

# Game Changer

As the manufacturer and supplier of synthetic surfaces for the world's biggest sporting competitions, Sport Group is miles ahead of its competition.

Images courtesy of Sport Group

With the science behind sport increasing rapidly, not only are elite athletes and scoring technologies constantly improving as technology advances, so too is the surface that sports are played on. Where a grassy patch or strip of asphalt used to do, now the surfaces that sports are played on are more advanced than ever. That's what Sport Group does with its global key brands Polytan, Melos, and APT—it creates synthetic, environmentally friendly surfaces for sport and recreation for everything from high-level elite sports to local playgrounds. While Polytan represents Sport Group's projects business globally, Melos and APT are specialised in developing, producing, and selling the required systems or components.

CEO Frank Dittrich says that Sport Group is active in a niche market and aims to be the market leader within the industry. "Our business is a niche market and our key systems are running tracks, recreational surfaces, and artificial

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turf sports surfaces. That's sports pitches for various applications like football, rugby, hockey, tennis—any sport that is played on natural grass, you can play on artificial turf." So far the group has installed more than 7,000 artificial turf pitches and 16,000 running tracks and recreational surfaces worldwide.

Frank's background is in the construction industry, which although slightly different to his current role, has given him a good understanding of international project management and business expansion globally. "I have my roots in the international construction industry," Frank explains. "I have been working for international groups for more or less the past 20 years."

"In our business, what is important is a combination of production and installation with a focus on quality across these critical areas. Sport Group covers both of these key segments internally and this is one of the successful elements of our group. Of course, it's extremely important to fully understand all the aspects of the project business globally, which is where my

experience has been helpful. I used to work for a group of companies for about 10 years in various international management roles. With that came travel to different markets and an opportunity to understand the complexities of successfully managing international operations."

Frank and his team are proud of the work that Sport Group has done in the last decade. Sport Group has gone from a local German installer to an international producer and installer of premium sport surfaces, with entities in nine countries across the globe. The global sales team comprises more than 120 employees and 200 agents on all continents. "Historically, the roots are in a German installation company for sport surfaces only. Over a span of 40 years, it has developed into a leading fully integrated global player for outdoor sports and recreational surfaces.

"The expansion started slowly in the first decades, but over the past 15 years we have truly become a global group. From today's perspective, we >



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have production and installation entities in Europe, in Australia, from where we service the Asia-Pacific market, and in the US for the North American market. This expansion has been achieved both organically and through acquisitions."

The global expansion of Sport Group is what, Frank says, sets the company apart from its competitors in the industry. "The strength of our group is that we are the only ones in our industry that are first of all global, and second, developing and producing all key components for the systems ourselves. To ensure quality for our customers, the surfaces are typically being installed from our own teams. Polytan has the biggest installation crew for these applications globally. It's a fully integrated footprint that is unique in our industry. This is also one of the success stories for our business going forward and this is where over the past couple of years we have been very successful in extending our group."

One of the other main differences that Sports Group has is its large investment in research and development of its products. With technology constantly advancing, Frank explains, it is essential to be ahead of the game and innovating. "In our industry, we are definitely the one spending the most on R&D. Generally, our concept is to cover the upper quality segment of the markets. We are definitely the innovation leader in our industry."

"From that perspective, it's clear that we are investing a lot of money in innovation and it fits well with the European customer expectation for premium quality. Being a key player in Europe is important as the entire group benefits from this product range and innovation. With these products as a basis, it's a lot easier to successfully expand the business into the markets in North America and the Asia-Pacific region, which also describes the business concept and the strategy from the past five years."

Over the years, this has also led to Sport Group winning a number of high-profile projects, including



manufacturing and installing surfaces for the Olympic Games and other international sporting competitions. "We have provided outdoor sport surfaces for many international events, including the Olympic Games, World Cup, and other major international sporting events. Currently we are producing and installing the hockey surface for the Olympics in Rio in 2016. Successfully delivering sporting surfaces to elite global competition requires a strong business platform of product innovation and quality. These are a core focus of our group and drive our international success at an elite level."

