

TORONTO FANS RALLY FOR NATURAL TURF

When Stadium Corporation of Ontario Ltd., decided to build a \$250 million dome stadium to replace Exhibition Stadium, the Toronto Blue Jays assumed it would have artificial turf. Exhibition Stadium has AstroTurf and they assumed an indoor stadium couldn't support natural grass. But, the fans and the local press had another idea.

After all, the dome would take the fans out of the cold gusting winds off Lake Erie into a warm, new facility. What more could they want? If you asked Rose Mary Branson, president of the 3,500-member Blue Jays Fan Club, she would say natural grass. To prove her point, Branson enlisted the support of The Toronto Star daily newspaper and organized a "Grass Love In" and a "Public Forum on Natural Turf."

Star sportswriter John Robertson has been raising all kinds of possible ways to grow natural turf indoors while Branson has filled the fan club's newsletter with stories about Prescription Athletic Turf (PAT) and a mobile grow-light system for the turf inside the dome. Robertson even ran a questionnaire in the sports section asking fans to vote for natural or artificial turf. He later reported natural was preferred by 400 to 1.

Stadium Corp. has been receptive to any type of surface which fit the needs of a multi-purpose stadium. Not only did the provincial (public) corporation propose a retractable dome so fans could enjoy an outdoor stadium during the spring and summer, it is evaluating four proposals for natural turf and seven for artificial. "We are looking objectively at all types of surfaces," says Ray McNeal, corporate secretary for Stadium Corp. "The facility will be used for concerts, boat shows, swap meets and many other events in addition to baseball and Canadian football. For a natural surface to work it has

to withstand all the non-sporting events."

Robert Hunter, vice president of operation for Stadium Corp., attended the recent Sports Turf Managers Association Annual Conference in Phoenix, AZ, to get opinions from turf managers of stadiums across the U.S. and Europe. He listened to ideas about soil heaters, subirrigation, field covers and the minimum lighting needs of sports grasses. He has also been thoroughly briefed on AstroTurf, Omni-Turf and other artificial surfaces. Between now and the fall of 1988, Hunter and Stadium Corp. have to choose between natural and artificial turf.

"The possibilities are exciting," says Laurel Meade, executive vice president of PAT. "We've discovered important research on the ability of natural turf to grow under limited sunlight by Dr. James Beard of Texas A&M, Dr. Don White of the University of Minnesota and Dr. Robert Carrow of the University of Georgia. If the dome is open 50 percent of the time, there should be no problem. We also have a concept for a center-pivot type of travelling light system that could be stored underneath the stands. Bulbs, suspended 24-inches from the surface, would travel around the field slowly during the night."

To explain some of these ideas to Torontonians, the fan club presented a Public Forum on a February weekend with four natural turf experts. The club paid air fares and hotel accommodations for PAT's Dr. William Daniel and Laurel Meade, The Toro Company's Dr. James Watson, and Mile High Stadium (a PAT field) turf manager Steve Wightman to Toronto in February so they could answer questions of Toronto fans and the local media.

Stadium Corp. took advantage of the situation and held private meetings with the four experts the same day. "We've also spoken with George Toma of the Kansas City Chiefs and many others about the stadium field," said McNeal.

Harold Starkman, director of public relations for the Blue Jays, explains the artificial field at Exhibition Stadium had problems with grading when the field was installed in 1976. "The field was graded for football with water running toward the infield," explained Starkman. "When extra pipes were added to keep the water out of the infield, they were installed too high causing a bump near short-stop. Much of the criticism of the AstroTurf is related to the odd bounces we get at short-stop."

Construction has begun and the Toronto Dome will open by the 1989 baseball season. The province and a consortium of 15 corporate sponsors paying \$5 million each are picking up the tab until event fees start coming in. Managers of dome projects across the country are watching Toronto closely to see which way it will go. It may be a year before a final decision is made, but that decision will carry a lot of weight for proponents of both natural and artificial surfaces.

NATURAL TURF CARPETS THE WAY TO NFL PLAYOFFS

An analysis of the performance of National Football League teams over the past 20 years has shown that teams playing on natural turf surfaces have a better chance of making the playoffs. The survey by BASF Corporation Fibers Div. revealed that in the past 20 years 59 percent of the teams in the Super Bowl had home fields of natural turf.

Only 11 out of 28 NFL teams still play on natural turf during home games. Yet, out of the ten teams that have made the playoffs more than six times, seven have natural turf. It's only fair to point out that the team with the most playoff games (18), the Dallas Cowboys, has artificial turf. The Raiders, the team with the second most playoff games (15), plays on natural. Other teams with more than six playoff games and natural home fields include the Rams, Dolphins, Redskins, Browns, Forty Niners and Colts. The Vikings and Steelers have artificial home fields.

Palmer Skoglund, manager of the BASF Fibers Group, said he started compiling the statistics after reading articles comparing injuries on artificial and natural turf. BASF also makes a product for natural fields called Enkaturf.

Skoglund believes teams playing on grass are healthier than teams playing primarily on artificial turf. "Healthier players translate into better teams," says Skoglund. Of course, this year the Giants played more games on artificial turf than the Broncos, and they took the crown. Furthermore, nearly all NFL teams practice at least part of the time on artificial turf. But, as Skoglund says, numbers don't lie. They must mean something, especially when that something is making it to the Super Bowl.

YAMAHA DONATES \$10,000 TO COLLEGE OF THE DESERT



Ben Watanabe (right), president of Yamaha Motor Corporation, hands a check for \$10,000 to Tony Manzoni, director of the College of the Desert Institute for Golf Course Management. The gift will be used to develop educational programs on golf car management at the College. The Palm Springs, CA, resort area features more than 60 golf courses. "The rental of golf cars is a critical part of a course's bottom line, so it's important that managers be informed about their management," said Watanabe. Also present during the ceremony were (left to right) Yamaha's Shane Muraki, Bob Torvick and Gary Jones.