A giant step in athletic turf safety, economy, aesthetics?

Athletic turf management moves as a turtle in the sand. Every five or six years, sports turf managers discover a new grass blend that works slightly better or researchers find a little bit faster way to germinate grass for overseeding.

So, as we prepared our special athletic turf report that some of you will receive this month, we were hard-pressed to find anything radically new. But lo and behold—just in time to follow up for this issue—we saw a report on CNN about the new grass infrastructure (can we call it that?) being used at the University of Utah. It’s an unusual blend of natural and synthetic turf.

We dispatched managing editor Terry McIver to Salt Lake City (where he was to attend a PLCAA board meeting anyway) to find out more about this new product called SportGrass.

It was invented by Jerry Bergevin, president of Turf Systems International. Its playing surface is more level than either a natural or artificial turf surface. There’s much less divoting, if any, and it’s safer than a fully artificial field.

“The field looked great at the time of my visit, and certainly was a more even surface,” McIver reports. “The crown of the plant is protected by the synthetic fabric. Management is identical to that for a usual turf surface; you can even aerate with ¼-inch solid tines or a Hydroject.”

And of course, SportGrass doesn’t have to be replaced, as do most high-use fields.

Utah Coach Ron McBride told us the field was in great shape after two games and is a fine playing surface. “It’s the best thing going in football,” says McBride, who adds that the field plays fast, and is “great for kickers.”

Back in the 1970s, it only took a few years for synthetic grass (now mistakenly referred to as “turf” by most sportscasters) to catch on. It quickly became the surface of choice in the Astrodome and at other multi-purpose fields on the professional, collegiate and even high school levels.

The swing back to safer natural grass—though well under way now—is taking longer, much to the dismay of most athletes. Not surprisingly, the first major U.S. installation of this new hybrid product called SportGrass came as a rash of new synthetic turf-related injuries hit the National Football League.

In the early stages of training camp, the Cincinnati Bengals’ top draft choice, running back Ki-Jana Carter (who played collegiately on Penn State’s natural turf) tore the anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee, and is out for the season. In the first week of the regular season, the same thing happened to Pittsburgh Steelers’ All-Pro safety Rod Woodson. Both injuries were sustained, shamefully, on synthetic turf. And both were “non-contact” injuries, in that other players were not involved.

The debate over artificial versus natural turf is always a compelling subject, and always timely indeed. As always, we’re interested to hear your initial thoughts on the product, by mail, fax, phone or e-mail. Only time will tell if SportGrass is a partial solution to the problems of safety, economy and aesthetics that have plagued sports turf managers for years. For now, it’s an interesting development that holds bright promise for athletic field managers and athletes alike.