

# Effectively Incorporating Synthetic Turf Fields into Athletic Programs: *A Groundskeeper's Perspective*

By Matt Olivi

As the popularity of both competitive and recreational sports continues to grow in our region, so does the demand for turf playing surfaces that are safe and aesthetically pleasing. As turf managers, we are constantly battling the daily traffic on our natural turf fields. The resulting soil compaction can be devastating with even the most thorough and well-planned turf maintenance programs. Finding the time and resources to maintain our fields between practices and game times for every sport that our facilities cater to is often a difficult task. As synthetic turf fields are rapidly becoming a considerable part of the turf industry, they can be viewed as a great tool for maintaining the playability and beauty of our natural turf fields.

Approximately three years ago, the Piscataway School District, in cooperation with the Piscataway Recreation Department, installed a synthetic field in place of a natural turf field in a heavily trafficked high

school football stadium. As in most cases where a natural turf field is replaced by a synthetic one, there has been and will continue to be healthy debate relating to the safety, cost-effectiveness, environmental impact, maintenance and installation issues of this synthetic field. As turf managers, we are all aware of such debates and may or may not have formulated our own opinions for or against these relatively new fields. This article attempts to offer a positive outlook for proponents of both natural and synthetic turf.

Since the installation of synthetic turf in the Piscataway High School football stadium, there has been a noticeable difference in the appearance and playability of the natural turf fields that make up the majority of the sports field surfaces in the school district. Over the past few years, the natural turf has

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gradually improved in terms of blade density and soil permeability. The turf has come back thicker and stronger each year as there has been significantly less traffic on these fields. As athletic administration has been urged to limit the use of game fields for team practices and gym class use, the obviously more durable synthetic turf in the football stadium has been able to absorb a great deal of this traffic that used to damage the natural game fields. For example, on an average day, there used to be as many as six gym classes of well over twenty students playing on the natural turf varsity soccer field. As the field was constantly being used all day long, its playability was greatly undermined by mid-season despite the aeration and top-dressing efforts of the grounds crew to alleviate as much soil compaction as possible. Fortunately, as efforts to divert such traffic clearly had positive results, the Piscataway Soccer Club, also sharing the same natural turf fields, recently began using the synthetic field for the majority of its winter season games as well.

As a groundskeeper, it is always more challenging and rewarding to maintain an aesthetically pleasing natural turf field that meets community demands for

playing consistency. As we all know, the communities we serve sometimes overlook the efforts of those managing and maintaining their athletic fields. However, I hear about more and more compliments every season in regards to the improvements of our natural turf fields in Piscataway. In combination with the efforts of an experienced and well-trained grounds crew, utilizing the synthetic turf as a resource for heavy sports field trafficking has produced very positive results.

As turf managers in many different affiliations, we will always have different opinions and arguments in the debate of synthetic vs. natural turf fields. However, I think one thing we will all be able to agree on is the beneficial playability characteristics and the large amount of traffic that synthetic fields can accommodate while still maintaining their pleasing appearance. As the use of sports fields and the corresponding maintenance costs are not likely to decrease in the future, perhaps we can look at synthetic turf as a necessary component of a versatile sports facility.

*Matt Olivi is Sports Turf Manager,  
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