

Turf manager's research pays off



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Tim Peterson is sports turf manager for the Arizona Cardinals. You may have heard about the new stadium they are building in Phoenix for the NFL franchise (hey at least Bill Bidwell's putting up \$104 million of the \$370+ million cost, that's better than nothing, Arizona taxpayer!). Peterson had already been researching and studying what type of field would work best in his situation for 2 years before the actual decision was made to build one and 4 more years after that. He made his findings known to the engineers who won the job.

Of course those engineers wanted to explore options. After all, as Peterson says, it was their butts on the line, not his. He calls the deal he and CMX Sports Engineers finally struck a "collaboration," although "I influenced them more than they influenced me," he says.

And the result is America's first removable natural grass field. The turf, grown from stolons that were tilled in the first week of May, is Tifway 419 bermuda from Evergreen Turf, and it sits on a 12-million-pound, 234 feet wide by 400 feet long aboveground tray. The tray rests atop tracks and rolls on steel wheel sets powered by small electric motors, and will take 45 minutes to move into place.

Peterson says the Cards paid for him to create sample trays so he could determine how different drainage systems and rootzone mixtures worked. The rootzone mix that tested best included polyester and other fibers, and Airfield Systems was selected to be the final "layer" between the tray and the rootzone.

This drainage system allows vertical drainage to a sub-surface layer of air, approximately 12 inches below a sand-based field, as well offer heat-controlled aeration into the drainage layer. Lance Barton of Airfield says there is PVC liner on top of the tray, then the drainage grid system, topped off with a filter fabric layer underneath the rootzone. "Our system can move 13 inches of water per foot per hour," Barton says. "It would take a monsoon not to play a game."

Peterson and I talked on June 2 and he said the field was 99% covered with turf and that he'd been cutting back on the water in favor of more oxygen. "The rhizomes get stronger then and dig through the soil, which creates a stable structure with wear tolerance," he says.

The field will be rolled inside the stadium only for game days; otherwise it will be outside. Workers will have access to the wheels and the underside of the tray for maintenance and repair from a special work trench.

Peterson says he's only looking at 10 NFL games this first season, one high school playoff and then the final one, the Fiesta Bowl, one of the BCS games. "There shouldn't be a need to replace the grass" this season, he says.

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The Official Publication Of The Sports Turf
Managers Association

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SportsTurf (ISSN 1061-687X) (USPS 000-292) (Reg. U.S. Pat. & T.M. Off.) is published monthly by M2MEDIA360, a Bev-Al Communications company at 760 Market Street, Suite 432, San Francisco, CA 94102. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Sportsturf, P.O. Box 2120, Skokie IL 60076-7820. For subscription information and requests, call Subscription Services at (847) 763-9565. Subscription rates: 1 year, \$40 US & Poss.; 2 years, \$65 US & Poss.; 1 year, \$65 Canada/Foreign Surface, 1 year, \$130 Airmail. All subscriptions are payable in advance in US funds. Send payments to Sportsturf, P.O. Box 2120, Skokie, IL 60076-7820. Phone: (847) 763-9565. Fax: (847) 763-9569. Single copies or back issues, \$6 each US/Canada; \$9 Foreign. Periodicals postage paid at San Francisco, CA and additional mailing offices. COPYRIGHT 2006, SportsTurf. Material may not be reproduced or photocopied in any form without the written permission of the publisher.

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