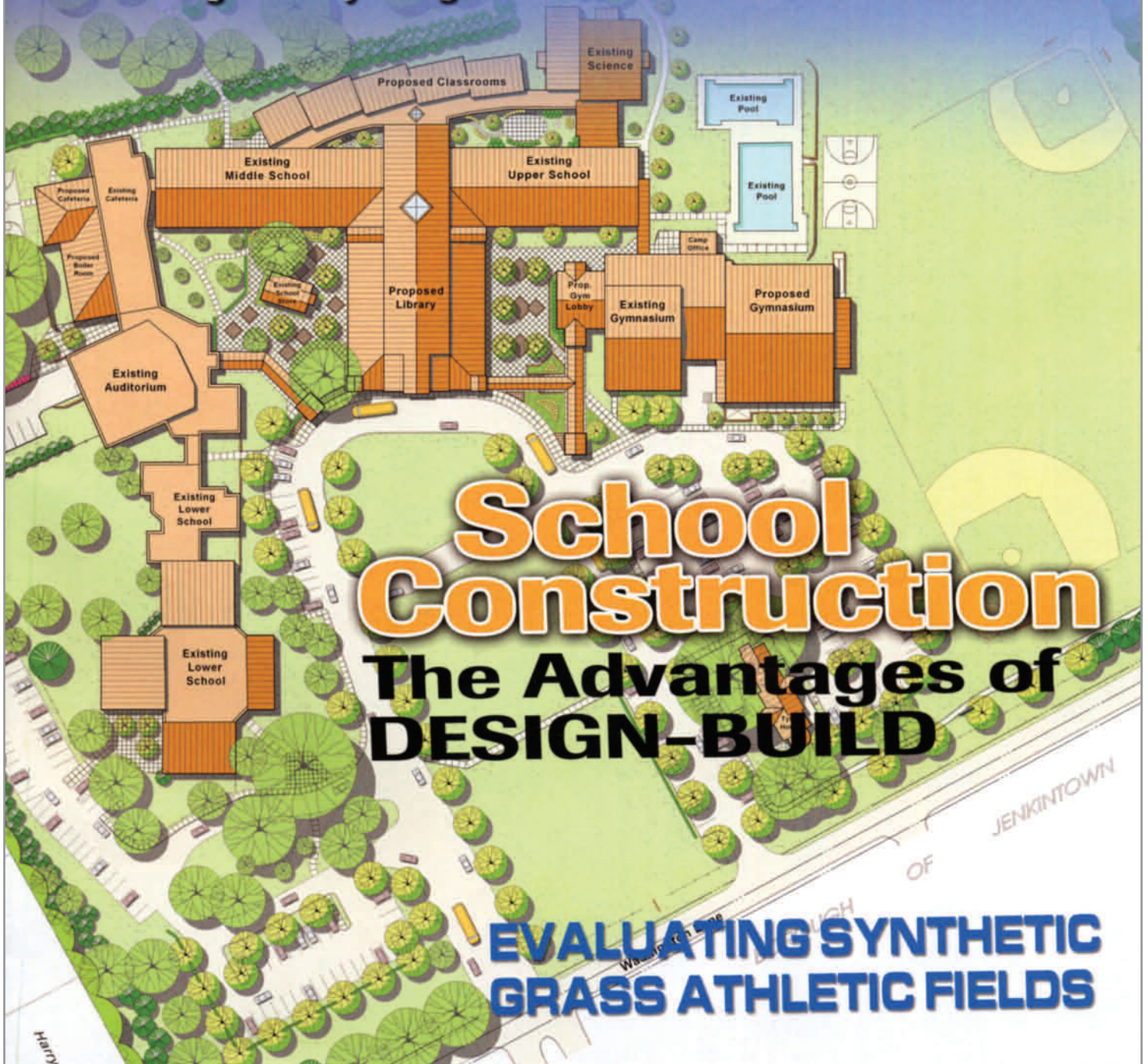


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**EVALUATING SYNTHETIC
GRASS ATHLETIC FIELDS**



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EVALUATING SYNTHETIC GRASS Athletic Fields

By Brian Karmie

Grass is great, but it has its limits. While the smell of fresh-cut natural grass can trigger nostalgic memories of Friday night football games from our youth, most of us have experienced the high maintenance, limited use, and inconsistent performance that come with natural grass fields.

