Donald Sauvigne, director of building and grounds services at Columbia University says the future of sports turf management "is going to be based on how well we manage the expectations of others. In order to manage the everyone's expectations, we have to educate them, and understand what their expectations are.

"The dilemma facing education is that nobody wants to hear our financial problems, but we've been meeting people's expectations for years, and we've become victims of our own success."

To best react to the enrollment crisis, which is likely to put a dent in field budgets, Sauvigne says every turf manager needs to understand and subscribe to the objectives of the university it serves.

"Understand the place of sports turf and the mission of the school when it comes to athletics. The turf manager is a member of the team in helping support those expectations."

The future of sports turf has never been brighter," says Jim Hornung, head groundskeeper at Pilot Field, Buffalo, N.Y. He points to expanding interest in women's sports and the growing interest in soccer as factors. Hornung says it's essential that we meet at least minimal construction and maintenance standards.

"We need to know what the soils are going to do, how they're going to play," says Hornung. "It's no different than what the golf course superintendents have been doing for years. They have a standard and they live by it."

Why do manufacturers fight? asks Hornung. "It's always Product A vs. Product B vs. Product C". Hornung would like manufacturers to work together more to solve common industry turf care problems.

"There are many tools we can use to meet expected maintenance standards. One aerifier or one sprayer may not be enough. There are no saviours in the equipment world."

"We must all give 100 percent and then some," urges Hornung, for two reasons: safety and aesthetics. He suggests field managers present their budgets a little differently to make the sale.

"Talk in cents per square foot rather than thousands of dollars for the entire field," suggests Hornung, to soften the blow of asking for big bucks.

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The Green, Green Grass of Superdome

Maurice Oishi,
University of Guelph

Trey Roger's thumb is greener than most. Inside the dim confines of (Pontiac) Michigan's Silverdome, he's grown a field's worth of real grass that will withstand the rigors of World Cup soccer.

The Michigan State University professor, who was keynote speaker this month at the Ontario Turfgrass Symposium on campus, was asked by the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) to grow the field for this year's World Cup.

After a test match between Germany and England's national teams last summer, the field's first-ever use, it drew rave reviews from both the players and the FIFA. No small feat considering "the players were more interested in hitting the roof with the ball than about the field," says Rogers.

The Silverdome is one of nine U.S. locales to host the World Cup games this summer and it's the only domed site. Putting grass in the dome was an idea launched by FIFA. "If this works here," says Rogers, "it would be applicable around the world. And it was in FIFA's self-interest to expand the horizons of the game."

The dusky light in the stadium - only about 10 per cent of sunlight passes through the translucent dome - was the most obvious obstacle.

Rather than install massive banks of expensive lights, Rogers and his colleagues devised a now patented formulation of plant-growth regulators, which slowed the rate of growth. As low as the lighting was, it met the energy needs of the slowed-down plants, he says.

Another problem was that soccer, like most stadium sports, voraciously chews up the turf. In addition, to meet the needs of Silverdome users, the playing surface had to be removable.

Roger's team used 7.5-foot-wide hexagons of turf, each six inches thick and confined by a rigid form. The depth of the turf ensures both a soft and resilient surface; the shape offers short sides with a relatively large surface area.

These features ensure that the 3,000-pound sections can be moved into and out of the stadium with little fear of damaging the edges and relatively few seams between adjacent sections that players can trip on.

Beginning in March (1993), the forms were filled with soil in the Silverdome parking lot, then topped with California-grown sod. In June, the sections were moved into the stadium and laid out like interlocking bricks.

Rogers was delighted with the results. "You couldn't even see the seams after 36 hours". Twenty-three days, four soccer matches and a Jehovah's Witness conference later, there was little wear and even less yellowing of the grass. His success made newspapers across the United States. "It's not very often turfgrass is front-page news," he says.

Rogers expects the technology will continue to grow. Ten years from now, this'll be a dinosaur. We'll have different grasses and better parameters. This was just a starting point."

But the technology is far from outdated yet. For the moment, the grass sits snow covered in the parking lot, awaiting for its day in the dome.

[Reprinted with permission from '*AT GUELPH*' Jan. 19, 1994]