Despite the controversy over the architecture of the new Soldier Field, the Chicago Bears players are only concerned with one thing—the turf.

When 79-year-old Soldier Field reopened Sept. 29 with a Black & Blue Division showdown on Monday Night Football, spectators found improved views of the field, larger concourses and upgraded concessions. The players, meanwhile, have been treated to a new playing surface. The field's immaculate condition on opening night drew rave reviews on television from Bears legend Dick Butkus and commentator John Madden.

Bears head groundskeeper Ken Mrock wanted a field constructed that would provide a healthy, safe-playing surface for the Bears, their opponents and any other athletic teams that were to play on it.

"Players today are bigger, faster and stronger, so it's that much more important to provide them with as healthy and safe a turf as possible," Mrock said.

Mrock didn't have to look far to find a model for which to build Soldier Field after Halas Hall, the Bears practice facility in Lake Forest, IL, thrives year in and year out throughout the season. The field's construction enables it to remain healthy and withstand the frigid Chicago climate and daily traffic of 300-plus pound football players, Mrock said.

"We've had great success over the years with our practice field at Halas Hall," he said. "Therefore, we mirrored everything at Soldier Field after that."

Among the similarities between the two fields are two key features: a sand-based root zone mix, and a heating system.

**Root zone mix**

Drainage and oxygen and nutrient retention are two of the most important aspects to maintaining a healthy sports turf field. A field's root zone make-up determines how efficient drainage and oxygen and nutrient retention are.

At Soldier Field, the custom designed root zone mix is made up of 85 percent USGA sand, 15 percent sphagnum peat moss and 10 percent Profile Perious Ceramic. The root zone depth is 3 inches over a 4-inch gravel blanket. The addition of Profile is meant to help enhance root growth, prevent compaction, provide permanent air porosi-
ty, and improve drainage.

"Incorporating Profile into our root zone mix has shown me the benefits over and over," Mroczek said. "This same root zone mix has produced a dense, deep root mass, ideal drainage and overall turf hardness. It has helped prevent unstable playing conditions, wear spots and divoting."

Soldier Field groundskeeper John Nolan will topdress the field as needed throughout the year with 85 percent sand and 15 percent Profile mix. With the soil installed in June this year, John and his staff were able to thoroughly prepare the field before the Monday Night Football season-opener by topdressing, aerifying and fertilizing it several times.

Heating system

Plants depend on sun and heat for survival. Unfortunately, Soldier Field doesn’t receive much exposure from the sun once the NFL season rolls along into December and January.

To counter Chicago’s cold temperatures, a heating system was installed underneath the field to provide a warm environment for the soil and turf. "A heating system is going to help us out a lot," Mroczek said. "It will help us keep a healthy turf longer. We'll see growth of grass into the winter months because the system will keep the soil at optimum growing temperatures."

By adding the heating system, Soldier Field is taking after several other NFL stadiums in cold-weather climates, including Lambeau Field in Green Bay.

The heating system was installed 9 inches deep, underneath the root zone using more than 40 miles of 3/4-inch tubing. Radiant heat will warm a combination of water and glycol as it is pumped through the tubing.

"It does its job," Mroczek said. "It melts some snow and keeps the field from freezing.

As a result, it will make it softer and more forgiving for players, and will extend our growing season."

Soldier Field’s sod was custom grown. Mroczek chose a Kentucky Bluegrass blend of turf that closely resembles the sod at Halas Hall.

Soldier Field will serve as a multi-use facility. It will be the new home of the Chicago Fire of Major League Soccer, and will be a venue for concerts and high school and youth league events.

Nathan Odgaard is a writer with Swanson Russell Associates, Lincoln, NE. He can be reached at nathano@srarmarketing.com.