

Synthetic turf update from STMA Conference

AT THE SYNTHETIC TURF UPDATE SESSION STMA hosted last January, a panel answered questions from the audience. The panel included Webb Cook, president of Sprinturf, Darian Daily of the Cincinnati Bengals, Shawn Mahonski of Towson University, and Tom Serensits of Penn State's Center for Sports Surface Research.

The panel began by assuring the audience that some day every synthetic turf field will need to be replaced.

In response to a question on alternatives to SBR rubber infill, the panel cited research saying the crumb rubber is safe and noted that some areas don't allow crumb rubber as infill, in New York City and Los Angeles, for example. Alternative infills cost significantly more than crumb rubber, it was noted.

Daily of the Bengals said the NFL currently has no policy regarding whether its playing surfaces should be natural turf or synthetic. He advised that if rain is forecast the day of an event on your synthetic field you should cover the field if possible, though Daily noted that he has the luxury of the time and money to do this.

He said he is more aggressive now with grooming the field in Cincinnati, hitting it three times a week during the NFL season. He added that the Bengals also practice on the game field, unlike many NFL teams, and that makes a difference. "I can see the difference if we can't drag it," he said.

In response to another question, Daily said wavy lines can some-

times be an issue and recommends using a broom to straighten the lines. He said firm but not hard is the goal and that too much grooming makes the field too soft and not enough grooming makes it too hard. After 7 years, Daily's field is showing signs of age and its Gmax rating has risen.

Daily also said his field was manufactured before the new monofilament products now in vogue, and that he has heard complaints about "moving infill" in some of these fields at the NFL level. "All fibers are going to lay over regardless of what kind it is," Daily said.

Another point the panel made sure was heard is that maintenance is necessary for synthetic fields. "No maintenance" claims are wrong and everyone knows it.

On the topic of cooling down the synthetic infill fields, Daily said the water cannons at his field are great but they don't work to cool the field. He uses them as part of his maintenance practices, hitting 15-20 minutes per station, saying it cleans the fibers and the infill and keeps debris off the field. He tries to get everything as clean as he can, he said.



Putting moisture into the sand and rubber gives players a feel they like, Daily said, they can feel their cleats going in and out and it's not sticky. "Later in the season I might cut down because there's already moisture, like if it snows."

Daily said his field has experienced less static as it has aged.

The panel agreed that 8-year warranties are now the industry standard.

When a field is between 8 and 11 years old, if it has been subject to sunlight 365 days a year, the UV rays will start to break down the fibers, Daily said. He said to get maximum years out of your synthetic turf you should groom it less, and that a field's location also makes a difference. A Texas field absorbs a more intense UV ray than one in New Hampshire, for example, so theoretically the NH field would last longer.

Serensits cited research at PSU, where they have tested shoes on their synthetic turf plots, that showed flat-soled shoes will wear a field faster than cleats.

One attendee wondered if someday there would be an environmentally related tax to pay to process the old infill material. A panel member responded that equipment exists that can remove 65-70% of the old infill; it is cut up and put in a landfill and that he knew of no current issues with that practice.

Another attendee, from Cincinnati, said a nearby cement plant was causing abrasions to his field's fibers and was told he had to just keep flushing that unwanted material through the

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system. The panel expressed more concern about the number of sticks and sunflower seeds and god-knows what else that regularly must be removed from these fields.

Mahonski said at Towson that outside groups, particularly soccer and lacrosse leagues, renting his facility sign for responsibility if the field needs to be cleaned after they use it. The bill to clean the field? Mahonski said about \$1,700. He recommended everyone put language doing the same in all their contracts.

Mahonski said he knows a guy who grooms his field every day and that he's wearing out the 4-year-old field.

Cook said manufacturers' manuals most often recommend grooming every 4 to 6 weeks. The GreensGroomer product was mentioned for the second time by an audience member as being an effective groomer. This one said he saves his field from wear by setting the brush height differently and lightens the setting on his machine and also by adjusting the tension.

The panel recommended removing leaves

ASAP, using air such as a pull-behind blower, to get them off. Handhelds work too, no matter what leaves need to "leave" in a hurry.

A machine from Redexim Charterhouse also was mentioned by an attendee who said its rotary brush helped bring the rubber and debris up off the surface and the rubber is then shaken back out, which works for him. A panelist recommended a magnet attachment to pull out metal, and showed a slide with more than a handful of hairpins and worse pulled from the surface.

STUDIES ON PROLONGING LIFE?

The panel said that infill material gets harder over time and the carpet fibers wear, though it was noted that the newer fields' fibers are wearing better while some questions remain as to their longevity.

Cook said, "After 4 or 5 years, I recommend that once a year you spend the \$5,000 it costs for a professional, deep-cleaning service to help prolong your field's life. You should work this cost into the budget for the project upfront."

This deep cleaning also includes tining of the field and added infill to bring down Gmax numbers. A growing number of contractors nationwide are getting into the business of cleaning the ever-increasing number of synthetic fields being built annually.

The panel cited it is important to have strength and other coaches rotate the spots they use repetitively on the field. Another point was made on the wisdom of a \$15,000 fence to protect a \$750,000 investment in a synthetic field. Companies are happy to replace damaged, or as in the case in Canada recently stolen, turf but it will cost you.

An audience member said he knew of a 6-year-old field in New Hampshire that had been dragged in the same direction the entire time and was left with a "not good" situation. He recommended changing it up, going corner to corner, side to side, north and south, and don't set the machine to go too deep so as not to disturb the seams, whether glued or sewn. ■



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