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## North Andover athletes deserve the real thing

*By Mike Fisher / The way I see it*

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And on the eighth day, God created the beautiful game - soccer. And on the ninth day, God created the surface it should be played on - grass, and he said: "It is perfect." And then, a few years later (1966 A.D.), man (a groundskeeper at the Houston Astro-Dome, to be specific) created Astro-Turf, and he said: "It is good enough."

God was nonplused, to be sure. And so was I.

In my mind, that was a dark day for all sports, but especially for soccer, where the playing surface is such a crucial part of the game; it was blasphemy.

Now, I know that there have been many advances in turf surfaces since that medieval time when the rough stuff cooked like an egg in the sun, turned into a duck's back in the rain, burned the skin like sand-paper when slid upon, and caused countless and even unprecedented injuries, but there is simply no way to recreate the subtle sweetness of grass.

So, why do we try? Why do we want so badly to live in a synthetic world? Didn't anyone read Huxley in high school... college?

Suffice it to say, I am glad that our scientists have been hard at work, trying to create a playing surface for the poor deprived youth of the world who live in places where there is not enough rain to grow cacti and the sun scorches the earth year-long (like Houston), or in the cities, where field space is the hottest commodity next to Dunkin-Donuts stores, and the overused surface must be availed for every recreational activity under the sun (like Boston). But, this is North Andover. We've got the rain, and we've certainly got the space. Why do we want turf?

Are we simply closing our eyes to the negative aspects of turf because 'it's better than it used to be,' or because we want to save a buck? All in all, the long-term savings afforded by turf are marginal, and, the kids are the ones who will lose out for our parsimoniousness. (A college education goes a long way.)

For the reader who has never experienced this artificial playing surface, I will try to describe what's not to like about it based on my experience.

Okay, here, let's try out this new surface together. 'Hey,' you say. 'It's bouncy, I like it.' 'Yeah, I say. If it was a trampoline I would too.' The reason it feels like you are running on rubber is because you are. There are the

rubber pellets packed under the woven, grass-like surface. It bounces. Grass, if my memory serves me, does not. Grass 'gives.' The experience is totally different. And, sure, the rubbery pellets make the surface easier softer to fall on, but thousands of these rubber pellets spray out of the turf whenever it is ruffled or scuffed. That can't be good. And the synthetic fabric that makes up the grass is covered with oil to prevent burns. Is that environmentally safe? Is it healthy?

All right, let's kick a soccer ball around a bit, to see how it plays. 'Hey!' you announce, 'the ball is covered with rubber pellets.' 'Yeah,' I say, 'try playing a game on this stuff.'

I never have played on it, but I have coached on it. During a league match up last year between Bishop Fenwick, where I was assistant varsity coach for two years, and Arlington Catholic, played at the brand new Arlington Catholic synthetic turf field, my goalkeeper complained at half-time of "choking" on the pellets and getting them in his eyes when he dove to make a save. Other players had similar grievances. 'Hang in there, guys,' is all I could tell them. They did, and we won.

I couldn't help wonder what that surface will be like in five years after countless thousands of those pellets have been washed down the drains of players they stick to. Will it be flat, like a tire? The pellets are, after all, made from the rubber of old tires.

In all fairness, I had one player say he "loved" the turf surface. When I asked him why, I found that he preferred the turf to some of the abysmal fields we had played on at other schools in the league. The field at Trinity Catholic, in Newton, for example, is more like a mine-field of ruts and rocks than it is like a grass soccer-field. For those schools, sure, a synthetic surface would be better than what they have, both for their players and for visiting teams. But they could also choose to put in a new grass field. And what about the groundskeepers who will be out of jobs all over the country if this stuff gets popular. Aren't we struggling to keep Americans in jobs?

All right, maybe that's off the point, but let's face it, proponents of the turf surface know perfectly-well it's not as good as grass. They'll argue until they are artificially blue in the face that it is, but there's a word for that. It's called: rationalization. Lou Minicucci, I'm looking at you.

At Bishop Fenwick, the players are proud of their fields. I remember seeing players, in the middle of a game, stopping to replace divots on rainy days.

At the risk of sounding maudlin, I will say there is also something 'spiritual' about grass that players whose home field is synthetic turf will be deprived of. And anyway, I like grass. I like to lay on it's cool surface, after practicing, and stare up into the great blue sky. I like to get itchy from laying on it without a shirt. I like the smell when it is cut, and sliding on it in the rain. How about in North Andover, we just take the next step and build a giant dome over the field with a perfect artificial plasma screen cerulean sky? Mmmm... Huxley comes to mind. Anyone?

But in all seriousness, it seems to me a shame, that the town of North Andover, which has such a great soccer program and supports the sport so avidly as a community, would settle for anything less than the real thing for its young athletes.

At the end of the day, no matter how far the technology has come, the intimacies of the natural grass surface can never be replicated, but only roughly imitated.

The way I see it, it's just not the same.

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