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Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/80007161

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Publication Date
2008-05-22

Peer reviewed
Limits of NbTi and Nb₃Sn, and Development of W&R Bi–2212 High Field Accelerator Magnets

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Abstract—NbTi accelerator dipoles are limited to magnetic fields \((H)\) of about 10 T, due to an intrinsic upper critical field \((H_{c2})\) limitation of 14 T. To surpass this restriction, prototype Nb₃Sn magnets are being developed which have reached 16 T. We show that Nb₃Sn dipole technology is practically limited to 17 to 18 T due to insufficient high field pinning, and intrinsically to 20 to 22 T due to \(H_{c2}\) limitations. Therefore, to obtain magnetic fields approaching 20 T and higher, a material is required with a higher \(H_{c2}\) and sufficient high field pinning capacity. A realistic candidate for this purpose is Bi–2212, which is available in round wires and sufficient lengths for the fabrication of coils based on Rutherford-type cables. We initiated a program to develop the required technology to construct accelerator magnets from ‘wind-and-react’ (W&R) Bi–2212 coils. We outline the complications that arise through the use of Bi–2212, describe the development paths to address these issues, and conclude with the design of W&R Bi–2212 sub-scale magnets.

Index Terms—Accelerator magnet, HTS, Bi–2212

I. INTRODUCTION

The superconducting material of choice for accelerator magnets has long been NbTi. The world’s largest particle accelerator, the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) at CERN, utilizes NbTi technology. The record magnetic field with NbTi in a dipole configuration is 10.5 T at 1.8 K [1], and is approaching the intrinsic limitations of NbTi as will be discussed below. To surpass the intrinsic limitations of NbTi, a number of prototype dipole magnets have been constructed using Nb₃Sn superconductors, since Nb₃Sn approximately doubles the available field–temperature regime. Prototype dipole magnets that utilize Nb₃Sn technology reach a steadily increasing magnetic field, with the present record being 16 T at 4.5 K [2]. This progress resulted, for a significant part, from the increasing critical current density \((J_c)\) in strands [3].

These successful prototype magnets demonstrate the feasibility of Nb₃Sn for use in accelerator magnets. This is emphasized through the U.S. LHC Accelerator Research Program (LARP) [4], which focuses on the development of Nb₃Sn magnets for future LHC upgrades. However, as will be shown below, due to these recent successful efforts, Nb₃Sn magnets are also rapidly approaching the material’s limitations and a switch to a new material is inevitable to achieve higher magnetic fields.

II. MAGNETIC FIELD LIMITS USING NbTi AND Nb₃Sn

To validate the use of a new material and the ensuing technology development, an accurate determination of the limitations of the present materials is required. A material’s current carrying capacity is determined by its effective field-temperature phase boundary \((H_{c2}(T))\) and its pinning capacity. A material’s pinning force \((F_p)\) is maximized when the pinning site density is comparable to the flux-line density in the operating magnetic field range.

For NbTi, \(H_{c2}(T)\) is limited by \(H_{c2}(0) \cong 14.4\) T and an effective critical temperature \(T_c(0) \cong 9.2\) K [5], as depicted in Fig. 1. Pinning sites can be engineered in NbTi in the form of \(\alpha\)-Ti precipitates, with a spacing that is comparable to the flux-line spacing in the 5 to 10 T magnetic field range [6] (Fig. 2). NbTi is therefore, under present understanding, close to fully optimized. This pinning capacity optimization yields a parabolic-like \(F_p(H)\) that peaks at about 50% of \(H_{c2}\) [5], and a maximum \(J_c(5\text{ T}, 4.2\text{ K}) \cong 3\text{ kA/mm}^2\), or 1150 A/mm² at 8 T and 4.2 K [1]. Fig. 1 shows that an optimized dipole magnet, using an optimized NbTi wire, achieves about 80% of its intrinsic field-temperature limitation. 80% can thus be regarded as an optimized efficiency for dipole magnets.

Recent investigations on the capacities of Nb₃Sn superconductors [7]–[9] place well-defined practical and intrinsic limitations on its performance. For Nb₃Sn, being stable from about 18 to 25 at.%Sn (the A15 phase), \(H_{c2}(T)\) depends on the \(H_{c2}\) averaging over the compositions that are present in a wire [9]. In Fig. 1, the maximum detectable \(H_{c2}(T)\) in
translates to the concave linear for optimized NbTi, in contrast, translates to an approximately H current carrying capacity towards H only 20% of H. The inset shows the normalized pinning force as function of reduced magnetic field. This results in collective pinning of the flux-line lattice, described by an asymmetric boundary density. This forms an intrinsic magnetic field limitation for Nb3Sn, as summarized in Table I. Technological challenges are related to the strain sensitivity of Bi–2212, its high formation reaction temperature in an oxygen-rich environment, and chemical compatibility of the insulation and construction materials during the reaction heat treatment. Operational challenges are related to the low normal zone propagation velocity, hindering energy dissipation and quench detection.

