LIABILITY TO CHALLENGE QUALITY IN FUTURE

This past week I received phone calls from two different insurance companies inquiring about safety standards for sports fields. They called the magazine because they were unable to locate a set of recognized safety standards for the millions of acres of athletic turf in the United States from industry associations.

All I could report to them was the work initiated by the American Society for Testing Materials (ASTM) two years ago. This work was supported primarily by the manufacturers of artificial turf. Even though a number of major specifiers and builders of natural turf systems attended the ASTM meeting in Phoenix in 1989, their input seemed to be utilized mainly as a benchmark for the safety of artificial turf.

Ironically, no representative of the insurance industry attended the meeting. Apparently we have now caught their attention.

Up to this point, superintendents and groundskeepers have been judged by the quality of their turf. Things like color, density, uniformity, bounce, and roll have been the key issues. All these are qualities visible to the eye. If a turf area scores well in all these categories, we often assume it is safe too. That might be changing.

The primary focus of those trying to quantify safety on our sports turf is hardness. Technology currently exists to measure hardness and compaction. Simple penetrometers or more advanced impact absorption meters can be used to test the hardness of any surface. A number of people have tried these devices report some fields are nearly as hard as concrete.

The next step is to track field-related injuries and compare them to field hardness. Researchers at Pennsylvania State University and Michigan State University are heading in this direction. Once a clear relationship between field hardness and injuries is established, and insurance companies find out about it, we will have a new ball game.

Insurance companies will associate field hardness with safety. They will judge their exposure to liability claims on hardness ratings. For some, this will mean higher premiums. However, by exposing hard, high-risk fields, claims and premiums can be reduced. These savings can then be attributed to the work of the skilled turf manager.

We all want our fields to be as safe as possible. We also realize that budgets don’t always allow us to meet quality standards, much less safety standards. If insurance companies can help us justify the budgets we need, let’s welcome them with open arms.

Properly managed turf translates into safe turf. In the near future, safe turf will be linked to lower liability. That should get the attention of those who think sports turf management is simple and finally bring much-deserved recognition for those who have been concentrating on safety, as well as quality, all along.