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By Mary Helen Sprecher

The first generation of synthetic fields is nearing the end of its lifecycle. Which, of course, begs the question: How do you know when it’s time to consider a replacement?

Not that you want to. After all, this is the field that has seen you through countless practices, scrimmages, games and maybe even some playoff or championship action. It has drained well, performed well, held up and hasn't complained, even when it hosted multiple matches the same day.

But nothing lasts forever and that includes synthetic turf. And while there isn’t a hard and fast number for how long fields will last, eight to 12 years is probably average. In general, your field will start to let you know - sometimes subtly, sometimes less so, that it’s time for retirement.

While there’s plenty of excellent testing equipment on the market, field builders recommend that owners rely on their senses first. Regular inspections of the facility – which, by the way, should not be limited to the end of the surface life cycle, but should take place on a continuing basis – can help uncover problems, including those that should encourage owners to call a contractor in to evaluate the field. Here are a few of the telltale signs of a field that is approaching the end of its useful life.

**Worn areas:** Just as with natural grass fields, a synthetic turf venue will show wear in high-traffic areas. These might include the area around the crease, in the case of a lacrosse field, or around the goal in a soccer field. If there are places where team members generally stand on the sidelines, those areas are likely to show wear as well. And if you have a synthetic turf tennis court,
the baselines are likely to see most of the action and therefore, to be the first place you notice a worn-out look.

Though not the primary reason for replacement, the aesthetics of a field are often a good indicator of its wear and tear. Fans in the stands, for example, may criticize the color of the field. In reality, the field color has not changed, but the fibers are wearing down and more of the infill – usually black crumb rubber – is showing through, leading to a markedly less-than-green appearance.

One place wear is immediately seen is along seams. If you inspect your field and see seams that are separating, or lines that are tearing, you should have them repaired as they constitute a tripping hazard. A field builder can also be contacted if lines, markings or logos seem to be faded or worn. If the seams are irreparably damaged, replacement can’t be put off, since running athletes over such a field is dangerous.

**Loss of infill:** In addition to seeing wear on the fibers of the turf, the infill in high-traffic areas is likely to be displaced over time. Fields can lose as much as five percent or more of the fiber height each year depending on the amount and type of use they receive. As the fiber wears down, the infill needs to be removed.

**Hardness:** Just as with a natural field that receives a lot of use, a synthetic facility will become packed down and over time, loses its springy feeling. GMAX testing can provide a good ‘second opinion’ for field owners. An independent testing lab is the best place to turn for help in this regard, although your field builder can be an excellent resource in helping you locate the correct professional.

**What next?** The next step should be to contact the builder who installed the field, who can perform an assessment. It may be that a few fixes can yield a few more years of great performance. It might be, however, that a field replacement should be considered. If this is the case, note there are companies available who specialize in field removal, as well as in recycling various components.

**Recommended Reading:** The American Sports Builders Association publishes Sports Fields: A Construction and Maintenance Manual, which covers not only field design, surface selection, construction and more, but also removal, recycling, sustainability and related issues. Learn more about this publication, available in both hard copy and digital form, here.

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