

Images of grief

Images. Most bombard the brain, evaporating quickly into oblivion. But some grab you, creeping into your thoughts throughout an otherwise routine day.

As I watched a baseball game played on artificial turf, I couldn't shake the memory of the tears in Alan Halbrook's eyes as he told me about Scott, who died when his head hit the artificial turf during baseball practice. "He was my son,"

he said softly, his lips quivering in an effort to hold back the tears. "How many kids get a baseball field named after them?" (Marist High School in Eugene, Ore., named the field in Scott's memory.)

As I caught a glimpse of the PGA Tour, I remembered the hope in Kent Waldrep's voice as he described how he'll swing a golf club when his paralysis is cured. Kent was left quadriplegic in a fall on artificial turf during a college football game.

Their stories are sad. The images, haunting. The results, courageous.

Waldrep runs the Kent Waldrep National Paralysis Research Foundation in Dallas, which raises money to find a cure for paralysis. He speaks out against artificial turf, suggesting Prescription Athletic Turf as a viable alternative. "I'm not convinced that system couldn't be adapted to dome stadiums," Waldrep says. "The technology is not the problem. It's applying that technology. It's the want to."

Halbrook has become such an expert on fields that the University of Oregon sought his advice on its new Omniturf football field. Halbrook is determined to see a hardness standard set for all athletic fields and knowledge of artificial turf become part of an athlete's training.

Their stories leave questions for our industry: Is the PAT system the answer? Who would set a hardness standard for schools, colleges, pros? How would it be enforced? Would it differ depending on a region's soil and turf? Will the liability crisis force some schools to eliminate athletics? Can turf be grown in dome stadiums? If not, can synthetic turf be made safer?

But these men and their families have their own question: Why does an industry's ignorance have to hurt anyone? Pain reflects in their eyes. Sometimes, anger flashes. But deep down is a strength which keeps them fighting to make fields safer.

The place to start is in our own backyard. Every field manager needs to evaluate the safety of his fields and make necessary changes. We need to do more than remember the stories of Scott Halbrook and Kent Waldrep, we must take responsibility for the safety of our athletes.

Images aren't enough.



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