

From the Sidelines



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Turf war doesn't need a winner

ONE OF THE BIGGEST, if not THE biggest, common denominator among the sports turf managers I know is a pure and simple love of growing grass—the science and the art of preparing their fields for competition. When talking about their turf they often sound like proud, involved and concerned parents discussing their children. I had an NFL guy tell me once as he was leaving an STMA meeting, “I’ve got to get back to my baby.”

So naturally (pun intended) the recent increase in the number of synthetic fields being built across the country is troubling to many turf managers, some who see it as a real threat to their livelihoods. From my following of this industry, I see two main reasons why more communities, school districts, and higher education institutions are opting for synthetic. One is “keeping up with the Joneses,” meaning nearby towns or schools have synthetic fields and so their neighbors want one too; the other is, and this is a real shocker, money. As in, for example, if we build this field we can have users on it 24/7 and profit from the rental fees.

Many facilities have the space and budget for both natural fields and a synthetic surface (or more), which may be the ideal situation today. Often those lucky folks can have a showcase natural field for games and big events, while avoiding practice traffic and wear by using the synthetic field. But some who don't have that luxury, if they can afford to, are building synthetic fields, often with funds generated by booster groups or wealthy donors.

Of course those in the know don't claim synthetic fields are “maintenance-free” and that includes the industry's main trade organization, the Synthetic Turf Council (see page 28 in this issue for evidence). In fact, to get their money's worth from infill surfaces, owners had best employ a good turf manager or risk needing to replace their investment years before its expected life.

My Google news feed titled “synthetic turf” regularly includes items from across the USA where proponents of synthetics make “maintenance free” claims in public forums. A smaller number of items include claims from citizens that the infill material is toxic, or the fields spread bacteria to users, etc., and turf scientists from our best universities continue to conduct research on environmental concerns.

Those same researchers, as well as turfgrass breeders, also continue to work to improve the natural stuff and how it is maintained for sports use. Many of our readers work tirelessly to have their natural fields in top shape year round as well.

And while it's understandable that some of the marketing tactics by the synthetic industry make people's teeth hurt, we all should realize there are uses for both it and natural turf. Management teams that didn't make taking care of their natural fields a big enough priority will probably repeat the mistake with their new fields.

Here's hoping one day everybody truly appreciates the need for professionals to maintain athletic surfaces of all kinds, for every athlete. ■

Error of omission

In our March 2013 article “Turf farmers' advice on choosing and successfully managing thick-cut sod,” we used several photos, on pages 14 and 16, without crediting the source. Those photos were from 2012 STMA Innovative Award winner, Paul Carlson of Green Source Inc. and Central Sod Farms, and his SideKick machine. We regret the omission.

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