

Is There A “Natural” Trend?

Players, Turf Professionals and Architects

Comment On The Possibility

You can spend hours arguing the merits of different playing surfaces, but sometimes it's important to step outside the argument and get opinions from those whose careers, in one way or another, are being strongly influenced by this debate.

When you do, it's possible to make these observations:

The “wave” of synthetic surfaces which began gathering in the '60s may be at the point of losing momentum.

There's agreement that synthetics will continue to be popular. However, issues are being raised which, in the long term, can affect their feasibility and tilt the balance toward natural turf.

The most important of these, and also the one most frequently “swept under the rug”, is which surface is best for the welfare of the athlete? In this regard health-related questions about newer synthetics are currently under discussion by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (Office of Prevention, Pesticides and Toxic Substances) and Turfgrass Producers International (TPI). Among the questions being raised here are:

- The hazards posed to athletes by the potentially toxic content of in-fill rubber.
- Problems associated with the elevated heat levels created by an artificial surface.
- The unique sanitation challenges of a non-absorbent surface.

- The effect which artificial surfaces may have on athlete health and career longevity.

Referring to the last point, there's strong evidence from all quarters that natural turf remains the playing surface of choice.

Football In a survey by the National Football League Players Association (NFLPA) 88.8 percent of respondents said they prefer playing on natural grass fields and nearly 96 percent said they believe that artificial surfaces were more likely to contribute to injuries.

Baseball Comments from well-known players and groundskeepers reflect a preference for natural turf.

Brett Saberhagen. Now head baseball coach at Calabasas (CA) High School, the two-time Cy Young award winner recently headed a fund-raising campaign to construct a state-of-the-art natural grass field for his team. "In the majors we used to dread going on the road to play on an artificial field," he said, "and there's no way I would consider one for my kids. Baseball was meant to be played on grass."

George Toma. In his recent book "Nitty Gritty Dirt Man" Toma writes, "George Brett was one of the finest ballplayers I have ever seen...however, the artificial surface at Kauffman Stadium took its toll on George's knees and the rest of his body. George once told me the carpet was good for his batting average, but bad for his body."

Trevor Vance. "I've never found a ballplayer that doesn't prefer natural grass," says Vance, the head groundskeeper for the Kansas City Royals. "Number one is safety—the grass is giving where artificial turf is not and it's awful hard on your back and knees."

Do his peers share the same opinion? "Absolutely." Vance says.

Soccer Elite soccer clubs, too, can balk at playing on artificial surfaces. "We haven't been able to convince the top international teams to play on anything but grass," said Mike McFaul, of First and Goal, Inc., the parent company of Seattle's Qwest Field. "So

on three separate occasions we've enlisted the help of West Coast Turf to create a Tifway II Bermuda grass field over our existing in-fill surface." West Coast Turf harvested more than 87,000 square feet of Tifway II Bermuda sod from its California sod farm and shipped it to Qwest Stadium where it was installed in two days and in use soon after. "Bermuda grass is ideal for soccer," said West Coast's Greg Dunn. "Its tightly-packed leaves near the soil surface help create a thick, closed canopy that provides excellent footing and a cushion-like feel."

The result, according to Mike McFaul, has been a successful series of international matches at Qwest Field. The natural turf has held up well under hard use and the players loved it. "It has also provided good public relations because after each series, we've donated it for use in area schools and parks where it has proven to be very viable." One good example of this is Kirkland, Washington, one of the recipients in 2003. There, City Parks Superintendent Jason Filan put the "used" natural turf to work in a soccer-made area where many schools and parks have gone to synthetic surfaces. "We had a field with a very beat-up surface," Filan says, "but before getting the West Coast Turf, we prepped it thoroughly. As a result, we now have a first-class soccer field that has held up well after two seasons of very heavy use."

