

# The elephant in the room

BY N. GROVE TEATES, JR.

I could not help but notice the grudging acknowledgement, at the 2004 San Diego STMA conference, that artificial fields are here, even though only a few turf managers openly embrace them or their concept.

After attending several other trade shows, The Football Coaches Show, the Soccer Coaches show, etc., I was surprised by the fact that little, if any, attention in the major user's market, was given to natural grass fields. This is the first year that there has been no exhibited interest in natural grass as a playing surface at our booth at these shows. This is an astounding observation and represents major change.

Instead, all are asking about the playability of an artificial turf field, how it ages, are the warranties any good, etc. During the 2004 show season there was not a single person who asked me about compaction, wet play/drainage, etc. This represents a major movement in the market sector that uses the majority of the fields (i.e., schools, universities, and municipals). A compelling need has established itself in the minds of these people.

All are faced with the fact that a greater number of athletes must co-exist with and use a diminishing number of available fields. There is no elasticity in schedules because many schedules are inter-related to other schedules; a wet field cannot be allowed to disrupt a game, because more is at stake than ever before (further travel to the game, more expansive scheduling over greater distances, revenue, reputation etc.). Thus, compromise must be made and the available answer, at the moment, is artificial turf.

Various artificial turf companies have a huge array of claims and attributes; yet, I admit they offer almost all-weather playability and can withstand 24-7 play. These two predominant factors (and needs) drive users to forget about natural turf.

This means that the turf manager, who insists that natural turf is the only option, will soon be similar to the buggy whip sales manager who felt that automobiles were not here to stay.

Therefore I must suggest that STMA members play "catch-up" on all phases of artificial turf; there is really not a choice. If we take this opportunity to learn about the industry (many turf managers have not educated themselves) and to become conversant with the terms, meanings, and applications of artificial turf, we then have the chance to lead the industry. If we don't, we will have a diminishing base of opportunities for our members to work on in the future, because, although there will always be applications for natural turf fields, the need and demand for artificial is increasing.

I do not feel that it is the responsibility of the STMA to do the basic research for the artificial turf companies, though there is a compelling need for these companies to do more research. The artificial

turf industry has the responsibility to do the research itself. STMA, instead, must seriously educate its members since they in a position of giving good advice to their employers. At the moment, there are few members who can do this, and many more members who are still saying, "perhaps the buggy whip can be used in a different way," etc. STMA members and the organization need to meet this new challenge immediately.

We all have to admit that there is a major elephant in the living room, and we must learn how to deal with this new, immediate, and compelling animal. We are already behind!

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