



BY DR. GRADY MILLER

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Questions?

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I understand your position as a turfgrass faculty member, but a synthetic turf surface allows me to prepare our team regardless of the weather conditions. Preparation is what wins games. A synthetic turf field has consistent footing and requires less maintenance during the year. I know NFL has data suggesting it may not be as desirable as natural grass and there have been medical studies that link it to injuries. But the other schools in our conference have them and use them and do not express the negatives that keep coming up. I used them at my previous school and liked them, but most importantly they allowed my team to be better prepared for games. Preparation wins games. So, why not have a synthetic field?

*Coach Dave Doeren,
North Carolina State University*

The comments above may be slightly paraphrased, but they reflect how I remember our coach's opening comments a few weeks ago. About a week before this conversation, rumors starting swirling that our new head football coach [Doeren] wanted to change our stadium field to a synthetic turf. This started an unexpected barrage of negative e-mail directed at him and our athletic director. Soon after I was asked to visit the athletic offices in the stadium to have some dialogue on the subject.

Exactly 1 year ago I wrote a brief essay for *SportsTurf* people in general (athletes, parents, boosters, etc) want synthetic turfgrass fields. Based on my experiences I figured I would hear from our coach more of the same reasons I have heard before. I was wrong.

Coach Doeren and his staff had researched the pros and cons and they did not base their justification for the synthetic surface on the typical reasons. It was not

about having fast game fields or the inability to manage natural grass surfaces. It was primarily about team preparation and winning.

The bestselling book "Outliers" details the concept of the 10,000-Hour Rule. The book's author gives examples where scientists have tried to determine if there is such a thing as innate talent. The answer has been yes, but they almost always point out that to have achievement there is also a need for preparation. But after significant analysis, scientists also found that even with the gifted (e.g., Mozart, Bill Gates, The Beatles), that innate talent seems to play a smaller role in achievement than preparation plays. The magic number that kept coming up in their analysis of outstanding performance, regardless of the activity: 10,000 hours of dedicated practice.

The NCAA rules limit practice time for college athletes. Considering all the NCAA stipulations, I am sure keeping up with countable hours of practice requires athletic associations to employ "timekeepers" just to stay in compliance. But even if rules were violated, it would be impossible for a student-athlete to reach 10,000 hours of practice under the direction of a coach. Does this swing the pendulum back toward the importance of talent to have high achievement? I will leave that as a rhetorical question.

Getting back to the synthetic turfgrass issue, there is no question that with our super-wet and cool spring that natural grass fields were difficult to keep in good shape. The athletic department staff wants to maintain the integrity of their fields and provide a great surface for practice. As the fields deteriorate so does the traction. This can lead to

more injuries. And the nature of practice is repetition, often in the same location of a field. Repetitive drills on soggy fields can quickly deteriorate field conditions and can ultimately lead to field failure. What is a team to do?

Well, they start thinking about synthetic turfgrass as an option. As I stated a year ago, "There may be one trait or issue that becomes the tipping point in favor of one surface over the other." Our coaching staff had reached that tipping point—our current field situation was limiting their preparation time. Our coach's experience had taught him that preparation gave his team a better chance of winning games. Concurrently, other schools may not have had practices limited by field conditions. So, the solution was to have an all-weather playing surface. A temporary fix was to trek to a local high school that had a synthetic field. But that trek time is also part of countable hours of practice according to NCAA, resulting in less available field time.

The question was then where to put a synthetic surface? Our coach previously had a synthetic stadium field, so why not at NCSU? Well, we are a land grant university (aka an Ag school). This was a big part of the resistance to putting synthetic turf in the stadium. It just did not match the legacy of our University's history.

So, after the resistance, the decision was made to change one of the three natural grass practice fields to synthetic. An indoor practice facility would be an even better solution, but cost prohibitive at this time. Will the stadium ever have synthetic turf? Perhaps one day. But for now we are going to concentrate on preparation and winning and stick with tradition come Saturday. ■