

Artificial Turf Dying in Major League Baseball



Former professional baseball player Maury Wills remembered back 43 years ago when he became the first batter to hit on artificial turf in a major league game. Even when the green rug was novel, he didn't like it.

"I'm a traditionalist," said the former Los Angeles Dodger. "I'm still an old-school guy. I believe baseball was meant to be played outdoors and be played in the daytime."

Turns out, most others think baseball is better on grass, too. The sport's turf wars are nearing an end.

Once regarded as magic carpets that would eliminate bad hops and minimize rainouts, artificial surfaces are going the way of the dead ball and complete games.

When the Minnesota Twins open Target Field in April 2010, just two non-grass

fields will remain in the major leagues: the Rogers Centre in Toronto and Tropicana Field in St. Petersburg, FL. That's down from a high of 10 artificial surfaces in 1977-78 and again from 1982-94.

While colleges and high schools actually are installing more artificial fields – to accommodate multiple sports – artificial turf is unloved by Major League Baseball.

"Baseball in the Metrodome is an unnatural act," Atlanta Braves president John Schuerholz said. Next season will have just 162 games on artificial turf, the fewest since 1969.



Rogers Centre

"I'm personally very happy that they're gone," baseball commissioner Bud Selig said. "I understood the need for artificial turf, particularly in multipurpose stadiums. But I think the players are better off and I think that the game is better, so I'm happy."

Players who still spend a majority of their games on artificial turf say they can feel it.

Tampa Bay Rays manager Joe Maddon makes sure to give All-Star outfielder Carl Crawford days off when he has a lot of consecutive games on turf. "I got away with it when I was 21. I'm a little older now — I'm almost 30, and it becomes tougher," Crawford said. "It definitely takes a toll on your body when you have to play 81 games on it. And we're in a division where you play another nine games on the road. That means you're playing more games on it than you are on natural grass. Basically, you play the best you can with it, but it's not easy."

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Gold Glove first baseman Keith Hernandez says grounders "bounced like a SuperBall." But that wasn't the biggest problem: His ankles aren't good to this day because of the turf at Busch Stadium in St. Louis, his home field from 1974-83. He would soak his feet in buckets of water while the Cardinals batted.

"On day games the thermometer would read 148 off the turf," he recalled. "I remember Reggie Smith, when we got him

from Boston, was out in right field in a day game in St. Louis in July or August and it's 100 degrees. He had rubber cleats and had to call time out. They had melted. If I wore the metal spikes, it would have me branded under the soles on my feet on a real hot day, from the metal, it would sunburn my heel and the balls of my feet. I remember and I would go, 'Why are my feet on fire?'"

Los Angeles outfielder Torii Hunter, who spent nine seasons at the Metrodome, said the artificial turf was "like running in sand" and hurt his hamstrings, lower back, knees and calf muscles.

Hunter, who left the artificial turf of the Metrodome for Anaheim's grass after the

2007 season, can't wait until it's all gone. While there's still artificial turf, his body pays the price.

"During the season, you feel it after your first couple games," he said. "It takes me like a month and a half to really get over some of the soreness that you have after the season." ♦

— Associate Press Baseball writer Ronald Blum, Sept. 26, Turfgrass Producers International E-Newsletter, November 2009



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