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TIME

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Getting Turf Conscious

Goodbye to old sod: stadiums are switching to a new synthetic grass that's both tough and tender

By PERRY BACON

The varsity football team at Claremont High School had not played a real home game for 50 years. The grass field at the school, 30 miles east of Los Angeles, was always in terrible shape, trampled by exercise classes, marching bands and other sports teams. So the football team played its "home" games on the field of another school in town. All the while, Claremont High spent as much as \$20,000 a year maintaining its own sorry turf.

Claremont's dilemma is one familiar to sports teams from the New York Giants to the Tennessee Titans, which this season have repeatedly had to stumble and slide through games on muddy, ripped-up turf. But Claremont found a solution, and it's likely to become a home-field advantage for many other teams too.

When the school received extra money for playing fields last summer, it decided to try an artificial turf, even though it would cost more than \$700,000. The new surface is not classic AstroTurf, which many players consider hard and abrasive, but a softer, shaggier material called FieldTurf, made of sand, recycled rubber sneakers and blades of grass fashioned from synthetic fiber. Pleased with the feel and durability of its new field, Claremont High this season was host to its first home football games in a half-century.

Though FieldTurf and similar new surfaces have been around for several years, they are finally taking off, driven by growing acceptance among serious athletes and a rise in sports participation by kids of baby boomers. Almost 200 synthetic fields will be laid in the U.S. alone this year, compared with fewer than 50 in 1999. Public schools and parks in Europe and the U.S. now use the new synthetic surface, as do top European soccer teams such as Britain's Manchester United. The Motor City Bowl in Detroit and the Seattle Bowl were played on the synthetic grass this year, and at least 20 colleges have made the switch. Four NFL stadiums — in Dallas, Detroit, Philadelphia and Seattle — use synthetic grass, and several others, including Giants Stadium, outside New York City, are considering it. "You don't even have to try hard to sell it," says Joe DiGeronimo, a turf consultant based in Sturbridge, Mass.

More than 20 U.S. companies are competing for synthetic-turf contracts, in contrast to only a few three years ago. They are seeking to build new fields abroad, while foreign firms, such as Australia's Balsam Pacific and Germany's Tarkett Sommer, are coming to the U.S.

Although pro stadiums receive more attention, the real volume is in recreational fields. With more girls as well as boys playing sports year-round starting as early as age 4, and with little convenient land where new fields can be built, cities and schools must get more use from the fields they have, and they get it from artificial turf.

Despite initial installation costs usually upwards of \$400,000 for a synthetic-grass field, compared with \$150,000 for grass, the increased usage and much reduced maintenance costs can make the switch a bargain. And teams that have the new synthetic grass say it's safer than real grass, which can become dangerously uneven if it's overused. Steve Lowe, groundkeeper for the Claremont School District, says players have had many fewer injuries on the synthetic field.

expertise?

For more than two decades, AstroTurf, essentially a nylon carpet attached to a 1/2-in. foam pad over concrete, dominated the synthetic-field market. But in 1999 FieldTurf, based in Montreal, began mass-producing a new surface whose composition better imitates the real thing, with more resistance to wear and tear. The longer, grasslike fibers give it a more natural look and feel, while the blend of sand and rubber particles that form its base are loosely packed around the blades of "grass," providing a softer cushion than real dirt.

*(not Synthetic)
Field*

FieldTurf has become so popular that other major companies, including Southwest, the producer of AstroTurf, have brought out similar products. Many of the new synthetic surfaces surround the grass blades with an all-rubber base, which, some companies say, makes a field even softer than the sand-and-rubber mix of FieldTurf.

Even if the formula to make the synthetic grass changes, the result will probably be the same as at Claremont. After a season of football games, the field is being taken over by the soccer team, whose players are giving it rave reviews. "Usually by mid-November my football field would be bare," Lowe says. "But this year it has held up tremendously."