Many have witnessed the more than occasional mud-bowl (or dust-bowl – depending on your region) that a field becomes when overused, but the demand

for field time isn't slowing down; it is growing.

In today's demanding sports world, natural grass often isn't a practical option. Even many professional-level stadiums with nearly unlimited maintenance resources have opted for the new generation of synthetic grass. Schools with football, soccer, lacrosse, band, phys. ed., and a host of community activities all vying for that precious sports field use are finding value in a synthetic grass surface that provides 24/7 access and playability in all weather conditions.

While synthetic grass isn't perfect, it has come a long way since the early carpet-style products. About a decade ago, the first infilled turf products hit the market, changing the paradigm of artificial turf. Since then, synthetic grass products have continued to develop in both performance and appearance to the point that some have now even won over the most discriminating residential and commercial landscape customers.

In addition to the nearly unlimited use, a good synthetic grass field provides a consistent surface that always looks pristine. These fields, requiring minimal maintenance and water, can greatly reduce the ongoing operational costs, since no bare spots will develop and no reseeding or patching with sod is necessary. In fact, you can even eliminate the time and cost of lining a field with paint if you decide to inlay your sports field lines into your synthetic field.

It is estimated that one synthetic field can replace up to three natural turf fields and will last from 8 to 12 years before needing to be replaced. Given these calculations, the cost



A synthetic grass field can provide more usage time, better and more consistent performance, and lower maintenance.

per event on a synthetic field is almost always less than a natural grass field.

Recently, questions about the health and environmental impact of synthetic turf fields have been raised. These questions are good in that they have given the synthetic turf industry an opportunity to share the overwhelming evidence demonstrating that synthetic grass is safe and effective for users of all ages. For a detailed discussion on this matter, you can visit the industry trade association at www.syntheticurfscouncil.org.

So, what now? How do you fund a field construction project? How do you choose a turf and a vendor? What about life after the installation? These questions and more are often raised when considering a field project.

FUNDING THE FIELD

The funding of a field can be handled in a variety of ways. Depending on your school's current budget and situation, simply reallocating money that will be spent on upkeep and maintenance of your natural field will often cover a majority of the project. However, this is often easier said than done since money that is budgeted annually for the next 10 years is quite different than money available for a construction project today.

Another method of funding becoming increasingly popular is through a private building committee and fundraising effort. When a community catches the vision of how a synthetic field will benefit the entire student body, it will energize contributors and volunteers alike. Additionally, the benefit of showing that this project is being conducted without straining the existing operating budget is a sign of good stewardship that many school supporters will appreciate.

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EVALUATING SYNTHETIC GRASS Athletic Fields

One final consideration on the financial aspect is the potential of turning your field into a revenue source. With the nearly unlimited use that a synthetic grass surface provides, the ability to rent the field out becomes a consideration that many never had with natural grass. The number of youth football organizations, soccer clubs, adult leagues, and more looking for a home

field continues to grow. A field that is playable in all weather conditions and provides a consistent playing surface is a great draw for these organizations.

CHOOSING A VENDOR

The actual construction of a synthetic field is not a minor undertaking. The options are vast and require thoughtful consideration.

From the grading and sub-base to the decisions on logos and inlaid lines, the choices can be quite confusing. One of the first major steps in this process is finding an artificial turf vendor and/or contractor.

First, consider that you aren't just choosing a turf; you are selecting a company that will be your partner. The company you select not only determines the type of turf you will be playing on for the next decade, there are other ramifications as well; from the initial construction through the field's life-cycle, you want a company that you are comfortable with and can trust.

