

## High Cost to Play

### INTRO

**Q:** How many of you either played on or have seen a synthetic playing surface? You may have experienced the surface at a high school, on TV, or along the Olentangy at Ohio Stadium. Other names for synthetic surfaces may also include artificial turf, FieldTurf or AstroTurf (the latter two being actual companies that are synonymous with synthetic turf).

**A:** Okay. So almost everyone has been exposed to a synthetic playing surface in some way. That's very important to keep in mind during the length of this presentation, because I'm going to tell you the truth behind synthetic playing surfaces that many never see.

I have ample experience in the athletic field industry. My father owned a small turf company the entirety of my life and applied golf course maintenance tactics to athletic playing surfaces. He started with two fields, and as my brothers and I grew older and became able to drive, he expanded the business to seven school districts that includes 15 playing surfaces. While the business may be continuing to reach new heights, it doesn't come without its own set of challenges.

Today, biggest challenge my father's small business and hundreds of others across the country face is the rise of artificial turf. Companies such as FieldTurf, AstroTurf, SporTurf and GrassTex have taken over the industry for the past 20+ years. They have pitched to towns and teams of all sizes that buying their product will significantly increase their field's playing ability and provide safety to their athletes. They have told high schools that purchasing a synthetic surface will be a great opportunity to sell more tickets. They have convinced coaches that fields can take any number of practices and games for upwards of 10 years. They have argued to athletes, both amateur and professional, at home and abroad, that playing on a synthetic surface will make them faster and make them safer. They have sold to all potential buyers that their fields will be more cost-effective and game-ready than natural grass.

In reality, these companies have crippled school budgets and lied repeatedly about surface temperatures. They've refused to acknowledge the dangers their fields present. Collectively, all these companies have left a trail of lies school districts such as yourselves deserve an explanation for. Today, I'll do the explaining for them.

### COST-ANALYSIS

The conversations with school boards usually revolves around one thing: money. Presenting unbiased cost-analyses to school boards is difficult because of the monetary influence companies have on research. FieldTurf—the largest of the synthetic surfaces—portrays their numbers based on “hours of usage” or each individual asset required rather than the overall price tag. According to a study on their website (“Cost-Analysis”), Field Turf claims their fields can be used for 10 years or 29,920 hours at an hourly rate of \$25.07/hour. Afterwards, they claim that over the same period of 10 years, a natural surface can only be used for 6,250 hours at an hourly rate of \$91.20/per hour (Figures based on 80,000 square foot fields and average costs and usage rates across North America). FieldTurf provides zero sources for such an important claim; this can be countered by collegiate and non-biased studies performed throughout the country.

The figures used by FieldTurf are from professional grade fields rather than a high school or community grade that most of the 12,000+ surfaces in our country utilize.

One source that refutes these claims was used in an article by forbes.com (Ozanian, 2014). The two men behind the research are David Millar of Red Hen Turf Farm, New Carlisle, Indiana and Aaron Loan of Blue Grass Enterprises, Cedar Rapids, Iowa (Millar and Loan). Millar and Loan are:

Turfgrass producers who independently explored installing artificial turf as an additional division to their turfgrass production. After a lengthy investigation period, both decided not to install artificial turf because they concluded that artificial turf is not an economical alternative to natural grass in most school and city situations.

Within their report, they provide data more accurately known to myself and others. They conclude that when comparing both surfaces over a one year period, synthetic surfaces will cost \$109,000/year compared to its natural opponent at approximately \$36,000/year (Millar and Loan). When comparing Millar and Loan's findings to statements made by FieldTurf, we begin to see a staggering difference in opinion. FieldTurf proposes their surfaces cost approximately \$75,000/year compared to a natural surface that will cost \$90,000/year ("Cost-Analysis"). How can these two prices be so different? The synthetic industry is not afraid to stretch the truth and manipulate their statistics.

Not only do the multi-billion dollar synthetic companies lie; they don't tell the whole story. They claim their fields are more cost-effective by asserting that a grass surface needs re-sodded once/year; even if not re-sodded, it must be replaced every 6-8 years ("Cost-Analysis"). This proposition—even in cooler climates—is completely fabricated. In my own experience, we have never re-sodded a field and hosted close to 100 events on one field within a three-month period. My father has killed and reseeded several fields, but that was at the request of school districts to install the most effective grass for the climate, Kentucky Blue Grass. My alma mater has been our longest client and never once been re-sodded after 12 years of service. With the proper drainage, irrigation and weekly and monthly maintenance plan, we have easily saved several school districts approximately \$80,000/year.

The high cost of a synthetic surface is found through several different variations not initially expressed by the companies. For starters, the synthetic industry claims their fields last 8-10 years; recent surveys and observations convey that actual number is almost always closer to 8. Ohio Stadium is one such example of this statistic, lasting seven seasons from 2007-2013 ("Ohio Stadium FieldTurf Upgrade," 2014). Installing a typical football field will cost approximately \$1,000,000 for the initial installation, and cost another \$500,000 when it needs replaced (Wolfson, 2015). On top of these two costs, the field will require another \$22,760 to maintain yearly; these costs include crumb-rubber grooming, disinfectant and repairs, among others ("Natural Grass Fields"). Altogether, with the initial costs and next however many fields to be built, the costs come out to \$147,760/year for the first carpet and at least \$64,426/year for each carpet thereafter.

On the flip side of these costs, "North Scott Community School District [estimates their] sand based soccer field costs \$20,378.49 per year to maintain" ("Natural Grass Fields"). Sand based, capped surfaces are more expensive than a typical soil surface to install but still less expensive overall than a synthetic surface. Installing a good base needed for a high school

stadium will cost around \$150,000 (\$350,000 for pro quality) to give an eight-year annual price of \$39,128 (“Cost Analysis”). Millar and Loan estimate “natural grass is about \$70,000 cheaper per year than artificial grass. Installing natural grass instead of artificial turf can save the school an excess of \$1,460,000 over 20 years,” and conclude, “[this is] money that could be spent on other projects or programs” (Millar and Loan, 8).

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This concludes the cost-analysis portion of the speech. Afterwards, there are arguments involving temperature, injury risk and potential correlation to cancer.

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## **CONCLUSION**

An artificial surface can be convenient in some scenarios—there is no disputing that. Artificial surfaces also have not been officially proven to cause more injury, though there is much more to be studied and combined before conclusion. I can tell you, from every root of my knowledge and reporting that I have done today, that athletes significantly prefer real grass over synthetic. In fact, 82% of NFL players not only prefer natural grass over synthetic but also believe the synthetic surfaces cause more injuries (Egan, 2015). I’ve experienced the preference of natural grass first-hand as dozens of athletes, officials and coaches have shaken my hand to complement our family business on a job well done. We have won almost 20 awards for our fields and relentlessly proven that it is possible for real grass to do more. There is more than mowing or seeding, no doubt, but if you take the opportunity to educate yourselves on the truth behind natural grass you will find there is no question it is the less controversial and safe way to go. Even if you have the money, there are no solutions to the injury, heat and cancer concerns, so why not take the easy and traditional route? Why not go for real grass? Our community wants to raise healthy and successful children to help lead the next generation, and natural grass is the best way to ensure that. Natural grass prevents economic woes, eases health concerns, and eliminates the risks of the high cost to play.