

AVOID VOIDING your turf warranty



“I did what you told me to do!” That’s the best defense for any field manager faced with a warranty issue on a synthetic turf field. And the way for the manager to document that defense is to maintain a simple log book that lists dates of sweeping, brushing, infill replacement and other maintenance practices.

However, field managers at all levels agree that most companies—especially if they expect to be in business for the long term—will do the right thing by their customers. “Don’t stress about the letter of the law,” says Darian Daily, head groundskeeper at Paul Brown Stadium, home of the Cincinnati Bengals. By that, he means that a grounds crew should do what needs to be done to keep the field in good shape.

“Eight years ago, we were told we were to drag the field four times a year,” he recalls. Experience showed that more maintenance was needed and they have had no warranty issues as a result. “Don’t get too caught up in the letter of the law. For the most part, companies know you’ve got to do what you have to do.”

Still, it pays to cover your bases.

“They give you a manual. Go by it.”
— McNeal

“I keep a calendar log, day by day, of maintenance,” says Abby McNeal, CSFM,

director of turf management at Wake Forest University. If they sweep the field, she notes the date and whether the field was power swept or simply dragged. They note when the mound clay is spruced up, entering that job in the daily log along with all the other maintenance practices. That way, McNeal and Wake Forest have proof that they complied with the manufacturer’s warranty.

“Don’t stress about the letter of the law.”
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Daily has access to a computer-based work-order tracking system. The high-tech system is used to bill back expense items for every event at Paul Brown Stadium. “We have a work order when we clean the field, when we drag the field, or we make a repair,” Daily says. If there is a warranty issue, the computer prints out exactly what was done and when.

The standard warranty in the industry is for 8 years. Typically, the warranty that comes with the carpet covers two separate

things: durability and performance of the product, itself; and the installation of the product. Among the standard items guaranteed are that seams will remain adhered, that the inlays will remain in place and that the surface will remain playable.

Why 8 years? Good question. John Sorochan, co-director with Jim Brosnan at the Center for Safer Athletic Fields at the University of Tennessee, says warranties are typically based on lab tests focused on the life of the fiber...not the field’s use or location, or maintenance practices.

“Warranties always have been based on a hunch on how long the fiber will last,” Sorochan says. The Center is starting a program this fall to begin to quantify some of the myriad elements that go into field life. Until then, vendors and buyers will be stuck with traditional rule-of-thumb standards.

“Standard warranty,” however, does not mean “fixed in stone.” McNeal suggests that sports field managers read the warranty terms before buying. “If the warranty does not sound right for your situation, ask for

“Keep a log of what you do.”
— Cook

provisions to be put in or for the warranty to be adjusted for your situation,” she advises. Once you sign that paper, those are the terms that will rule any future discussion.

Keep in mind that you are dealing with a carpet that will be outdoors for a decade or so. It will be exposed to UV light that will break down the fibers. Depending on location, it will be subject to snow and ice or to pine needles and leaves. A typical warranty will cover issues like the fibers remaining in the backing and the field draining as specified.

That’s what the manufacturer promises. The city or college that owns the field has to do its bit, too. That means regular maintenance, by the book.

“We’ve never voided a warranty yet,” says Webb Cook, president of Sprinturf, King of Prussia, PA. “The best way for a manager to stay out of trouble is to follow at least the minimum protocol in the manual and be

able to say, 'I did what you told me to do.'"

Don't make a situation worse by "trying something." Stick to what the manual says. "When in doubt, it is best to contact the turf's manufacturer before rectifying any problem you feel could potentially affect the warranty," says Thomas Serensits, manager of Penn State's Sports Surface Research Center at University Park, PA.

Serensits emphasizes how important it is that the buyer be familiar with the terms of the warranty outlined by the manufacturer of their field. "General wear and tear is typically not covered by the warranty," he says. "When in doubt, contact the manufacturer."

The Tennessee Center began testing some basics this summer. "We are doing traction testing," Sorochan says. This means using live humans to execute 40-yard dashes, shuttle runs and zig-zag exercises to look at wear patterns. Sorochan emphasizes the need for some solid data.

"A common misconception is that these fields are maintenance-free." – Serensits

"Whenever there is an accident, it is always the field's fault—or the grounds staff's fault—never the shoe's fault or the athlete's fault," he says.

The Center hopes to quantify the multiple variables that effect fiber change and wear, rubber loss, traction and similar playability concerns. While the work will focus on conditions in Tennessee, it will provide a baseline for synthetic turf everywhere.

WORKING IT OUT

Every company in the business provides a maintenance manual with instructions on how to handle the field. Typically, it calls for weekly or bi-weekly drag brushing of the field during periods of heavy use. This will help keep the fiber from laying over, remove trash and redistribute the infill.

Next, Cook says, you get into maintenance of specific areas like the creases on lacrosse fields, the arc on a soccer field, or the

areas around the bases on a baseball diamond—places where the infill will be displaced and where it needs to be brushed back and replenished regularly.

