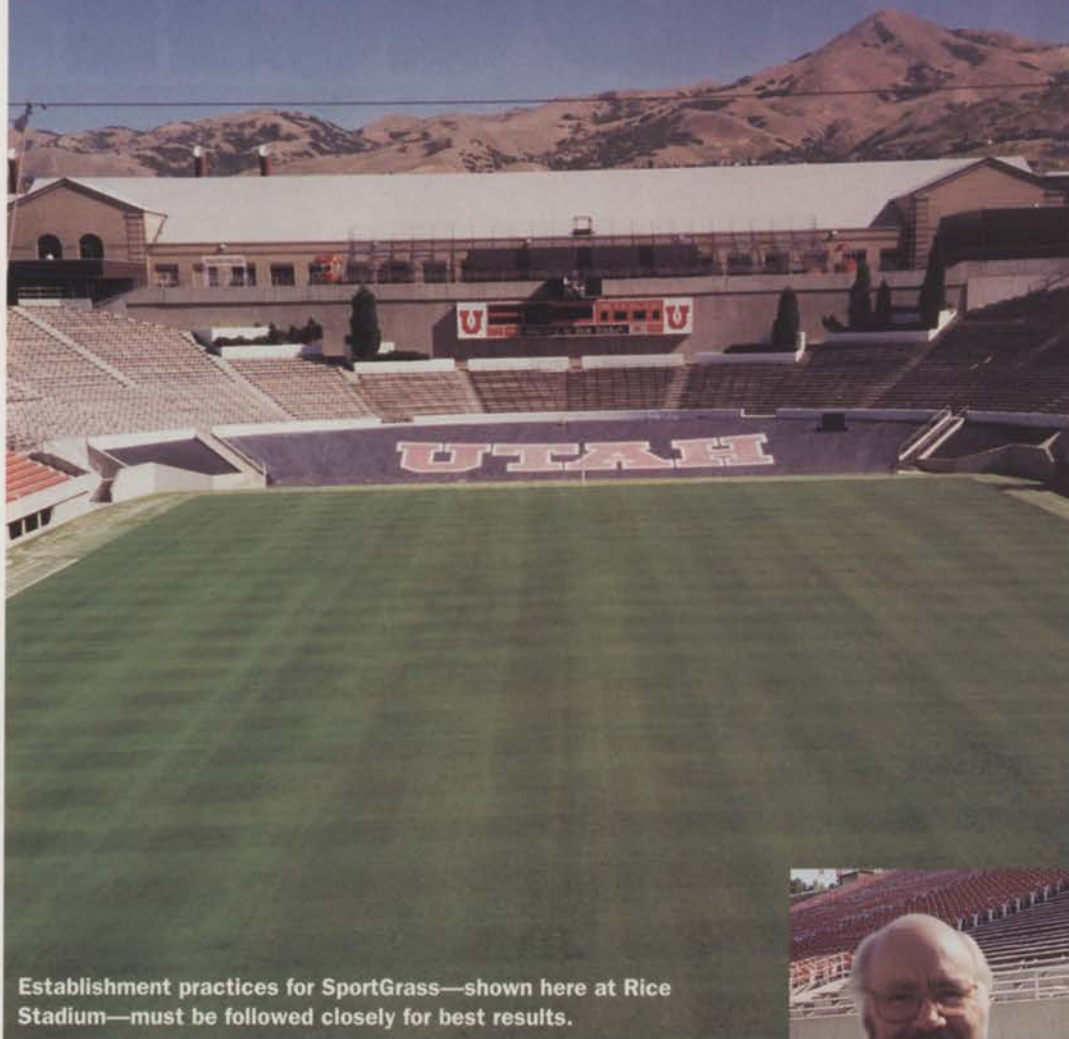


Natural, synthetic turf joined for divot-free playing surface



Establishment practices for SportGrass—shown here at Rice Stadium—must be followed closely for best results.

SportGrass is possibly the next step beyond total artificial or all natural turf fields. It gets a passing grade in Utah's Rice Stadium.

by Terry McIver
Managing Editor

Proponents from both the artificial and natural turf camps will be thrilled with the latest ally in athletic turf surfaces: SportGrass.

The invention of sport field expert Jerry

Bergevin, president of Turf Systems International, SportGrass consists of natural grass grown into a synthetic matting. Grass grows down through the synthetic backing and in-between fibrulated synthetic strands, which protect the crown and roots of the plant.

The result is a surface with the playability of natural grass and the wear resistance and durability characteristics of synthetic turf. The natural turf cushions the impact of sports activity, and the artificial turf and matting below act as an anchor to reduce—if not eliminate—divots.

SportGrass is available as sod, or it can

be established on site, as it was late this past summer at the University of Utah's Rice Stadium, the first major SportGrass installation in the U.S.

Brian Nelson, director of buildings and grounds at the university, says the field has held up "extremely well" after practices and two full games. A pregerminated ryegrass mix was used to fill in minimal wear areas—which the company says should be expected—but Nelson reports there were "no divots whatsoever."