Despite the success, the industry does pose challenges for Frank and his team. Because Sport Group both manufactures its systems and installs them on site, the communication between different areas of the business has to be perfect to ensure maximum efficiency. "It's tricky because we are primarily producing for our own projects, with also some component supply for others," Frank explains. "Planning production requirements so that materials arrive on site at projects around the world when they are needed requires good communication and logistics coordination."

"The ongoing challenge is really to make sure the feedback from the front end—from the project world of our business—is properly reflected in the product development, in the planning for the pre-production of the components, and in the preparation of having all the materials available at the right point in time."

With sports surfacing installation predominantly undertaken in the

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dry, summer months, Polytan's project installation works are condensed within a short window each year. To adequately service its large customer base, Polytan needs to schedule installation works on all projects efficiently. "This is where communication between the manufacturing and installation divisions is so important," says Frank. "It requires proper planning between the segments within the group and it requires some pre-production to have everything available during the peak installation season, without limiting customisation for each client. It's a continuous challenge, but we have learned to successfully manage this process efficiently and effectively."

For the future, Frank says the company has plans to continue its expansion worldwide, and continue to increase Sport Group's revenue. There are plans for more acquisitions and Frank wants the company to double its turnover within five years. "We already have a turnover of more than €300 million, which in our industry is already significant. But compared to the complexity and the fact that we are a global actor and a global spending group, there is still a lot of benefits from further growth and vertical integration. Also the markets in our segments are still fragmented in most countries."

"There is room for further expansion organically but also through add-on acquisitions. What's driving us is to be a €500- to €600-million turnover company in five years from now. We have to be innovative and to define our products so that at the end of the day they fulfil the requirements for our customer. Having the knowledge to further develop the systems, a strong reputation in the sports segment, and the network understanding around the globe is very unique in our industry. That provides us with a perfect basis to push for further growth." •

*"Sports Group and its supplier EOC Belgium go back a long way. The excellent personal relations between Polytex and EOC associates help of course, but the DNA of both companies just matches. We value their trust in us, which is quintessential for a decade-long cooperation." - Gerard Marsman, CEO, EOC Group*



# Artful Turf

EOC Group is leading the way in artificial grass backing.

**E**OC Group is a family-owned producer of chemical products with headquarters located in Oudenaarde, Belgium. EOC Group is active on a worldwide scale, with more than 10 production sites spread over Europe and Asia. The product portfolio extends from compounds and carboxylated latices to adhesives, emulsions, surfactants, and technical textile chemicals with new product lines such as polyurethanes in the pipeline.

## Proven technology for the artificial turf market

The latex and compound divisions form the historical backbone of the company and are still today important contributors to the success of EOC Group, more than 60 years after its foundation.

While being a reputable supplier to the carpet and textiles markets, EOC Group assumes absolute market leadership in the growing market of artificial turf. Both for professional and leisure turf

producers, EOC offers an unmatched product line of artificial grass backing latices and compounds.

Continuous research led to the development of a self-crosslinking latex that assures prolonged longevity of professional artificial turf fields. Another development overcomes the negative influence of spin finish oils used in the production of grass yarn on the tuft lock of the yarn.

## New alternative grass backing solutions

Although EOC believes firmly that compounds and latices are currently the most efficient and environmentally friendly grass backing solutions available, the company has developed alternative solutions in cooperation with other divisions within the Group such as a grass backing hot melt with excellent recycling characteristics.

In the course of 2016, EOC will also bring polyurethanes to the market. This exciting new product

line will be produced in a brand new reactor facility that is currently under construction at the Oudenaarde plant.

## One-stop shop solutions

With this extensive portfolio of proven technology as compounds and latices, hot melt solutions to ensure high levels of recycling potential, and the newly developed polyurethanes, EOC Group offers artificial turf producers a unique one-stop shop solution.

The combination of excellent product quality with unbeatable customer service will guarantee the continued market leadership of EOC Group in the long term.

- Reliable grass backing binders
- Polyurethane grass backing
- Hot melt backing

EOC Group is the leading grass backing binder specialists. For more information visit [eocgroup.com](http://eocgroup.com) or call +32 55 23 58 58. •