"They give you a manual. Go by it," McNeal says. She notes that the manual covers everything from the ordinary to protecting the turf when it is necessary to take a bucket truck out on the field.

"A sports turf manager has to use their senses about it," she continues. "If something seems not quite right, call the manufacturer."

THE NEW BABY

All hands should be on deck when the field is turned over to the municipality or college. Before that, however, Cook likes to see the person responsible for regular maintenance at the job site every day.

"The maintenance guy should be there, watching what is done, to understand how the field was installed and how the product works," Cook says. "It is vital to have someone on the owner's side involved."

All good companies offer basic training in maintenance. Yet field managers will also learn from others in the business. For example, one of the benefits of artificial turf is that it becomes playable right after snow, if the snow is removed correctly. But it is incumbent on the field manager to know how to remove snow and ice properly so the field and its markings do not get torn up in the process.

"A common misconception is that these fields are 'maintenance-free,'" Serensits says. Regular maintenance must be performed to maintain the safety and playability of a field. Common maintenance practices such as grooming, debris removal, and adding additional infill to heavy wear areas are a great start to maintaining these fields correctly, he adds.

Most installers or vendors are happy to leave extra infill to assure the city has the right material handy.

In addition, buyers should ask for a section of extra turf after the installation. Keep the extra piece outside (perhaps behind a maintenance building or on top of a press box). "By doing this, if a section of carpet must be replaced, the color of the carpet will match up because it is from the same batch and it has been exposed to the same amount

of sunlight," Serensits says. He also recommends having extra crumb rubber on site.

"In areas of high wear, such as sliding areas on baseball fields or lacrosse goal mouths, infill can be moved resulting in reduced infill depth," Serensits says. "Reintroducing rubber into these areas maintains the safety and playability of these areas."

"Then, keep a log of what you do," Cook advises. That way, you can validate the activities you did to keep the warranty valid and current.

MAKING A FIX

"Failures can occur because of a lack of maintenance," Serensits says. "I cannot stress enough the importance of regular maintenance on these surfaces."

Warranty issues never should devolve into a "did so – did not" conflict. Again, a simple log book will go a long way to validating a customer's compliance with required maintenance practices.

In Wake Forest's case, the field installed in October 2010 already is showing discoloration in the fibers around the sliding areas. Fibers are coming out in the batter's box.

"Wake Forest is adamant in getting the field we want," McNeal says, adding that the manufacturer has been quite open about working to a mutually satisfactory resolution of the problems.

The main warranty issues involve the carpet fiber, not workmanship.

At the moment, McNeal says, the issue is more a visual problem than one of playability...except in the batter's box. As soon as she saw the problem, she began to document it with photographs.

"The vendor has been on site every six weeks or so. They suggested a few extra maintenance practices. They want a mutual resolution and are standing behind their product," McNeal says. "They want to make Wake Forest happy about the field."

Daily says the only issues they have had are with fading of logo colors and some fiber breakdown and small depressions near the

hashes and numbers. From the stands, nobody would notice it.

"But if you walk the field, and we walk it all the time, you will see the numbers have broken down more than the field," Daily says. "It's only an eighth of an inch. But we want to be sure it is safe." Here is where some hard data from the Tennessee Center will come in handy.

Daily notes that the field at Paul Brown is entering its eighth season. That means it is near the end of its warranty life and, indeed, they expect to change out the field in 2012 at the end of the upcoming season.

"Fibers are the limiting factor," Daily says. "The fibers are wearing down and you can't afford a mis-step."

Daily, who is in regular contact with the synthetic field grapevine, says he believes the main warranty issues involve the carpet fiber, not workmanship.

"Reputable companies will always come back," he adds.

If there is a warranty issue, usually a city

or college will deal with the turf company, not the installer. The vendor will determine whether a repair is in order or whether some or all of the carpet must be replaced.

If there is a defect in the product, the customer has a right to expect replacement. If an inlay comes loose or the hash marks on the field come up, then a repair is reasonable.

Major issues, like a lack of drainage on a new field, are somewhat more complicated. Then it will be up to the vendor to determine if the cause is a lack of perforations in the carpet or whether the base stone was not set right.

DOWN THE ROAD

Researchers are in the process of gaining a better understanding of the performance of the yarns used by turf manufacturers. "At this point, that is still a work in progress as manufacturers tweak the characteristics of their yarns on a fairly regular basis," Serensits says.

Avoiding failures is an on-going project. Each field is different, so one solution does

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not fit all. A first step to avoiding failures is a quality installation. Serensits says proper installation procedures during base construction and sewing/gluing seams will go a long way in reducing the chances for failures.

Eventually, research-based data will give manufacturers and turf managers the data they need to fully anticipate the life expectancy and wear history of a new synthetic turf.

Even then, however, it will behoove the turf manager to keep a maintenance log and add digital photos to document practices and problems...and thus avoid voiding the warranty. ■

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