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~ Striving for Perfection ~

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Veteran users are spreading the word that artificial surfaces are one step closer to natural grass playability.

by Dave Morningstar

ARTIFICIAL PLAYING SURFACES have been around long enough to have developed a cadre of veteran users who are actively spreading the word on the benefits they've experienced firsthand. Jon Oliver, Executive Associate Athletics Director at the University of Virginia, is one of them.

"I came here from Washington State University," Oliver explains, "which was the second college program in the country to move from grass to an artificial playing surface. What I saw there parallels what the industry says about the safety and playability advantages of an artificial surface compared to grass, so there really wasn't much question in my mind as to which way to go with the three fields here in Charlottesville."

Versatile and Adaptable

Monofilament is a significant technological advance, according to FieldTurf Tarkett CEO John Gilman. "We believe it will change the industry as much as the original material did. For one thing, it will double the expected useful life of the installation because the individual fibers used in the mono surface are both stronger and more chemically uniform than those used in the traditional product. That means they wear more slowly and can be formulated to resist environmental agents, like ozone, which attack polymer materials."

"I stayed in touch with the people I'd worked with at Washington State," Oliver says, "and it was becoming clear that the surface there was approaching the end of its useful life. It was installed in 1998 and had seen a lot of use, not only from the football team but from many other activities, including the marching band. So the fact that it is showing signs of wear after eight years is not a surprise to anyone. I also stayed in touch with the people at FieldTurf, so I knew they had introduced a new monofilament product to the market recently. We talked it over and worked out an arrangement that made it possible for us to use the product on our fields instead of the traditional surface we had initially selected."

Filament Technology Two Steps Ahead

Oliver and his staff visited the monofilament installation at the University of North Carolina and spent a lot of time talking with the people there. "In the end, it was an easy decision," says Oliver.

"Mono is an important new product for us," explains FieldTurf Tarkett CEO John Gilman. "It's a breakthrough in technology every bit as important as the original surface was. Mono is the result of a lot of hard work in collaboration with our material suppliers to develop a product and a process that significantly improves the properties of the playing surface".

The shape of the DuraSpine Monofilament fiber is based on similar structures found in nature. The arched profile features a durable "spine" which runs vertically through the center of each fiber. DuraSpine is extruded through a spinneret, and as a "true" monofilament fiber - not a flimsy slit tape like competing systems.

The yarn is also much stronger than the tape filaments. "So the surface will last longer, all things being equal," says Gilman. "We anticipate that a FieldTurf mono surface will have a useful life longer than the 10 years we expect from a tape filament surface".

"We have also developed a patented process that causes some of the filaments in the mono surface to lay over while others stand straight up," explained Gilman. This helps keep the infill material in place much better than the first generation materials. Even the 'splash' from a bouncing soccer ball is completely encapsulated on a FieldTurf Duofilament field."

This unique fiber system is the latest in fiber technology. The FieldTurf Duofilament system features a "bundle" of eight true monofilament fibers, each fiber extruded through a spinneret. The eight fibers are tufted together into the backing. Four of the fibers are an extrusion that is more than twice the thickness of standard monofilament fibers. This delivers unmatched durability while the triangular profile of each fiber provides "fiber memory" to help prevent matting. The other four fibers are softer and are produced through a flatter, rectangular extrusion to provide a soft and lush playing surface. These softer fibers lay over to encapsulate the infill and reduce "splash."

Gilman explains that the big problem with tape surfaces is that the properties of the polymers tend to vary from one part of the sheet to another, so the tape is inconsistent. "You can't, for example, add ozone-resistant chemicals to the extrusion feedstock and get a uniform distribution over the entire playing surface made from the resulting tape," he says. "FieldTurf mono is made from single strands of polymer which are completely uniform in both physical and chemical properties."

As always, FieldTurf is steps ahead of the competition with regards to safety, playability, aesthetics, and research and development.

Keeping Up Appearances

The overall trend toward artificial playing surfaces is still headed strongly up as both users and purchasing authorities experience the benefits they offer.

"Actually, one of the biggest challenges we face is persuading our customers to schedule their installations at times of the year other than summer," Gilman notes. "The playing surface is usable year-round; that's one of the major reasons for using it, but the order and installation cycle is heavily weighted toward the summer months. I suspect it's a holdover from the days when they were installing and maintaining grass, but it creates a huge bottleneck for our installers and sometimes leads to disappointed customers. There just isn't time to install everything from June to September, and there really isn't any need to, either."

Jon Oliver isn't concerned with that, though. He is busy making sure that his maintenance crews understand what's required to keep the university's new practice fields in like-new condition.

"Even the maintenance required of a mono surface is grass-like; you just don't have to do nearly as much of it, and it never turns to mud."

