

Artificial turf

It has advantages — and disadvantages, too

By RICK STOLLE
Sports Reporter

NOTE: This is the first of a special two-part series.

At the snap of the ball, the defensive back bolted toward the line. Suddenly, he realized a pass would be completed if he didn't get back into position. He tried to cut and something gave way.

On the artificial turf, the pain hit. He tried to move his leg but painful spasms shot through his body. Charles Waters was down for the season and nobody had touched him.

Waters' injury in the 1979 exhibition season dealt a serious blow to the Dallas Cowboys' secondary. It is an example of a new type of injury: non-contact injuries, which are becoming more prevalent in American football today.

Non-contact injuries occur when a joint in the body cannot stand the pressure the body exerts on it in an extreme movement. Non-contact injuries can spell disaster not only for the athlete but for his team as well.

Artificial turf, with its great amount of traction, has been blamed as the cause of many of these injuries. Although no direct association has been proven, it is commonly believed that artificial turf is a major cause of non-contact injuries.

The injuries are unfortunate, but can they be avoided?

As more high schools and colleges are using artificial turf, the questions about artificial turf's safety become more important. Does artificial turf

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In 1979, more athletes played on artificial turf than ever before. An ever rising number of high schools are going to artificial turf. Many colleges now have artificial turf stadiums to practice and play on. It is impossible for a college team to go through an entire season without being exposed to artificial turf: at least one team in each conference has it. Fifteen of the 28 professional football teams play on artificial turf at their home fields.

Artificial turf has not eliminated injuries from sports, it has just changed the type, said Billy Pickard, Texas A&M University head trainer. Pickard said the only actual way to prevent injuries in football would be to stop playing.

The problem came with the promises made by the artificial turf manu-

facturers, he said.

"When it was first marketed, the companies promised it would eliminate serious knee and ankle injuries from the game," he said.

In 1968, the Monsanto Company, which produces Astroturf, made a survey of football knee and ankle injuries for the 1967 season. The survey reported that 80 percent of turf-related knee and ankle injuries would have been avoided if Astroturf had been used. In 1967, only three fields in the nation had Astroturf; the Astrodome in Houston, Seattle Municipal Stadium and Indiana State University's field.

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serious knee and ankle injuries in football. It said, "there were approximately six natural turf injuries to each Astroturf injury."

To many of the trainers and coaches around the nation, this statement looked like a saving grace. Now, they don't make the same claim, Pickard said. The manufacturers now say artificial turf will simply reduce the amount of injuries.

"But it's not the turf that causes the injuries," said David Heath, assistant trainer for Texas A&M. "It's the contact on that surface."

A solid hit can do more damage than getting hit by a car at the same speed, he said. The players are so big and fast, they can easily hurt themselves and their opponents by their momentum at contact, he said.

"The force is channeled to so small an area on the helmet that it actually can do a great deal of damage."

So far in the 1980 spring training season, three football players have gone down with knee injuries requiring surgery.

"All the injuries were due to contact," said Pickard.

The contact, momentum and rules of the game are such that injuries are expected occurrences, he said.

Nobody likes to see an athlete go down with an injury, he said. "There can be too much traction on the surface and the athlete will get hurt."

Pickard used the example of Waters as a prime case. "He got too much traction and when he tried to cut, his foot wouldn't give and his knee couldn't take the pressure."

Pickard said traction is so important, the shoe becomes a vital con-

cern to any football team.

"We feel there are some shoes on the market that give too much traction and we prefer not to use them."

The Texas A&M football team uses a multi-cleated shoe that costs \$50 a pair. Pickard said it gives the support and traction needed but will give.

"It is expensive, but we feel that it is safer for the athletes," he said.

Pickard said he also prefers new shoes because of an experiment he tried in the spring last year. He gave all the players older shoes to practice on and got a surprising result. The older shoes had a greater susceptibility to great toe sprains. He said, like turf, the more wear a product gets, the more problems are associated with it.

A report by the National Athletic Injury Reporting Service (NAIRS) came to a similar conclusion.

In the report to the U.S. Consumer Safety Product Commission, it showed a relation to the age of a surface and the amount of injuries on it. There were increasing numbers of injuries as the surface aged. This is due to the fact that the wear on the surface tends to break the padding down and mat the fibers to the surface.

According to the report, in 1976, there were 13 cases of significant knee sprains on old Tartanturf to one case on the new. A significant injury will keep the athlete out of competition for up to seven days. There were 20 significant ankle sprains on old Astroturf to 10 for new in 1977. And again in 1976, there were 17 significant ankle sprains on old Tartanturf to zero for the new.

This produced an injury rate on old Tartanturf of 8.9 for 1,000 athlete-exposures in 1976. For example, of a 100-member football team, approximately nine ankle sprains could be expected in 10 practices on the turf.

The data in the report come from approximately 150 high schools and colleges from around the nation. The

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report studied a three-year period (1975-1977), but the study is continuing. The study compared two artificial surfaces (Astroturf and Tartanturf) to natural grass.

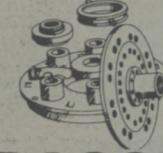
In the study years, 59 percent of the games were played on natural turf, 30 percent on Astroturf and 11 percent on Tartanturf. The injury rates on the surfaces were very similar.

The study determined that of 100 college athletes participating in football, 97 could expect some type of

injury, minor or major, in 1975, 93 in 1976 and 92 in 1977. These injuries may or may not have been serious but they required some type of treatment. A college team had an average of two knee surgeries a season.

The report compared the two artificial turfs to natural counting the number of injuries on each. It broke injuries into four categories; significant, moderate, major and severe. After the seven days of a significant injury, moderate injuries kept the athlete out of competition for eight to 21 days. A major injury kept him out for more than 21 days and a severe injury permanently disabled the athlete. The report did say, however, that severe injuries were very rare.

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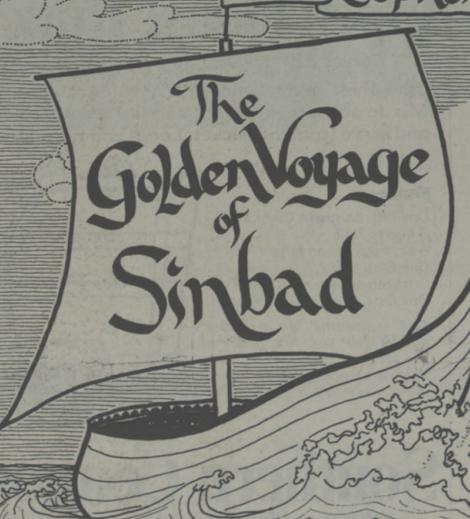
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