

# Natural turf still the standard

**W**hile synthetic fields continue to be popular, conversations with players, architects, and others working "in the field" reveal concerns on how the new surfaces may affect the athletes competing on them.

In this regard health-related questions about newer synthetics are currently under discussion by the EPA's Office of Prevention, Pesticides and Toxic Substances and Turfgrass Producers International (TPI). Among the questions being raised are:

- The hazards posed to athletes by the potentially toxic content of in-fill rubber.
- Problems associated with the elevated heat levels.
- The sanitation challenges of a non-absorbent surface.
- The effect that the new surfaces may have on an athlete's health and longevity.

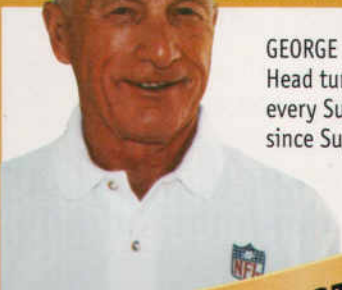
Referring to the last point, there's strong evidence that natural turf remains the playing surface of choice:

Football. In a survey by the National Football League Players Association (NFLPA) 88.8 percent of respondents said they prefer playing on natural grass fields and nearly 96 percent said they believe that artificial surfaces were more likely to contribute to injuries.

Baseball. Comments from players and groundskeepers reflect a preference for natural turf. Bret Saberhagen, a two-time Cy Young Award winner and current head baseball coach at Calabasas (CA) HS, recently headed a fund-raising campaign to construct a state-of-the-art natural grass field for his team. "In the majors we used to dread going on the road to play on an artificial field," he says, "and there's no way I would consider one for my kids. Baseball was meant to be

"I'VE NEVER FOUND A B  
DOESN'T PREFER NATU  
TREVOR VANCE, HEAD  
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played on grass."

In his recent book "Nitty Gritty Dirt Man" George Toma writes, "George Brett was one of the finest ballplayers I have ever seen. However, the artificial surface at Kauffman Stadium took its toll on George's knees and the rest of his body. George once told me the carpet was good for his batting average, but bad for his body."

"I've never found a ballplayer that doesn't prefer natural grass," says Trevor Vance, current head groundskeeper for the Kansas City Royals. "Number one is safety; the grass is giving where artificial turf is not and it's awful hard on your back and knees."

Do his peers share the same opinion? "Absolutely," Vance says.

Soccer. "We haven't been able to convince the top international teams to play on anything but grass," says Mike McFaul, of First and Goal, Inc. the parent company of Seattle's Qwest Field. "So on three separate occasions we've enlisted the help of West Coast Turf to create a Tifway II Bermudagrass field over our existing



infill surface."

The result, according to McFaul, has been a successful series of international matches at Qwest Field. The natural turf has held up well under hard use and the players loved it. "It has also provided good public relations because, after each series, we've donated it for use in area schools and parks where it has proven to be very viable."

One good example of this is in Kirkland. There, City Parks Superintendent Jason Filan put the "used" natural turf to work in a soccer-mad area where many schools and parks have gone to synthetic surfaces. "We had a field with a very beat-up surface," Filan says, "and we prepped it thoroughly before getting the turf. We now have a first class soccer field that has held up well after two seasons of very heavy use."

Sport Field Architects. As independent consultants, sports field architects are understandably reluctant to "take sides" in the natural vs. artificial competition. However, on the basis of not being named, one active and respected practitioner shared personal opinions in the following conversation:

**Q. What's your basic assessment of the natural vs. artificial situation?**

**A.** Our goal is to make sure we give our clients the best surface for their needs. We find there are applications where synthetics can be very practical, but, in my opinion there's no better surface than well-maintained natural grass."

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**Q. You stress "well-maintained" grass."**

**A.** The problem is that, too often, someone who isn't trained properly will be assigned to maintain a field. It will begin to deteriorate in a few years and the athletic director will begin thinking about an artificial surface. So you get in a cycle where proper planning up front could have saved a lot of money.

**Q. Could the same problem occur with synthetics?**

**A.** Yes. Adequate preparation and maintenance are essential for both surfaces. Since we are now in the first generation of the new types of synthetic turf enough time hasn't elapsed for a true test and some problems are just beginning to show up.

**Q. For example?**

**A.** Things like improperly glued seams may not show up until later. These can be fixed. But neglecting proper surface preparation can be even more of a problem. What happens if you discover surface undulations through the lines in a football or soccer field? On natural grass you can just mow them out. But on synthetics the problem may be clear down in the subbase and can't be fixed without replacing the turf. So, in some ways, surface preparation for synthetics can be more exacting than grass.

**Q. What about maintenance items such as cleaning and marking on synthetics?**

**A.** These are things that will have to pass the test of time. Many synthetic fields will have permanent markings for soccer and football; if there's a third it will just be painted on. The markings will fleck off the synthetic fibers in time, but not from the rubber. So there will always be kind of a shadow there that's hard to remove. As for maintenance, synthetics don't take to burning and gum very well. They can be watered down for cleanup from things like vomit and bleeding, but the rubber and sand down below tend to get a little fouled over time.

**Q. How would you compare costs between the two surfaces?**

**A.** They can even out. The cost of maintaining a well prepared, sand-based natural turf field will be higher. Compared with the fact that, over time, the synthetic surface will have to be replaced, it can be a wash. But it's important to remember that cost comparisons can't be really valid unless there has been a comparable commitment to subsurface preparation and adequate maintenance.

**Q. So what's your view of the future?**

**A.** Synthetic surfaces have been on the upsurge, but as organizations see that an investment in good turf managers is the best strategy for getting more out of natural fields I think we'll see a move back toward the middle. **ST**

Swanson Russell, a marketing communications firm in Lincoln, NE, supplied this article.



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