

Judgment Day

for a synthetic turf field?



Brad Park

What does a municipality or board of education do with a synthetic infill field when it's time to replace the surface? Does the public body have a **plan** and/or the **resources** to tear-out, dispose-of, and replace the carpet and infill? How many officials will simply kick the 'can' down the road and arrive at the decision to "get another year out of it" when faced at the costs of replacement? Will they kick it again going into 2012? How about 2013?

While visiting family over Thanksgiving, I read an article in the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* published on November 25, 2010 regarding a suburban Pittsburgh school district contemplating the replacement of their 8-yr-old all-rubber infill synthetic field. The article titled, *Study to find whether new turf needed* was authored by Heidi Dezayas and can be digitally acquired at www.pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/news/pittsburgh/s_710871.html

The article serves as an example of what I have observed to be a common oversight related to synthetic turf fields. That is: Many governing bodies don't have a clue how they're going to come-up with the funds to replace their synthetic turf fields, particularly in these times of fiscal belt tightening.

According to article, Gateway School District's Athletic Director indicated that the turf is falling apart in some places

and maintenance crews are involved in gluing numbers and lines back into the carpet. The Athletic Director was reported to have received a letter from East Suburban Sports Medicine saying that this year was the first year where athletes received a lot of skin burns. He attributed it to the synthetic field behaving like "a carpet in your house; it wears and starts to flatter ... as it flattens, it becomes more of a safety hazard".

The article stated that the projected replacement costs range from \$300,000 to \$350,000.

The response from the school board? The article quoted on member as saying, "Besides the warranty being over ... is there anything saying it's not safe? ... Gluing and re-gluing is normal".

A second Gateway school board member provided his own insight as to the source of the field's gluing and re-gluing problems. He surmised that, "... the problem could be that the field is used for too many things."

Lastly, Gateway board member Scott Williams chimed-in on the funding issues for replacing the synthetic turf field and reminded all that when the existing field was installed 8 years ago there were discussions to allow advertising on the scoreboard to help offset the future costs of field replacement.

The advertising never happened.

The article reported that the school board agreed to tour the field and an independent contractor was being sought after to test the field and determine if it is safe. While the article did not specify the nature of testing, the questions arising at this school district underscore the argument in support of independent field



SFMANJ Update Editor Brad Park holds a permanently inlaid line that came unglued on a poorly managed synthetic field (Photo by Matt Olivi)

testing to assess field performance – particularly surface hardness.

American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) has developed the Standard Specification for Shock-Absorbing Properties of North American Football Field Playing Systems as Measured in the Field (ASTM F 1936-98) and describes methodology and field locations to be tested with equipment conforming to Test Method F 355, Procedure A.

Regardless of whether one agrees or disagrees with the nature of surface hardness testing, or the stringent nature of the performance requirement "... the average G_{max} of one or more of the tested points is in excess of 200 average G_{max} , the surface system should be replaced in full or in part", the reality of surface hardness testing is that it amounts to a **quantification** of field characteristics and can be incorporated into the field replacement decision making process.



A lack of attention to synthetic fields may result in severe seam damage as in the case of this all-rubber infill synthetic field (Photo by Matt Olivi).

Finally, the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* article reported that Gateway athletic director made the judgment that the turf could hold-up for another year, but officials should begin to consider how to pay to replace it. He was quoted as saying, "We have to have a plan ..."

Brad Park is Sports Turf Research & Education Coordinator, Rutgers Univ.; SFMANJ Board member; and Editor, SFMANJ Update.

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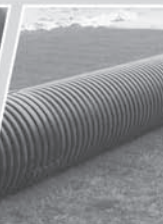
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