Sports Field Architects As independent consultants, sports field architects are understandably reluctant to "take sides" in the natural vs. artificial competition. However, on the basis of not being named, one active and respected practitioner shared personal opinions in the following conversation:

Q. What's your basic assessment of the natural vs. artificial situation?

A. Our goal is to make sure we give our clients the best surface for their needs. We find there are applications where synthetics can be very practical, but in my opinion, there's no better surface than well-maintained natural grass. Of course there are always the intangibles of a well-maintained grass field...when you lay down on it and get that fresh grass clipping type of smell...well, it's just very appealing.

Q. You stress "well-maintained" grass.

A. Yes. The problem is that, too often, someone who isn't trained properly will be assigned to maintain a field. It will begin to deteriorate in a few years and the athletic director will begin thinking about an artificial surface. So you get in a cycle where proper planning up front could have saved a lot of money.

Q. Could the same problem occur with synthetics?

A. Yes. Adequate preparation and maintenance are essential for both surfaces. Since we are now in the first generation of the new types of synthetic turf, enough time hasn't elapsed for a true test and some problems are just beginning to show up.

Q. For example?

A. Things like improperly glued seams may not show up until later. These can be fixed. Neglecting proper surface preparation can be even more of a problem. For example, what happens if you discover surface undulations through the lines in a football or soccer field? On natural grass you can just mow them out. But on synthetics the problem may be clear down in the subbase and can't be fixed without replacing the turf. So, in some ways, surface preparation for synthetics can be more exacting than grass.

Q. What about maintenance items such as cleaning and marking on synthetics?

A. These are things that will have to pass the test of time. Many synthetic fields will have permanent markings for soccer and football. If a third set of markings need to be added, it would be painted on. The paint will fleck off the synthetic fibers in time, but not from the rubber. So there will always be kind of a shadow there that's hard to remove. As for maintenance, synthetics don't take to burning and gum very well. They can be watered down for cleanup from things like vomit and bleeding, but the rubble and sand down below tend to get a little fouled over time.

Q. How would you compare costs between the two surfaces?

A. They can even out. The cost of maintaining a well-prepared, sand-based natural turf field will be higher. However, when you compare this with the fact that over time, the synthetic surface will have to be replaced, it can be a wash. But it's important to remember that cost comparisons can't be really valid unless there has been a comparable commitment to subsurface preparation and adequate maintenance.

Q. So what's your view of the future?

A. Synthetic surfaces have been on the upsurge, but as organizations see that an investment in good turf managers is the best strategy for getting more out of natural fields, I think we'll see a move back toward the middle.

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sidebar

Most turf managers agree that the jury on sports surface selection is going to be out for a long time. However, athletes who work on both natural and artificial turf are becoming vocal about their preference—as seen in these excerpts from an LA Times article last summer.

No Surface Charm to Angel Loss; Glaus criticizes turf at Metrodome after barely avoiding injury in fifth inning of Twins' 6-3 win.: [HOME EDITION]

Mike DiGiovanna. Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles, Calif.: May 1, 2004. pg. D.1

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...Friday night's 6-3 loss to the Minnesota Twins could actually be seen as a positive...at least the Angels' most productive hitter, third baseman Troy Glaus, was still standing—and playing...Glaus suffered a partial tear in his right shoulder last July 21, an injury that ended his season, when he fell awkwardly on a similar artificial surface in Tropicana Field, and it appeared he might have suffered a similar fate after his awkward landing Friday night...he slumped over and clutched his left shoulder after diving for Torii Hunter's double down the line in the

fifth inning...but it was the new FieldTurf in the Metrodome, and not Glaus' shoulder, that took the biggest pounding.

"When you dive, your glove should not stick on the ground," a perturbed Glaus said. "That doesn't happen on dirt, and it didn't happen on the old turf here. This is one of those things that shouldn't have happened."

The Twins' new playing surface, which looks like plastic grass and is considerably softer than the old turf, has been the subject of controversy in Minnesota, with Twin outfielders Hunter and Shannon Stewart attributing hamstring injuries to it.

"You can't simulate grass," Glaus said. "No matter what you do, you can't fake it. At least with the old turf, it was consistent. This stuff has hard spots, soft spots, sometimes your cleats stick to it, sometimes you slip. It's not good to play on."

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