

BY MARK LESLIE

# HURRICANE ISABEL CAN'T SHUT DOWN HOKIES

**S**hortly after host Virginia Tech and Texas A&M played football despite one-inch-an-hour rains from nearby Hurricane Isabel, turfgrass professor Dr. Eric Ervin declared the new tray-drainage playing surface at Lane Stadium could have withstood a torrential 10 inches an hour without impacting play. With a root-zone mix of 90-percent sand and 10-percent peat, "It was lab-tested to move 15 inches an hour infiltration rate," he said.

"The system costs more," he added, "but the ability to have a high-performance, dry, firm playing surface under hurricane conditions in that one game paid for itself."

"I was shocked, almost, that the footing stayed so good with so much rain coming in so short a time," said head football coach Frank Beamer. "There was no bad footing. [Hokie running back] Kevin Jones gained 170 yards and you can't do that on a bad field."

Beamer and assistant AD Tom Gabbard agreed the field has literally paid for itself. They speak from experi-

ence. Virginia Tech's season-opening game against Georgia Tech in 2000, due to be nationally televised on ESPN, was canceled by a rainstorm that made the old field unplayable. The stands were full with more than 60,000 would-be spectators, the ESPN cameras were turned off and Virginia Tech lost \$750,000 in revenue.

Vowing to never cancel a game again, school officials choose a GreenTech field, which was first pioneered by Dr. John "Trey" Rogers at Michigan State for the World Cup games at the Pontiac Silverdome in Detroit.

Today, GreenTech, a Richmond, VA, firm, has modified and improved the technology, replacing heavy hexagonal steel modules, or trays, with lighter, polyethylene modules that are smaller at 4-by-4 feet square. The steel hexagons weighed 3,300 pounds when loaded with rootzone, while the new trays weigh 800 to 1,110 pounds.

Gabbard explained how the tray-drainage system

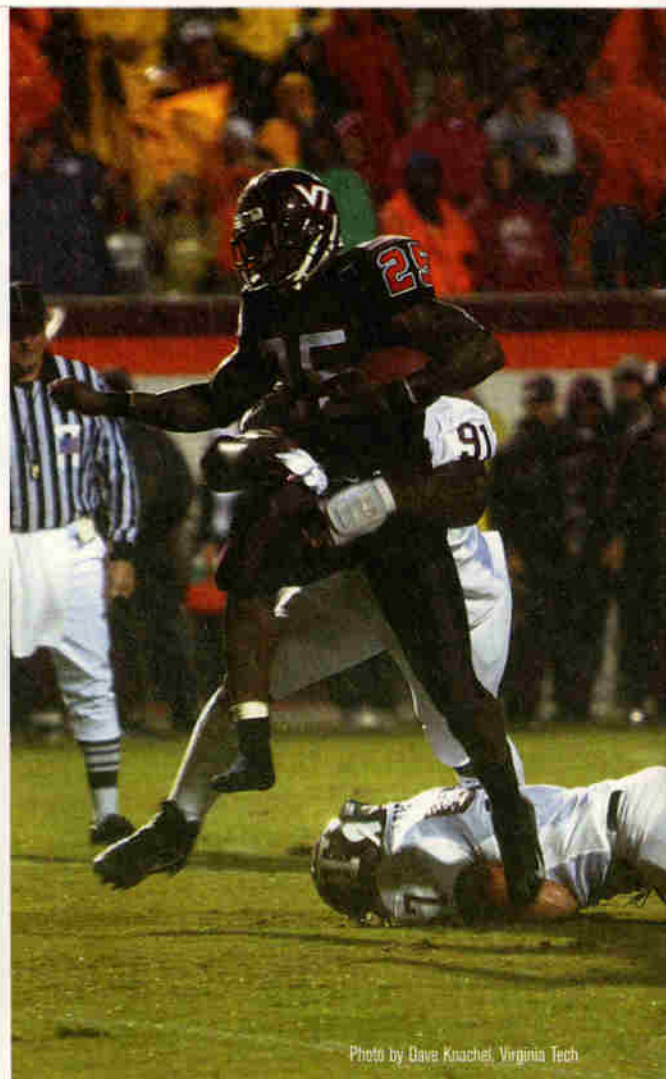


Photo by Dave Knachel, Virginia Tech

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canceled out the effects of Hurricane Isabel.

The old field was stripped of grass and covered with an asphalt pad, with 22 air inlets and a trench drain along each sideline. The trays, filled with rootzone mix and sporting mature Bermudagrass, were placed, like tiles, on top of the asphalt. The modules have legs that create a 3-inch space between the asphalt and trays.

With the 3-inch space between asphalt and trays, said Gabbard, "In essence, we could have a 3-inch lake underneath the entire surface of the field and the grass would still be dry."

Grounds manager Casey Underwood, knowing the hurricane was coming, used an Advanced Aeration Systems unit, a giant machine that can blow air into the rootzone, or suck water out of it was hooked to the vents, to prepare for the downpour ahead of time. The week of the game, Underwood's crew hooked up the vacuum system and reduced the moisture content in the soil from 28 or 29 percent to 4 percent and waited for the rain.

The rain came and the game went on. "The players didn't even get their uniforms muddy," exclaimed Virginia Tech Sports Information Director Dave Smith.

As the game wore on, ESPN commentators marveled at how dry the gridiron remained through-out play in the harsh elements.

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Mark Leslie is a free lance writer.

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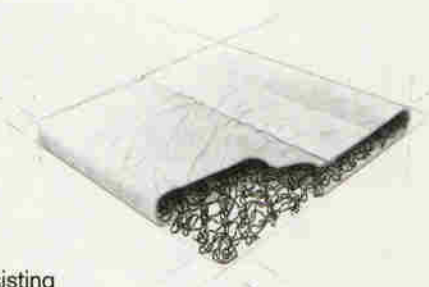


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