A. Stress and strain related issues

The critical current in Bi–2212 is, like Nb3Sn, sensitive to strain (ϵ). A model that has been developed to describe the behavior of Jc(ϵ) in Bi–2212 in longitudinal strain experiments indicates, as with Nb3Sn, that the highest Jc is obtained in the strain free state (Fig. 3 [14]). Compressive axial strain during cool-down causes, in contrast to Nb3Sn, an irreversible reduction of Jc (Fig. 3: a). Releasing the thermal pre-compression (Fig. 3: b) does not, as for Nb3Sn, recover Jc, but Jc(ϵ) shows a plateau up to an axial strain where cracks occur and Jc collapses (Fig. 3: c). Though Jc(ϵ) on this plateau is reversible, any additional pre-compression and relaxation causes a wider plateau at a reduced Jc value. Such a wider plateau is often misinterpreted as an indication for reduced strain sensitivity, but is in fact a result of a larger axial pre-compression in the Bi–2212. The Jc loss is on the order of 75% per 1% axial compressive strain [14]. Construction materials that match the thermal contraction of Bi–2212 are therefore preferred. One publication on the stress sensitivity of Bi–2212 cables indicates a broad-face load limit of about 60 MPa [15]. This emphasizes the need for more detailed investigations and accurate stress handling in magnets and/or new conductor reinforcement techniques.

III. TECHNOLOGICAL CHALLENGES WITH BI–2212

Constructing a magnet using Bi–2212 is significantly more complicated than using NbTi or Nb3Sn, as summarized in Table I. Technological challenges are related to the strain sensitivity of Bi–2212, its high formation reaction temperature in an oxygen-rich environment, and chemical compatibility of the insulation and construction materials during the reaction heat treatment. Operational challenges are related to the low normal zone propagation velocity, hindering energy dissipation and quench detection.

A. Stress and strain related issues

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B. Formation reaction related issues

Bi–2212 is a brittle ceramic material which is formed from precursor powders during a partial melt reaction at about 890°C in an oxygen-rich environment. This higher temperature in comparison with Nb₃Sn, and the presence of oxygen and a partial melt in the wire core, place high demands on the insulation and construction materials in a W&R magnet fabrication process. These problems can in principle be avoided using a React-and-Wind (R&W) process as was demonstrated by other groups [16], [17], at the cost of irreversible \( J_c \) loss due to strain. To achieve magnetic fields approaching 20 T and higher, a low inductance dipole magnet with small bending radii in the highest field regions is the preferred option. A W&R method is then inevitable to retain high field \( J_c \).

Construction materials will have to withstand the high temperature in an oxygen-rich environment, and match the thermal contraction of Bi–2212 core. Our research indicates that some low-carbon stainless-steel alloys and nickel-based ‘Super alloys’, such as INCONEL®, would perform adequately.

The choice of insulation materials is limited to ceramics, which have to be chemically compatible with the Bi–2212 formation reaction and available in a form that is suitable for cable insulation. Three problems arise as a result of the partial core-melting and the oxide reaction. First, micro-cracks and pin-holes can be present in the Ag matrix. These can cause liquid core constitutes to leak out and react with the insulation and/or construction materials. Second, oxides in the insulation can etch the Ag matrix materials at the grain boundaries, causing micro-cracks and leakage. Third, insulation components can accelerate the diffusion of core constitutes to the surface of the matrix. It should be emphasized that only limited sources are available that address these issues [18], [19]. ZrO₂, \( \text{Al}_2\text{O}_3 \), \( \text{Y}_2\text{O}_3 \) and high purity SiO₂ are possible candidates, and the presence of Cr, Mg, Ni, and Fe should be avoided. Also, the formation of SiO₂-glass phases should be avoided. The literature, and other sources, are therefore ambiguous regarding pure SiO₂.

### IV. Bi–2212 technology development at LBNL

#### A. Bi–2212 sub-scale magnets

We initiated a program to develop the technology for W&R Bi–2212 magnets. The program goal is to solve the issues discussed in the previous section using sub-scale magnets [20] as a technology test-bed. A number of \( 2 \times 6 \) turns double pancake sub-scale coils will be wound from Bi–2212 cable to test insulation and construction materials. Stand alone acceptance tests will be performed on sub-scale coils and successful coils will be stacked into various sub-scale magnet configurations with different magnetic field and load options, as summarized in Table II. A number of coils will be extensively instrumented to study magnet protection issues. Such a modular approach gives the opportunity to efficiently test a variance in materials, loads and magnetic fields. Also, it will enable mechanical decoupling of Nb₃Sn background coils and Bi–2212 coils.

