

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED CHALLENGES ERSATZ TURF

There was one primary topic of conversation at Monsanto headquarters when the August 12th issue of Sports Illustrated arrived: Astroturf. The national sports magazine devoted 21 pages to a special report, "The Case Against Artificial Turf."

The story asked the question, "If all the reports of greater injuries on artificial turf are true, why are more college and professional stadia switching to it?" For the answer, three different writers interviewed players, coaches, sports turf managers, and manufacturers.

The headline of the story tells their conclusion: Injuries are worse on artificial turf, player health is not being properly considered, and, in most cases, the disadvantages of the materials are being intentionally disregarded by stadium owners and alumni. In other words, except in certain cases, such as indoor stadia and heavily used urban fields, artificial turf is not safer or easier to maintain than natural turf.

Astroturf was just one brand of artificial turf mentioned by the authors. Monsanto has consistently held a number one position in the market nationally and internationally while other manufacturers have come and gone. According to Sports Illustrated, annual sales of Astroturf are \$20 million.

Since 1965, when Astroturf was installed in the Houston Astrodome, where natural grass had failed to grow, the surface has been improved and can be found on 60 percent of 550 artificial turf installations in the world. Astroturf is the playing surface in 19 out of 41 major stadia in the U. S. and a growing percentage of major conference universities.

Monsanto installs or replaces 30 to 40 fields each year at an average cost of \$500,000 each.

Astroturf product manager Tony Morillo stands by his number one product repeating his pitch of more hours of use, more uniform surface, less maintenance, and reliable appearance. So far, he has been winning the war against both competition and "bad press."

The vulnerable point is injuries. Field use is clearly greater on the plastic turf, but players are applying more and more pressure on team owners and university presidents. They are most concerned about losing years of career play to the unforgiving surface. Insurance companies are starting to respond to the charges against artificial turf, doing studies of their own.

John Macik, representing the player's associations of both the National Football League and the United States Football League, told SportsTURF the players will

continue to demand natural turf where possible during contract negotiations.

Meanwhile, the only thing certain is the momentum favors artificial turf despite the injury statistics and player demands. Although the surface has an important place in sports turf, players and insurance companies want to know what the limits will be in the future.

Perhaps more critical is artificial turf is now fodder for the popular press. Sports Illustrated, Forbes, The Washington Post, Kansas City Times, and Los Angeles Times have devoted critical coverage to artificial turf. Organizations, such as the Musser Foundation and the Lawn Insti-

tute, are reaching the Parent Teachers Association and other influential national groups with the story on injuries.

Professional stadium managers have a business to run. The more events in their facility, the more revenue is generated. A decision in favor of natural turf requires limitations on the use of the facility. Many stadium managers are not ready to compromise for natural turf.

Macik and others believe only two things can slow the momentum of artificial turf, a rash of injury settlements against the manufacturers of the surface and a resultant increase in insurance rates. ▶

MONSANTO REBUTS SPORTS ILLUSTRATED STORY

Francis Reining, general manager of engineered product for Monsanto Company, maker of Astroturf, wrote Sports Illustrated magazine in response to the article "The Case Against Artificial Turf" in the August 12 issue of that magazine. Monsanto has given SportsTURF permission to run the letter to provide a balanced look at the artificial turf controversy.

Mr. Reining's letter follows:
Sir:

I feel compelled to respond to the special section on artificial turf, which presents (as you admit on your cover), a one-sided "Case Against Artificial Turf."

The first article by Bill Johnson was a reasonably balanced discussion of the artificial turf business. I only wish that in the second and third articles the same balanced approach had been taken and the information checked as carefully for accuracy.

The baseball section, by Ron Fimrite, is another exercise in sports purism. Did it occur to you that some players prefer artificial turf? Several have spoken publicly on the matter. The Kansas City Royals played on a new Astroturf field this year. Hal McRae said it is "really better than grass, because there are no holes or rocks." Frank White said: "All I can tell you is that it's soft" and "I'm convinced that it can add a year or two to my career."

Some years ago, Brooks Robinson of the Baltimore Orioles said: "I feel invincible on Astroturf. It's much easier to play third on it than on grass." Certainly, these players were not the ones contacted and quoted in the article.

And the third article by John Underwood. Talk about one-sided overkill. Underwood never admitted that there is another side to the story. His interpretations of the various injury studies are highly debatable, and his choice of sources was carefully designed to support one side of the argument.

You apparently made no effort to talk to many highly respected sports medicine specialists who would take exception to the anecdotal sensationalism of your story on injuries. Why did you not contact Dr. Kenneth Clark, director of sports medicine for the U.S. Olympic Committee, who is probably the leading authority on sports-injury epidemiology? Or Dr. Fred Mueller, director of football injury studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who puts out the "Annual Survey of Football Fatalities"? Or Dr. James Nicholas, of the Institute of Sports Medicine and team physician of the New York Jets, who has just conducted a 25-year study of football injuries?

Why did your author choose to ignore the conclusions of a committee of former professional football players that artificial turf does not represent "a significant health hazard" to football players? That committee was headed by Dr. William McColl, a prominent orthopedic surgeon who played for the Chicago Bears and became a member of the National Football Hall of Fame. It included other football greats such as Gale Sayers, John Brodie, and Bart Starr.

Opinion is one thing. But when you attempt to unilaterally denigrate an industry, you have a responsibility to present conflicting opinions of acknowledged experts and facts on both sides of the argument.

Letting your section's statements stand unchallenged would be an unforgivable disservice to the dedicated professionals in the artificial surface business as well as to the customers who depend on us for a valuable and proven product.