

## Gutsy grass-backers

A funny thing happened on the way to planning Toronto's dome stadium. Somebody suggested that natural grass might be safer for athletes than synthetic surfaces.

That somebody isn't a turf expert or a politician or part of the Stadium Corporation. Rose Marie Branson is just a Blue Jays fan.

Actually, she's more than a fan. She's the first person in North America to get a major city to take a long, hard look at the safety differences between natural and artificial surfaces.

Branson, along with equally dedicated grass-backers at the *Toronto Star*, sponsored a pro-grass day in Toronto. The turnout included Blue Jays managers, Toronto mayor Art Eggleton, media and about 100 supporters. She brought in the kings of our industry: Dr. Jim Watson, vice-president of The Toro Co, Dr. Bill Daniel, inventor of the Prescription Athletic Turf (PAT) system, and Steve Wightman, field manager of Denver's Mile High Stadium. Even I had a chance to participate.

The questions raised weren't about the agronomics of growing grass indoors. The experts agreed it's feasible with improved turf varieties, good drainage systems (like PAT) and new geotextiles.

But the meeting raised other critical questions:

Will the retractable dome on the stadium be open, and closed only when necessary? Or will the dome be closed, and opened only on game days? Will the sod be removed each winter? Or will it be maintained year-round? (It may be cheaper to re-sod each year than replace an artificial field every five years.)

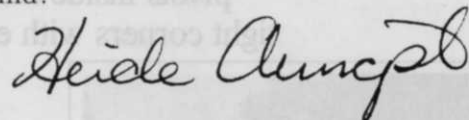
But the biggest consideration of the Stadium Corp. is the facility's management. One professional turf manager is needed to care for the field and coordinate events.

Wightman will attest that rock concerts can be held during the sports season with minimal damage to the turf. Turf can be covered for five days. Shows could go on during the sports season, and, if the turf is removed every winter, the stadium could function as a multi-purpose convention center.

But managing good turf while juggling a variety of events takes a turf professional. Hiring the right person is the key.

Toronto is expected to release its decision this month. I hope the city is gutsy enough to go with grass. But even if they don't, they've opened up dialogue between cities, architects and turf scientists.

Are you listening Chicago and Cleveland?



Heide Augst, associate editor

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