

THE FRONT OFFICE

OPINION PAGE

A BETTER BRAND OF FOOTBALL



Just as we were proofing the last pages of this issue, a FAX came in confirming a rumor that the New England Patriots were switching to natural turf at Foxboro Stadium. This summer, after Randall & Blake, Inc., completes the new field at Foxboro, half of the National Football League's 28 franchises will play their home games on bluegrass or bermudagrass.

Leave it to Victor Kiam to shave off the seven-year-old SuperTurf to make an impact on professional football. "This decision is in the best interest of not only the Patriots football players, but also players around the NFL," said Sam Jankovich, the team's CEO. "Such a surface is conducive to a better brand of football."

That sentiment is not new. The first issue of sportsTURF in September 1985 led off with a debate about natural versus artificial turf. The NFL Players Association has been fighting for natural turf for most of the past decade.

I always believed that artificial turf deserved a fair trial. Now, I think the jury, made up of coaches and players, has delivered its verdict. It is, unless you have a dome, natural turf is the way to go. Even this ruling is being challenged with some new technology to make unitized, transportable natural fields for indoor facilities.

Much of the credit for the improvement of natural surfaces must go to today's sports turf manager. He has acquired the skills to manage field damage, compaction, and drainage. He has regained the support of players and coaches. Furthermore, he has earned the respect and confidence of management.

Backing him up are agronomists, specialized contractors, and suppliers who have known all along that they could overcome almost all objections to natural turf. Until recently, all that was lacking was the support and encouragement of stadium operators. Once the Bears took a firm stand in Chicago, got the natural turf they wanted, and proved it works, other teams gained the courage to make the switch. The success of the 49ers at Candlestick and the vast improvement of training facilities have also helped the cause.

Natural turf has not been given a chance indoors since the Astrodome. All seven domes and seven of 21 open-air stadiums have artificial surfaces. However, a lot has changed since these fields were built.

The Patriots' new field will be heated with electrical cables and will drain more than five inches of water in an hour, states architect Dan Almond. "We know that practice fields of the same construction can withstand heavy use," he adds.

Almond warns, however, that stadiums converting from artificial to natural turf must hire groundskeepers with up-to-date knowledge of sports turf management. "You are essentially dealing with one huge golf green exposed to considerable abuse," he remarks. "The groundskeeper must be a scientist and an artist. He must be well-educated and experienced to handle the job."

The more franchise owners listen to their players, the more grass stadium fields we'll see. Sports turf managers will then set the stage for a better brand of professional football.

Bruce F. Shank

EVENTS

CALENDAR

FEBRUARY

19-20 Northeastern Pennsylvania Turf & Grounds Maintenance School, Luzerne County Community College, Nanticoke, PA. Contact: William Pencek, Lackawanna County Coop Extension, 200 Adams Ave., Scranton, PA 18503, (717) 963-4761.

21-22 Landscape Industry Conference, Holiday Inn I-70 East, Denver, CO. Contact: Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado, 3895 Upham St., Suite 150, Wheat Ridge, CO 80033, (303) 425-4862.

26-27 Golf Course Irrigation Seminar, Renton, WA. Contact: Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, 1617 St. Andrews Drive, Lawrence, KS 66047-1707, (800) 472-7878.

26-28 Western Pennsylvania Turf Conference, Pittsburgh Expo Mart, Monroeville, PA. Contact: PTC, Landscape Management Research Center, Orchard Rd., University Park, PA 16802, (814) 863-3475.

MARCH

1 Seminar on Recreation, Golf, Sports and Landscape Turf Management, Cuyamaca College, El Cajon, CA. Contact: Bill Mitchell or Michael Hall, Cuyamaca College, Ornamental Horticulture Dept., 2950 Jamacha Rd., El Cajon, CA 92019-4304, (619) 670-1980.

5 Massachusetts Turfgrass Conference, Springfield Civic Center, Springfield, MA. Contact: Dr. Joe Troll, P.O. Box 489, Hadley, MA 01035, (413) 549-5295.

11-12 Regional Sports Turf Seminar, Omaha, NE. Contact: NIPGM, P.O. Box 1936, Appleton, WI 54913, (414) 733-2301.

14-15 Regional Sports Turf Seminar, Baton Rouge, LA. Contact: NIPGM, P.O. Box 1936, Appleton, WI 54913, (414) 733-2301.

19 Sports Turf Institute and Grounds Operations Conference, Cal Poly, Pomona, CA. Contact: Kent Kurtz, Dept. of Horticulture, Cal Poly University, Pomona, CA 91768, (714) 869-2219.

Send announcements on your events two months in advance to editor, Golf & SportsTURF, P.O. Box 8420, Van Nuys, CA 91409. Fax: (818) 781-8517.