Frankly my dear... I’ll take grass

Both artificial turf and natural grass have advantages for the baseball player, but 90% of today’s players don’t prefer one to the other, says Hall of Fame outfielder Billy Williams. Grass, however, is more likely to sustain a career. ‘We always say that artificial turf takes two or three years off a player’s career,” said Williams at the third annual Midwest Sports Turf Institute in Glen Ellyn, Ill. The first to go are a player’s knees, says Williams, victims of continuous pounding on a hard surface.

He also reminded groundskeepers that “A good ground crew can mean the difference between a home team winning an extra five or six ballgames a year.”

Match your turf with your sport

When planning to put grass down on your football, soccer, or baseball field, the most important characteristics to look at are a cultivar’s growth and recovery rate, traffic and compaction tolerance, disease resistance and cultural intensity level, says Tom Voigt, assistant horticulturist at the University of Illinois, Urbana. Here’s how Voigt sees each through the eyes of a groundskeeper in the Midwest:

Kentucky bluegrass has a good recovery rate, medium traffic tolerance (which can be improved by combining it with perennial ryegrass), medium to high compaction tolerance, medium disease resistance and a medium cultural intensity level.

Perennial ryegrass has a slow recovery rate but good traffic and compaction tolerance. “The newer varieties can be mowed lower and have improved disease resistance and cold/heat tolerance compared to the older varieties,” says Voigt.

Tall fescue, despite a poor recovery rate, has good traffic and compaction tolerance, high disease resistance and a high cultural intensity level. "I don’t think fine fescues are going to play a big role in sports turf in the Midwest,” concluded Voigt.

Creeping red fescue, the “Rolls Royce” of the bentgrasses, recovers well but has poor traffic and compaction tolerance and low disease resistance. “This is a grass that you have to constantly work with to be successful.”

Turfgrasses do not show the dramatic visual response to potassium that they do to nitrogen.