

THE FRONT OFFICE

OPINION PAGE

NATURAL TURF HAS COME A LONG WAY SINCE HOUSTON



Builders of natural turf fields have come a long way since their early setback at the Houston Astrodome. They weren't prepared when a layer of paint applied to the permanent, translucent dome blocked out precious sunlight needed for the original natural field. As the turf declined for lack of light, the stadium operators made the decision to install artificial turf and set a precedent for indoor stadiums that continues today. Since then, natural turf experts have been waiting for another chance to prove themselves. They got that chance in Toronto.

It was the retractable dome that gave Toronto's natural turf fans a foot-in-the-door with the Stadium Corporation of Ontario and permitted turf experts to show how far they've come in 20 years. From the moment the stadium was proposed, both the fans and the players made it clear that they wanted natural turf to be considered. The *Toronto Star* and the Blue Jays Fan Club rallied Torontoans and put out a call for natural turf experts to present their latest technology. The call was answered and the artificial turf precedent for indoor stadiums was almost broken.

The experts had a solution for nearly every concern Stadium Corporation had. A novel method of providing artificial light to the turf when the roof was closed was revealed. State-of-the-art methods used by other stadiums to protect their fields during non-sporting events were presented. The compaction resistance of the sand-based Prescription Athletic Turf field was carefully documented. The safety advantage of a natural field was also stressed.

If natural turf was installed in Toronto, the stadium would be on the cutting edge of sports turf technology. If only there was an existing indoor facility to prove natural turf would work for both sporting and non-sporting events, the Stadium Corporation might have had the confidence to select it.

Eroding their confidence, however, was the fact that non-sporting events would be as important as sporting events in paying off the \$250 million tab for the indoor structure. The primary tenants, the Blue Jays and the Canadian football Argonauts, will occupy the facility for 97 out of nearly 200 event days. Nonsporting events, like trade shows and concerts, are expected to occupy the facility for more than 100 days. It became apparent that the dome would be open less than half the time and that made an artificial lighting system for the field necessary.

The second point of contention was that the field would have to be covered or protected as much as it was uncovered. Solutions to both problems greatly increased the cost of the natural field in comparison to an artificial surface. And, there was no guarantee it would work.

One purpose of the dome was to get away from worrying about delays and cancellations caused by the weather. They had no control over the weather and they weren't sure they could control the special devices needed for a natural field indoors either.

But, you've got to hand it to those who almost convinced them. Dr. William Daniel and Laurel Meade from Prescription Athletic Turf had the stadium officials excited about exploring the unknown like Americans were excited about the space race. Toro's Dr. Jim Watson and Steve Wightman from Denver's Mile High Stadium provided the experience and limitless confidence found in men like Warner Von Braun or John Glenn. For a while, the Toronto officials were ready to take the step into indoor natural turf.

It's just a matter of time before natural turf field builders win an indoor stadium job. For now, they'll have to be content knowing they have the advantage when the field is outdoors.

Bruce Shank

EVENTS

CALENDAR

MAY

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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.

JUNE

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Northern California Turfgrass Council Field Day, Marine World Africa USA, Vallejo, CA. Contact: NCTC, P.O. Box 268, Lafayette, CA 94549.

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Iowa Turfgrass Field Day, Horticultural Research Farm, Ames, IA. Contact: Dr. Michael Agnew, 105 Horticulture Bldg., Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011. (515) 294-0027.

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Turf Seed Field Day, Hubbard, OR. Contact: Tom Stanley, Turf Seed Inc., P.O. Box 250, Hubbard, OR 97032. (503) 981-9571.

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Midwest Sports Turf Institute, College of Du Page, Glen Ellyn, IL. Contact Susan Glasgow, College of Du Page (312) 858-2800, Ext. 2770.

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Massachusetts Turfgrass Field Day, University of Massachusetts Turfgrass Research Center, S. Deerfield, MA. Contact: R. J. Cooper, Department of Plant and Soil Sciences, Stockbridge Hall, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA 01003, (413) 545-2353.

JULY

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Kansas Turfgrass Field Day, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS. Contact: Larry Leuthold, Horticulture Dept., Waters Hall, KSU, Manhattan, KS 66506. (913) 532-6173.