matt and it's through professionals like him that our industry continues to thrive."

That willingness to lend a hand was also on display during the current NRL season when Oliver travelled to Bundaberg to help with preparations at regional venue Salter Oval for its Round 24 match between the Dolphins and Bulldogs.

Above all, however, Oliver's focus is always to put the spotlight back on his team. At the conclusion of major events or significant work projects, both Oliver and the Suncorp Stadium management place regular posts through their social media channels highlighting the team's efforts and achievements. A key theme within these posts is the appreciation of the team's efforts and how they have contributed to the success of the event/works that have been undertaken.



Oliver regularly highlights the work of his team on social media and is always sure to thank them for their efforts

In addition to that, the Suncorp Stadium team are often featured in local Brisbane/Queensland media. In the lead-up to this year's NRL Magic Round, the crew featured in a photo shoot which appeared in the Brisbane Courier Mail newspaper. Oliver also readily makes himself available for media interviews, whether on radio, television or for industry podcasts in the lead-up to major events (e.g.: Magic Round and Women's World Cup) where he discusses the management of the stadium surface. As part of these interviews he is always quick to single out his team and their efforts in helping deliver a top notch product.

"Matthew and the Suncorp Stadium grounds team consistently produce a world-class surface ensuring elite performance across a variety of codes while also hosting concerts," sums up stadium general manager Alan Graham. "They are an essential part of promoting this iconic stadium to the world and maintaining its reputation as a world-class venue. Suncorp Stadium is incredibly proud and congratulates Matthew and his team on receiving the ASTMA Team of the Year Award for their excellent commitment and tireless hard work. It is a fitting acclamation of their contribution and dedication to the industry."

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