

SYNTHETIC FIELDS: END-OF-LIFE ISSUES: How do you evaluate an older field? What's the next step?

Nothing lasts forever. Including, unfortunately, your synthetic turf field. And that field, which has remained cheerfully green and bright through wins, losses, sun and rain, is now showing its age.

It hardly seems fair. But if it helps any, you're not the only one going through this.

"A lot of fields are now coming up on their end-of-life," says Zach Burns of the Motz Group in Cincinnati, OH.

The first generation of synthetic fields, installed approximately a decade ago (give or take a few years), is showing its age. Field builders, and those who work with sports facilities, say the symptoms are easily recognizable.

"The fibers start to degrade," notes Darren Gill of Field Turf in Montreal, Canada. "You'll notice a 'hairing' of the fibers and they will start to break. You'll start walking off the field with broken fibers on your shoes. The infill also hardens."

According to John Schedler of AirFieldturf in Spokane Valley, WA field owners can walk the field and find definitive signs of wear.

"Areas of wear typically are between the hash marks and on the sidelines of a football field where there is the most use or foot traffic and around the goal mouth and corner kicks on a soccer field. Baseball and softball are different but typically you'll see the highest wear in the

▼ **Beginning of life.** All photos courtesy of The Motz Corporation, Cincinnati, OH



batter's box area and pitcher's mound area. Other areas to be watching are around the bases and sliding areas as well as where the players for each position typically place themselves."

The signs of wear, he adds, can be deceiving. "Most fields will have a displacement of infill in the higher wear areas. This exposes the fibers to more UV exposure and more wear from use. The infill is key to protecting the fiber and keeping it upright and preventing what is called lay-over. Maintaining the infill levels is a key part of any synthetic surfacing system by checking the high wear areas and grooming them specifically on a more regular basis than the rest of the field. The more stable the infill the more protected the fiber is from laying over. Fiber lay-over is the beginning of the breakdown process."

For those with access to testing equipment, the field's Gmax level will also be a telling point. "The field's Gmax will begin to rise," adds Gill. "It should be monitored and as it approaches 200 gs, the field should be remediated or replaced."

Remediated. Replaced. "Gosh," you're thinking. "Isn't this why I got a synthetic field in the first place, so I wouldn't have to go through this?"

Well, yes and no. For years, you've avoided mowing, sodding, weeding, seeding and feeding, the remediation and replacement other field owners go through regularly. But nothing lasts forever and that includes synthetic fields.

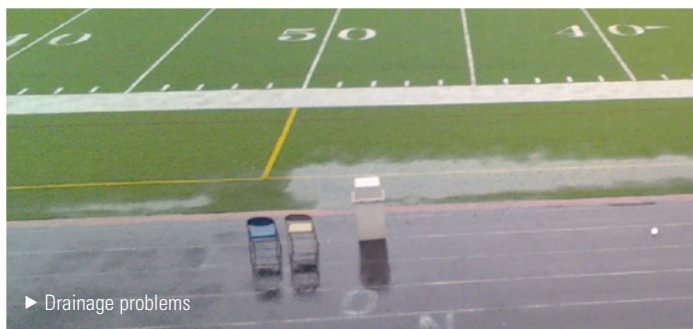
According to Burns, a field that needs to be replaced may show a

» "But again, **the key is to follow the operations and maintenance guidelines submitted by your manufacturer** and keeping in touch with your manufacturer's rep for the life of the field. A phone call or e-mail with pictures of any area of concern can be handled quickly by the manufacturer's rep and can keep the field manager protected."

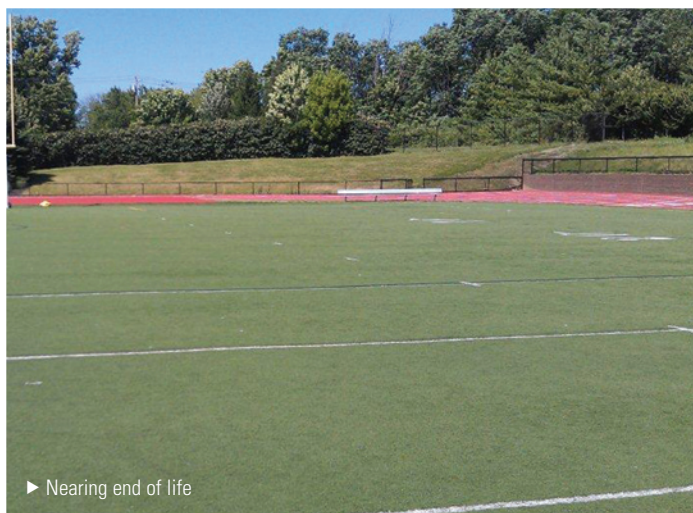
— *John Schedler.*

decrease in performance and/or it may present a danger to users. However, he notes, there always are those owners who try to eke out a little more time.

