

from the sidelines

Airplanes landing safely

Every day of the year, all around the country, athletic contests are played out on natural turf, whether it's the Super Bowl in Jacksonville or an amateur soccer match in Joyce, WA. And, like airplanes that land safely, you never hear anything about the turf supporting those athletes. Unless there's a "crash."

Last December I was watching the NCAA Division I-AA championship football game between Montana and James Madison (maybe I need a hobby) on TV. If you saw any of it, you saw what appeared to be a turf crash at Max Finley Stadium in Chattanooga.

This 20,668-seat facility opened in 1997 as the city's proverbial "crown jewel" in neighborhood revitalization and is run by a non-profit stadium corporation. It has hosted the I-AA championship game since that first year and also is home to soccer, high school football, lacrosse tournaments, concerts and other community events, as well as being home of University of Tennessee-Chattanooga Moc football.

Here's some excerpts from a column after the game by sports editor George Geise of the Great Falls (MT) Tribune:

"... for at least one night, Max Finley Stadium in Chattanooga earned the dubious honor as the World's Worst Field... the turf was so fragile that it could be kicked apart by a 180-pound sportswriter in street shoes... at least five or six 'phantom' tackles were recorded by the turf... that was no way to decide a national football championship."

"We're disappointed in the condition of the field," Dennis Poppe, director of championships for I-AA football, told Geise. "We hoped the sod would have taken and rooted; we wouldn't be facing this problem now if we had artificial turf."

I called STMA member Tim Gambrell, director of operations at Finley Stadium, to find out what happened. "It's part of the NCAA contract that we have to put new turf in between the hashes before the game. We could have re-grown our ryegrass, even though we had 35 events on the field from September through November," he said. "The sod, which

was grown on a sand cap, was laid and put under blankets but it was too wet. There wasn't enough root development on about 10-15% of the turf though it was cut thin to try and help rooting. We did all we could with the sod not being as thick as it could have been."

"I heard, unofficially, that the NCAA has said 'go artificial or lose the game,'" Tim said. "And rumor is the UTC AD is determined to get the money for artificial. The city and the county want out [of the situation]."

The unfortunate moral of this tale is to expect to hear nothing about your field from "civilians" unless there's a crash.



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