

More research, less hysteria needed



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I'm sure there were at least a few patrons of this magazine who smiled upon reading headlines this spring such as "Sinatra Park shut down over lead." When the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services ordered several artificial fields closed after finding lead concentrations, there were certainly some folks in turf maintenance offices across the country thinking maybe now was the time to watch some heads get chopped off and rolled into a basket.

But that would be way premature. The turfgrass science industry has done little research in the area of synthetic turf, and what has been done is more about hardness, surface temperatures and MRSA. As for the synthetic manufacturers themselves, sales have been good and a large portion of the public seems to think these fields are better than natural turf. Why would these companies feel the need to conduct research that might find results that are less than favorable for them?

It's ironic that the same groups of concerned citizens that just a few years ago were crying (and still are) about use of herbicides and similar products on athletic fields, and welcomed the synthetics into their communities, are now fussing about the dangers of synthetic fields.

At a news conference May 6, AstroTurf general manager Lou Ziebold dramatically dumped bags of artificial turf fibers on the floor to illustrate how much a child would have to swallow before they would be at risk of lead poisoning. He said a 50-lb. child would have to swallow 23 lbs. of artificial turf to reach the federal cap for toys of 600 parts of lead per million. Michael Dennis, chairman of GeneralSports Venue (GSV), AstroTurf's USA licensee, said, "Synthetic turf sports fields, including the nylon versions being brought into question, are completely safe and pose no risk to children or athletes."

Nevertheless, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission and the EPA have begun a study that includes the newer infill systems so popular today. Jon Pritchett, GSV's CEO, said his company will participate fully in the federal investigation, and predicts they will find the same results as his company has, which include seven separate scientific conclusions. "We assembled the most qualified scientific and technical experts in the country to produce and analyze the best available data, and everything they told us confirmed our position," Pritchett said.

In today's society it only takes a hint that something might be harming the children to provoke action, so everyone in the sports turf industry should welcome as much research as possible, including the manufacturers themselves, who might be best served by funding these studies.

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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-AI 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 2007, SportsTurf. Material may not be reproduced or photocopied in any form without the written permission of the publisher.

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