Sub-scale coil heat treatments will initially be performed at Showa Electric Wire and Cable Co., Japan and Oxford Instruments Superconducting Technology, Carteret, NJ (OST), until a suitable furnace becomes available at LBNL. Two dummy sub-scale coils, wound from insulated Ag cables, will be used to study the critical coil heat treatment thermodynamics and to tune the furnaces. Fig. 4 shows the design and a fabricated dummy sub-scale coil inside reaction tooling.
B. Materials development

A combination of oxidation tests at 880°C in pure O₂ and availability yielded INCONEL alloy 600, INCONEL C276, and stainless steel 316L alloys as suitable construction materials for the reaction tooling. INCONEL alloy 600 was selected since this most closely matches the thermal contraction of Bi–2212, whereas bolts, nuts and rings are available in INCONEL C276. All reaction tooling is heat treated in pure oxygen to create an oxide layer before coil winding.

Cable insulation materials can be separated into five groups: 1) Ceramic fiber based sleeve, cloth or tape, 2) Metal-oxides, 3) Ceramic paper, 4) Sol-Gel based ceramic coatings, and 5) Plasma sprayed ceramic coatings. The latter two options were not pursued since at present, the available results on Sol-Gel based coatings on metals and conductors [21], and LBANL’s in-house experience on plasma coated metals, do not appear to be sufficiently promising.

Fibers, suitable for braiding, were obtained from 3M™. We have tested, in close collaboration with OST, the following Nextel™ fibers for compatibility with the Bi–2212 formation reaction using short sample tests: 312 (Al₂O₃/SiO₂/B₂O₃, 62/24/14%), 440 (Al₂O₃/SiO₂/B₂O₃, 70/28/2%), 610 (Al₂O₃/SiO₂/Fe₃O₄, >99/<0.3/<0.7%) and 720 (Al₂O₃/SiO₂, 85/15%). We also tested pure SiO₂ (>99.97%) Quartzel® fibers from Saint-Gobain. We found that the fibers containing B₂O₃ are incompatible, but that Nextel 610 and 720, as well as Quartzel fibers are compatible. The compatible Nextel fibers cannot be braided into sleeve of a sufficiently low wall thickness (< 150 µm), but are available in cloth. Quartzel fibers were braided into trial sleeve with a wall thickness of about 225 µm by EDO Fiber Innovations, Walpole, MA. Thinner wall sleeve is presently under development.

Metal-oxide insulation can be used by co-winding a strip of suitable metal that is compatible with the Bi–2212 formation reaction. We tested Ti grade-2, which initially appeared promising, forming a rigid 25 µm TiO₂ layer and O₂ depleting within a few µm into the Ti base material. Unfortunately, oxide layer growth increased to around 150 µm when in contact with the Ag-alloy matrix material and sintering occurred. Also, the matrix material became brittle, indicating a reaction between the Ag-alloy and the Ti. Ti is therefore not suitable to form a metal-oxide insulation, but alternatives will be investigated.

The above investigations have highlighted, for now, sleeve from Quartzel fibers as the most suitable insulation option. Coil tests with this insulation will determine large scale applicability and compatibility. Organic sizing, present on the fibers to reduce abrasion, is usually problematic in Nb₃Sn insulations since it can form carbon deposits in the finished coils [22]. Sizing is of less concern for Bi–2212 due to the presence of pure O₂. Some concerns with respect to the compatibility of the sizing constitutes can be raised, but the Quartzel fibers were tested without initial heat cleaning. Their sizing thus does not appear to be problematic, provided it can be completely burned off during a coil reaction.

V. Conclusion

For accelerator dipole magnets NbTi is intrinsically limited to 10.5 T by its field-temperature phase boundary. Nb₃Sn is practically limited to 17 to 18 T due to insufficient high field pinning capacity and, if this could be improved, intrinsically limited to 22 T by its field-temperature phase boundary. To achieve dipole magnetic fields approaching 20 T and higher, a switch to Bi–2212 is inevitable.

A Bi–2212 sub-scale program was initiated in which the required technology for W&R Bi–2212 accelerator magnets will be developed. Insulation and construction materials were investigated and the most suitable options found are, for now, pure SiO₂ braided sleeve insulation and INCONEL construction material. A Bi–2212 sub-scale coil design has been made and a first dummy coil has been fabricated.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to thank E. E. Hellstrom, K. R. Marken, M. Meinez and T. Hasegawa for collaborations and helpful discussions, A. Devred for providing a prototype Quartzel braided tape, P. Bish, R. Hannaford, H. C. Higley, D. Horler, N. L. Liggins, G. Ritchie, J. Swanson for their technical expertise and L. Sun for SEM analysis.

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