Synthetic grass wins some true believers

By Andy Nesbitt
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Burlington and Lexington soccer players go head to head on Lexington's new synthetic grass field.

When a vicious late afternoon rainstorm passed through the region and dumped close to 2 inches of water in less than an hour two weeks ago, most high school sporting events scheduled for that day were canceled.

Yet while most athletic directors were scurrying around trying to plan makeup dates, Belmont athletic director Jim Davis was giving the clearance for both the girls JV and varsity soccer teams to go on with their games against Burlington.

"We were one of the only schools in the state to play soccer that day," Davis said. "The field did what it was supposed to do. There was some standing water on it at first, but the field drained the way it was designed to and it was in perfect condition."

The field Davis refers to is the new synthetic grass multipurpose field Belmont recently installed. Unlike the artificial turf used in the past that was basically a carpet laid over a slab of concrete, the new synthetic style combines a foundation of rubber and dirt that gives the surface the feel of a grass field while maintaining its origi-

games to be played under less than ideal weather conditions.

More important, the synthetic grass field plays like real grass, feels like real grass, and drains more efficiently than grass. In addition, because of the soft surface, players are less likely to get rug burns or suffer major knee injuries that were all too common with the old style of artificial turf.

Mainly for those reasons,

the price -- about $1.6 million for an average-size football field -- is a little steep.

"From a dollar cost perspective, the initial cost is a pretty hefty amount, but the average life expectancy of the field compared with a regular grass field and the maintenance of cutting the grass and lining the fields balances out in the end," Davis said. "That's one of the bigger selling points. Once it's down, it's operational and you

Belmont's field is little over a year old and cost about $1.4 million to install. Lexington just opened three new artificial fields this season with the cost totaling about $3.4 million.

"The big advantage is they are very durable," said Tony Porter, Lexington's athletic director. "You can play on them as much as you want and use any type of cleat that you would wear on regular grass."

Lexington and Belmont use the

teams using it on Sundays.

"We believe it will be cost-effective down the road because if you play on it X amount of years, it will pay off itself with the lining, fertilizing, and mowing of the grass fields no longer being an issue."

Not only does the new surface allow for different sports to be played on it without wear and tear, it also helps athletic directors eliminate the hassles of trying to reschedule events because of

fields in the fall for football, soccer, and field hockey. In the spring the two schools will use them for lacrosse.

The synthetic grass fields are catching on at both the collegiate and professional levels, too. Seventeen NFL teams use it, as do a number of big-time college football programs such as Nebraska.

Woburn is in the process of completing plans for the construction of a new high school. Included in the initial budget is money for a synthetic grass field.

Woburn athletic director Jim Duran said the main reason Woburn would like to install the new type of field is that overuse of the main field is eating up a lot of money in maintenance fees.

"We have a lot of teams using our [main] field," Duran said. "The girls and boys soccer teams use it. The varsity, JV, and freshman football teams all use it. And now we have six Pop Warner

weather.

"What it does is, barring any lightning or severe weather, we can play in any weather condition," Belmont's Davis said. "It allows us to stay with the schedule and not pack games on top of each other" because of postponements.

Davis learned of another benefit last spring, when the baseball and softball teams were able to practice on the synthetic surface while their fields were still covered with snow. The rubber base held the warmth of the sun, which melted the snow and made the field playable.

Davis said Belmont has a 10- to 15-year warranty on the field. Once that expires, the school will only need install a new carpet instead of redoing the whole project.

"I believe it's the wave of future," Davis said.

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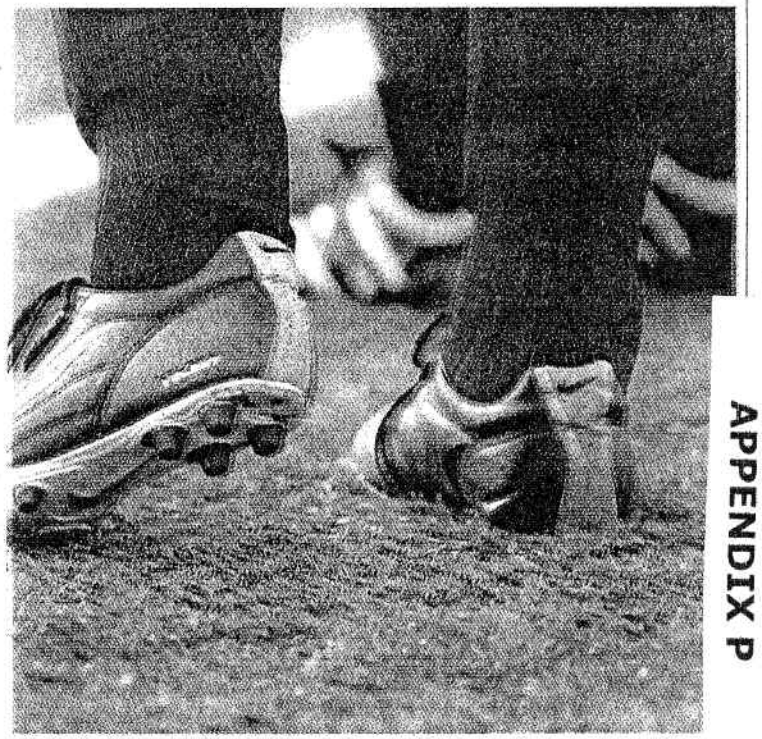

Any type of cleat that athletes would wear on grass is safe for the new synthetic grass surface, like this one in Lexington.

APPENDIX P