As the synthetic turf industry has grown rapidly, there are many different company models out there. Some companies are construction focused and "custom-order" turf to meet any specification. While this may not seem like a problem at first, this lack of consistency of turfs can create some unpredictability with each new turf recipe. Other companies have a one-size-fits-all turf policy and try to "custom-fit" you to their one product. They have the benefit of knowing their product, but don't take the time to know you or your needs. The best scenario is to find a company that will evaluate your needs and match them with the right choice from their specific product offerings.

Another point of consideration when choosing a partner for your synthetic grass field is how they handle the installation process. Many companies today have sales forces with local presence in various markets, but then contract the installation out to generic turf installers who will work for a variety of turf companies. Few companies today actually handle both the sales and the hands-on installation of the turf, which is the ideal arrangement. Selecting a company with their own install crew ensures that your project will not only have a local point of contact, but that the crew working on the project will be working with a consistent product and will have a sense of ownership for the project.

DETERMINING TYPE OF TURF

Along with the company and installation, the type of turf needs to be determined.

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EVALUATING SYNTHETIC GRASS Athletic Fields



There are several features to evaluate on the turf products. With the new generation of turf products, the synthetic grass is made up of individual polyethylene or nylon fibers stitched into a backing material. The product is then infilled with granulated rubber, sand, or some combination of the two. This leaves us with three major aspects of the construction to consider: the grass blades, the backing, and the infill material. These components contribute to both the appearance and the performance of the product.

It is important to evaluate all three of these features. The grass blades, or "yarn," are the most obvious difference in synthetic products. Be sure to discuss the type of yarn used on each product and inquire why different blade constructions were chosen. The density of the blade stitching is also an important consideration. The denser blade structures will require less infill and often provide a more consistent surface, but may come with a higher price.

The backing of the product is often an



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overlooked consideration that can have major impacts on fields. This component is what holds the grass blades in place, and where the product will get much of its stability and durability. Unfortunately, it is also where many companies cut corners to save money.

The rubber and sand is used to infill the products providing support for the grass blades, adding resiliency to the turf, and offering a layer for more natural traction. While rubber provides more resiliency and is less abrasive, some products have thinner backing and require the sand as a ballast to weigh the product down. The first generation of infilled products had a small amount of blades filled with large amounts of infill. As these fields became more widely used, "infill flyout" became a term to describe the spray of infill that occurs during play. This flyout can get in players' eyes and clothing, and the migration of this infill requires that the field be groomed more often to ensure that the infill level stays consistent. Investing in a product with denser blade construction and minimal infill gives the added resiliency and traction layer without the flyout.

One way to get a true evaluation of these components is to request a sample of turf as it is cut off the roll. Installed fields and boxed samples are great to show what the turf will look like dressed up, but often make it difficult to truly see the makeup of the product. Evaluating the turf both as it comes from the plant and after it is installed will give you a better understanding of the differences and advantages of each offering.

All of these different variables sometimes make it difficult to compare apples to apples. During your selection process, take some time to do your homework. Evaluate the products and the companies, talk to references, and think long term. Determine whether quality or product cost is the primary driving force. If the project is going to be a bid process, set the project specifications, define the turf, and accurately represent features that are important to you. Once this is done, invite the companies that you feel comfortable with to bid on the project. Realize that sometimes a product that costs more upfront may be a better long-term value based on the quality of product,

installation, and the ongoing support.

A synthetic grass field can help you overcome many of the limits found in natural grass. It can provide more usage time, better and more consistent performance, and lower maintenance. Construction of a field is a major investment, and in order to maximize the benefit, it should be well thought out and investigated. Develop a committee

of stakeholders to evaluate the needs of your school and then investigate the various offerings. Take the time upfront, and your field will be a benefit to your school for years to come. **CSP**

Brian Karmie is with *ForeverLawn*, www.foreverlawn.com.

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