

THE FRONT OFFICE

OPINION PAGE



TO DOME OR NOT TO DOME . . .

That is the question being asked by numerous stadium authorities around the country this winter. In their quest to have a facility that meets the needs of all types of events 12 months a year, stadium authorities are re-examining the advantages of both natural and artificial turf. As a result, proponents of both surfaces are going back to their drawing boards and coming up with some pretty fascinating ideas.

A stadium authority is an organization established by a city or state government to wade through all the facts about stadium construction

and operation and to figure out methods of financing. Their motivation is often to attract a professional sports franchise to the city—or to prevent one from leaving. Sometimes the competition gets pretty tough.

The true test really is the fans. It doesn't matter what type of stadium a city has if the fans don't buy tickets. Anything that discourages fans from attending games, such as consistently bad weather, a losing team, or a bad field, hurts the profitability of a sports franchise. A few years of losses and any team owner starts looking for greener pastures.

To help their team's bottom line, more and more cities are looking into dome stadiums. They realize quickly that domes cost considerably more than outdoor stadiums to build. This fact alone forces a stadium to schedule non-sporting events to make up the difference. Non-sporting events, such as concerts, swap meets, auto shows and tractor pulls, require imaginative approaches to protecting sports turf. The field has to support all types of activities for the dome to pay for itself.

Realizing this, the city of Toronto has planned a retractable dome for its new stadium, under construction a few blocks from old Exhibition Stadium on the shores of Lake Erie. Toronto Blue Jays fans have made it perfectly clear to Robert Hunter, vice president of Stadium Corp., that they do not want to sacrifice the things that make outdoor sports special just so other events can use the same facility. The retractable dome is part of an effort to satisfy the fans.

It's the second request by Blue Jays fans that has Hunter and his stadium engineers concerned. The fans want natural turf too. In fact, they have enlisted the support of Toronto Star sportswriter John Robertson. He has interviewed experts from all over the continent to defend natural turf against the standard questions raised by developers of indoor stadiums.

In February, Rose Mary Branson, president of the Blue Jays Fan Club, organized a "Grass Day" to publicize the club's position on the stadium turf and to provide both the fans and the press with answers. Steve Wightman, turf manager of Mile High Stadium in Denver, CO, was able to satisfy most of the concerns the stadium authority had about protecting natural turf from non-sporting events. Toro's Dr. Jim Watson and Laurel Meade and Dr. William Daniel of Prescription Athletic Turf also fielded questions from the press, the stadium authority and the fans. Rarely has sports turf gained so much attention prior to construction.

Before next summer, a decision will be made. It's important to note that, regardless of the final decision, the Toronto project has brought new life to natural turf.

You can't force a professional team to stay in a city. Build a dome stadium that fans don't like and the team will still have to leave. We commend Toronto's Stadium Corp. for the way it has listened to fans so far. We hope stadium authorities in other cities learn from Toronto.

Bruce Shank

EVENTS

CALENDAR

MARCH

24 Third Annual Sports Turf Institute, Cal Poly University, Pomona, CA. Contact: Kent Kurtz, Dept. of Horticulture, Cal Poly University, 3801 W. Temple Ave., Pomona, CA 91768. (714) 869-2176.

24 USGA Green Section/Southern California Golf Association Joint Meeting, Newport Beach, CA. Contact: Kevin Heaney, SCGA, P.O. Box 3375, Tustin, CA 92681. (714) 980-3630.

APRIL

4-6 National School Boards Association Annual Exposition, Moscone Convention Center, San Francisco, CA. Contact NSBA, 1680 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314. (703) 838-6722.

10-14 National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association Annual Conference, New Orleans, LA. Contact NIRSA, Gill Coliseum, Room 221, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR 97331. (503) 754-2088.

13-14 Southeastern Turfgrass Conference, Georgia Coastal Plain Experiment Station, Tifton, GA. Contact: Dr. Glenn Burton, Dept. of Agronomy, Coastal Plain Experiment Station, Tifton, GA 31793. (912) 386-3353.

27-29 Turf and Landscape Institute, Anaheim Convention Center, Anaheim, CA. Contact: Ed McNeil, 2492 East Mountain St., Pasadena, CA 91104. (818) 798-1715.

MAY

20 North Carolina Turf & Landscape Field Day, North Carolina State University Turf Field Center, Raleigh, NC. Contact: J. M. DiPaola, NCSU, Box 7620, Raleigh, NC 27695-7620. (919) 737-2657.