SportGrass needs five to six weeks to establish, after which the grass has grown above the height of the plastic blades, and the roots have formed a mass of interconnecting fibers in the soil.

Synthetic secret—

The key to field stability seems to lie in the type of synthetic material used. SportGrass uses Desso DLW synthetic turf, manufactured by Desso DLW



Bergevin, left, and Eric Chapman, turf nutrition expert who consulted on Utah SportGrass project.

Sports Systems, Int., headquartered in Germany.

"SportGrass is basically the same material as a sand-filled synthetic turf. All we've done is modify the material," says Bergevin. The artificial turf is made out of polyethylene, which is softer than polypropylene or nylon, and has a more

grass-like feeling.

"The fiber is thicker," says Bergevin, "and I don't allow them to use the secondary latex backing because that makes it impervious (to air and water and gas exchange)."

"SportGrass is stabilized horizontally and vertically, which is very important," says Gundolf Becker, U.S. marketing manager for Desso DLW.

"SportGrass is stabilized horizontally



UCLA's David Ashman: likes the 'instant playability' of SportGrass.

by the backing," explains Becker, "to distribute the load. Vertically, it's stabilized by the fibers."

Bergevin says SportGrass fields are compatible with a Prescription Athletic Turf system or any other viable field construction, provided there is good drainage.

Short growing season—Bergevin realizes that playing on a newly established field is not always the best treatment for tender young seedlings.

"Generally," he admits, "you like to have a full growing season. But it will survive fine as long as they don't play on it too much. The second season it will be great."

In addition to regular watering, SportGrass control product applications can be made as with standard turf fields.

"We're still doing a lot of testing," says SportGrass Marketing Manager Donny Jones, who adds that he's had inquiries on how SportGrass can be used at golf driving ranges and in tee boxes. "It's working well in high traffic, walk-off areas" on test golf areas, says Jones.

"We're almost there for tees, but the main focus is ball fields."

Natural grass the choice of the pros

■ Maybe now the proponents of artificial turf will listen.

A recent survey by the NFL Players Association of professional football players revealed something many turf managers already knew: players don't like artificial turf.

Survey results, released earlier this year, say 85 percent of the 965 players who answered prefer to play on natural grass. Seven percent preferred artificial turf and eight percent had no preference.

And come contract time, 70 percent said that the home field surface was either very important or somewhat important in selecting the teams they would consider signing with as free agents.

The three stadiums most preferred by the players: Tampa Stadium, Joe Robbie Stadium and Sun Devil Stadium in

Tempe, Ariz.

The three least preferred playing surfaces are found in Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia's Veterans Stadium, and Riverfront Stadium, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Other results of the survey:

- 93 percent of NFL players believe artificial turf is more likely to contribute to an injury than a natural grass field.

- 96 percent believe artificial turf causes more soreness.

- 91 percent believe artificial turf is more likely to shorten their careers.

- 90 percent believe artificial turf is more likely to worsen their quality of life after football.

- 54 percent identified an artificial turf injury they suffered that they believe would not have happened on grass.

Sodded variety—Three thousand square feet of SportGrass sod were recently installed at a UCLA practice field. Dave Ashman, facilities director, is most impressed with SportGrass's "instant playability."

"The sodded material gave us such an advantage because you didn't have to wait to get on it," says Ashman. "It gives the team a competitive advantage and gives them a safe environment. It may not be the final answer, but it's very close."

Bergevin cautions against thinking of SportGrass as a "perfect" natural turf, but he says it still is subject to the pests which plague normal turf, but without the problem of root-feeding insects.

"It's still 100 percent natural turf," reminds Bergevin, but he adds that he doubts pest problems will appear in the same degree of severity as they can on a field that does not have the artificial underbelly.

Air conditioned—An added feature of the Rice Stadium field is the SubAir cooling system. Developed by Augusta National superintendent Marsh Benson, SubAir picks up cooler air from the tunnels below the stands and blows it through the sub-surface drainage system to oxygenate and cool the turf.

Eric Chapman specializes in nutrient movement through sand-based profiles.

He's consulted with Bergevin during the Utah SportGrass establishment phase, and gives the field high marks.

"There would never be a need to aerify if you maintain an aggressive verticutting and thatch control program via nutrition, catching clippings and irrigation," says Chapman.

Verticutting is advised at the rate of four to six times a year.

"There may be some management changes in water use because the mat actually provides a barrier against evaporation," suggests Chapman. "It may be that this field uses less water in the long run because of that barrier to evaporation."

Early fertility program—Chapman explains that during establishment a granular fertilizer was used, one that contained a bit more soluble nitrogen rather than than a full-blown slow-release product.

"It's a young field," reminds Chapman, "and in sand-based situations, the microbial activity needed for breakdown of slow-release materials isn't there yet. So we're using more of quick-release fertilizer for now. They'll be able to use a blend of nitrogen that has more slow-release as the field ages."

Optimum playing height for SportGrass is one-and-a-half inches.