Just Another Milestone or the End of the Road? Check Your Field and Find Out

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Artificial turf has been in use for years, but it really became mainstream, with an increasing number of high schools, colleges and even municipal installations, within the last 15 years. And at the time, it felt like those fields would last forever.

But even those great fields, that stubbornly resist weeds, don’t need mowing and don’t depend on fertilizer and rain, will wear out. So of course, the question becomes how to find out whether your field is in need of replacement, or whether it just has normal wear and tear.

Knowing when problems are significant is a factor of knowing the field well. Field builders advise owners to walk the field on a regular basis and to keep an eye out for problems (or developing problems). After all, many issues, when caught early on, can be resolved more easily, and with less expense, than if they are left to worsen.
The first part of a walk-through should be a long view. Climb your bleachers and look down at the field. Do the playing lines look straight? Does the surface look flat? Do you see any irregularities in the turf?

Do the same exam from field level, walking the sidelines and looking across from various angles.

Next, irrigate the field. Check not only to see if the field is draining properly, but to see if sprinklers are all operational and to make sure they are spraying onto the field (as opposed to onto the track or onto adjacent structures.)

Walk the field itself. Check for high and low spots, and make sure there is a uniform feel under your feet. The field should not have hard spots, worn spots or loose seams. Look for signs of wear in high-stress areas (around soccer goals, around pitcher’s mounds or batter’s boxes, etc.)

Check the fence line and look for any sagging rails or sharp edges. (No, your fence is not part of your field but it is an important component of your facility, and it needs to be kept up, not just for aesthetics but for safety reasons.)

All fields come with a list of maintenance procedures recommended by the manufacturer. Keeping up with these is key. A phone call or e-mail with pictures of any area of concern can be handled quickly by the manufacturer’s rep or your field builder and can keep the field manager protected.

These are all part of a regular inspection, and if done on a routine basis, will provide a baseline for field managers to use in keeping tabs on field condition.

So knowing the importance of being vigilant, it is essential to be able to spot symptoms of a field that might need replacement in the not-too-distant future. Field builders say to look for certain signs:

A breakdown of the fibers: Excessive fiber deterioration, with what some field builders call a ‘hairing’ of the fibers is a red flag. Another clue will be an increasing amount of broken fibers clinging to your shoes and socks.

Hardening of the field: The surface will lose its springy feel.

Seam failure: Keep an eye out for this.

Test results: For those with access to testing equipment, the field’s g-max level won’t lie. As the level steadily rises, field managers should consult with the field builder to discuss.
While some physical symptoms can be remediated with regular maintenance, it is when they no longer respond to this treatment, and when safety becomes a prime concern, that fields need to be replaced. Resist the temptation to “get one more season” out of the facility, as the savings will not be worth the risk.

While the majority of fields installed in this country come with a specific year-term warranty, a facility’s longevity is dependent upon factors such as use, climate, maintenance and quality of the system components and installation.

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