Time to strike

God—the lover of all that is natural—will not likely rain lightning bolts onto the heads of the makers or users of artificial grass. As miracles go, that would rank somewhere below (way below) the parting of the Red Sea.

Anyway, we’re supposed to do some things for ourselves. In this spirit of doing something, a small cast of respected turfmen gathered at the Midwest Regional Turf Conference last March. Loosening their ties after an afternoon of swapping tales, they mulled the question: “Who decides synthetic turf at the sports fields at our schools? Who are the decision makers?”

Dr. Bill Daniel, Purdue University’s imminent turfgrass expert, directed. Galling to those in attendance, particularly Daniel, was the announcement just weeks before that Illinois was going carpet. Purdue stands alone as the only Big Ten school still playing football Saturday afternoons on grass, real grass.

The decision makers? After an hour’s discussion, they remained nameless and faceless. Some, however—those who have decided fake over real—are suddenly drawing fire from the popular press. Opinions are being molded by magazines and newspapers at the breakfast table. Sports Illustrated blistered sports carpets with a 21-page spread in its August 12 edition. Nightline fueled the controversy on national television. Syndicated columnist Jody Powell scalded synthetic turf in some of the nation’s most respected newspapers.

But, proponents of synthetic surfaces aren’t taking the critical press lightly. Francis Reining, a Monsanto general manager (Monsanto’s Astroturf is the most popular synthetic on the market), responded to Sports Illustrated. In part he wrote: “Opinion is one thing. But when you attempt to unilaterally denigrate an industry, you have a responsibility to present conflicting opinions of acknowledged experts and facts on both sides of the argument.”

The controversy heats. That’s good news for us in the turf industry. We’ve shown we’re not good crusaders. We’ve build a case—i.e., injury data and costs—but we can’t seem to find, never mind convince, those with the final say.

Now we find ourselves with allies. That small group, as indecisive as it seemed last March, guides us. Let’s find these decision makers while public opinion simmers. Let’s present our side of the story again. Soon.