The Kansas City Chiefs play on artificial turf in Arrowhead Stadium. So why is George Toma praising grass playing fields? After all, he’s the team’s director of fields and landscaping. The reason is simple. Real sod still plays an integral part in the team’s training schedule. The Chiefs’ training camp fields at William Jewell College in Liberty, Mo., are green with living grass.

Both Toma and his son, Chip, who is responsible for maintaining the Liberty practice fields, praise their playability and safety—while admitting they’re sometimes a headache to maintain.

To the Tomas, father and son, real turf is well worth the trouble.

Nevertheless, when spring rolls around and it’s time to get the practice fields back in shape, Chip must sometimes wonder whether he’s in charge of turf renovation or out-and-out reincarnation.

For instance, it took Chip and his assistant fully two months last spring to renovate and groom the three fields. Then, just when the grass had come beautifully back to life, the rains came.

The Tomas remember it well. Last July 18—the night before the Chiefs’ first preseason practice, as luck would have it—nearly five inches of rain deluged the

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Liberty training camp fields.

At best, it seemed, the fields would need a couple of days to dry out, since they are built on heavy clay soil that tends to hold moisture like a porcelain saucer holds tea. That meant that if practice were to begin on schedule the Chiefs would have to pack up all their gear and make the trek to the artificial turf at Arrowhead Stadium, which is located just outside Kansas City.

However, the dawn that followed the downpour brought a happy surprise. Early in the morning, when the Tomas inspected the Liberty gridirons, they were delighted to see that the fields were already playable. Not a lake in sight.

Chip cites two reasons for this—"the way they were built and the way we baby those fields to compensate for the abuse they get."

Indeed, the three training fields are in constant use eight months of the year. Not only the Chiefs, but the William Jewell College football team as well, pound up and down their length for six or seven hours a day all through July and August. The college's intramural teams crush them in the fall and spring. Then, adding insult to injury, the fields become parking lots for college football fans during the fall and winter.

Most sports fields subjected to such intensive use and abuse would be unable to support turf at all, yet the Liberty fields are in top condition every July when the Chiefs return—"because the coaches expect them to be perfect," Chip explains matter-of-factly.

The Chiefs' head coach, John Mackovic, insists on well maintained fields because he firmly believes they help prevent sports injuries. Or, as George Toma puts it, "If the turf doesn't give when a player makes his cuts, he could blow out a knee."

With utter candor—for a man whose team stadium is paved in plastic—he explains, "During the regular season the players take enough of a beating on artificial turf. It's our job to make sure that these natural fields are in excellent shape so that the players stay healthy and perform to their potential."

In Arrowhead Stadium, of course, they are on their own.

Five years ago, after conducting training camps at Liberty for more than 16 years, the Chiefs' management decided to upgrade their training fields. With a budget of $25,000 per field—that was for everything, including drainage and irrigation—the Tomas went to work.

Chip Toma regularly checks Liberty fields with soil probe to check root depth, soil moisture and insects.

"We took an unconventional approach to constructing these fields in 1980," says Chip. "We call it the three-tier process, or milkshake for short, and it has worked well for us every season."

No soda fountain ever saw the likes of Toma's milkshake, but it works just fine on football fields.

He gladly discloses the recipe. "We brought in eight tons of gypsum and till..."
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