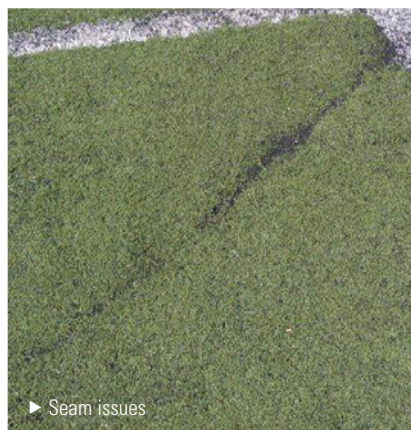
"Sometimes, we know the field needs to be replaced, but we hear, 'Maybe we can get another year out of it.' More often than not, you'll hear that because people just don't have the money right now to replace it. We do have some people who have budgeted for this and planned for replacement in year eight, though. It depends on the owner."



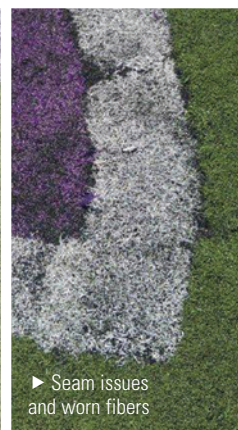
► Drainage problems



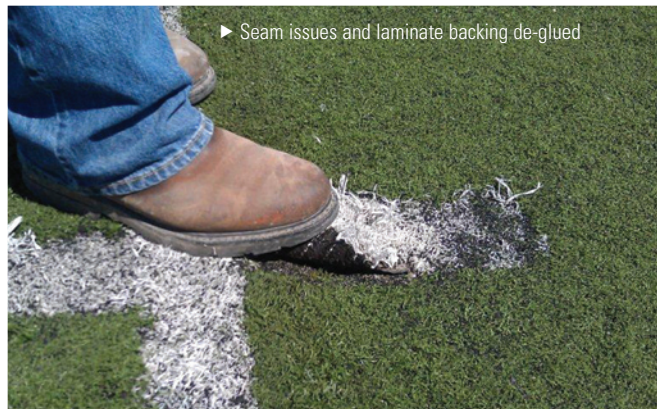
► Nearing end of life



► Seam issues



► Seam issues and worn fibers



► Seam issues and laminate backing de-glued

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Facility & Operations

If the field is safe for the users, he adds, an owner may try to keep the facility going. However, all builders agree: safety should always be the paramount concern.

While the majority of fields that are being installed in North America are supplied with a specific year-term warranty, Burns says the actual longevity of a field will depend on a number of factors including but not limited to use, climate, system component quality, maintenance and installation quality.

"I think something that would be incredibly helpful for a manager is a yearly assessment (including seam integrity, fiber loss, testing protocol, infill depth, etc.) of the field conducted by the field manufacturer or an industry expert," he notes. "Having a benchmark set at installation and then an annual check provides the manager and owner data to weigh when a field is ready to be replaced. Most turf manufacturers conduct this kind of service."

Regular maintenance, including grooming the fibers and maintaining the level of infill, as well as addressing any minor problems, can help the field perform well during its useful life.

"Consulting with your manufacturer is key during the life of the field," says John Schedler. "Make sure you're following the maintenance procedures lined out by the manufacturer and keeping the field clean and free from as much debris/contamination as possible. Spot maintenance is also key in the high-wear areas. Sometimes, overall field grooming and brushing isn't necessary

▼ Worn fibers



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if the high-wear areas are maintained separately. But again, the key is to follow the operations and maintenance guidelines submitted by your manufacturer and keeping in touch with your manufacturer’s rep for the life of the field. A phone call or e-mail with pictures of any area of concern can be handled quickly by the manufacturer’s rep and can keep the field manager protected.”

However, when regular repairs can no longer keep the playing surface consistent, when the field starts feeling hard, looking bald or patchy or shiny, or when other symptoms appear, it is time to take that next step.

Having the field replaced might seem like a daunting prospect but, says Burns, “It’s not as disruptive of an event as the first installation. You’re not doing what you did initially, which included excavating and bringing in stone and pipe. The benefit is it’s a lot less time the facility is out of use. You are talking about three to four weeks instead of eight to ten weeks.”

And this brings up another question: once the surface of the old field is trucked away, what is the next step for it?

“Most customers aren’t thinking about recycling very much,” says Darren Gill, “but they should be.”

The next article in this series will discuss synthetic sustainability and turf recycling. ■

Mary Helen Sprecher is a free lance writer who wrote this article on behalf of the American Sports Builders Association. ASBA is a non-profit association helping designers, builders, owners, operators and users understand quality athletic field construction. ASBA offers the publication, “Sports Fields: A Construction and Maintenance Manual,” which discusses, among other topics, sustainability in the construction and maintenance of synthetic fields, as well as synthetic turf recycling. For information, visit www.sportsbuilders.org.

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