



## How Safe is the Artificial Turf on Your Child's Sports Field? [Part two]

by Art Drysdale

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Art Drysdale, a life-long resident of Toronto and a horticulturist well known all across Canada, is now a resident of Parksville, British Columbia on Vancouver Island, just north of Nanaimo. He has reno-vated an old home and has a new garden there. His radio gardening vignettes are heard in south-western Ontario over radio station Easy 101 FM out of Tillsonburg at 2 PM weekdays.

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Following up on the report here last week, NBC News has now done a further report after considerable input from listeners/viewers.

"Voters will have the final say in two long-running battles over artificial turf playing fields next month when they consider ballot measures in San Francisco and the leafy borough of Glen Rock, New Jersey.

"Concerns over potential long-term health effects from playing on the synthetic fields are just one element of the turf wars that have divided citizens and elected officials in both communities for years. But they are top of mind for opponents like Edward Pertcheck, a San Francisco architect who is active in the battle to block four new artificial turf soccer fields from being built in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park.

' "I don't want my son playing on artificial turf," said Pertcheck, adding that he doesn't believe the surface has been adequately studied. "I specifically asked his team manager to not have any of their practices or games on artificial turf and she took the request very seriously.'

"But for a frustrated Phil Ginsburg, general manager of the city's Recreation and

Parks Department, such concerns are preventing his agency from providing a badly needed resource.

“‘We have studied this extremely thoroughly,’ he said of the \$16 million project, which has been on the drawing board for six years. ‘We’re not in the business of harming the health of our children.’

“As reported by NBC News on Wednesday, concerns about potential long-term health effects from playing on artificial turf fields containing crumb rubber have been fueled by anecdotal reports of cancer among soccer players—especially goalies.

“The report kept Meghan Lowell from getting much sleep. ‘I was lying in bed about 1 a.m. I was reading it. ... I was in total shock,” said Lowell, a former soccer goalie and current coach who was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma at the age of 23 after playing on artificial fields. Lowell, who is now in remission, was one of more than two dozen readers and viewers who emailed NBC News to share their stories.

“But backers of the technology note that all evidence collected so far by scientists and state and federal agencies has shown that artificial turf is safe.

“During the past two decades, there have been more than 60 technical studies and reports that review the health effects of crumb rubber as it pertains to toxicities from inhalation, ingestion and dermal contact, as well as cancer,” the Synthetic Turf Council, an industry group, said Thursday in a statement responding to the initial NBC News report. “These studies and reports were performed during the past 22 years by independent organizations such as: Connecticut Department of Health, Hofstra University, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and University of California Berkeley.

““The preponderance of evidence shows no negative health effects associated with crumb rubber in synthetic turf.’

“The trade group also said it takes ‘the health, safety, and welfare of synthetic turf users very seriously’ and expressed sympathy for ‘those individuals who are battling a serious illness.’

“Despite such assurances, community groups around the country are raising concerns about artificial turf fields. The SynTurf.org website lists dozens of cities

where activist groups are campaigning to limit or block projects.

"In San Francisco, voters will decide between two competing measures on Nov. 4 – Proposition H, which backers of natural grass fields put on the ballot in a last-ditch to block the new soccer complex, and Proposition I, which supporters drew up to authorize the installation of artificial turf and lights. If both pass, whichever gets the most votes will carry the day.

"Working with the nonprofit City Fields Foundation, San Francisco already has renovated 12 multi-use sports fields in six different parks using crumb rubber artificial turf.

"But the Golden Gate Park project, which is estimated to cost taxpayers \$6.25 million, has been the most controversial proposal.

"Cost, bird migration patterns and the ambience of the 411.5 hectares (1.017 acres) park all have entered into the debate, but concerns about the use of styrene butadiene rubber, or 'crumb rubber,' as part of the surface's cushion has emerged as the dominant issue in the campaign. The crumbs, made from pulverized car tires, can contain benzene, carbon black and lead, among other substances. 'Once you look into it, natural grass wins on almost every aspect over artificial turf.'

"Pertcheck, the architect, said he didn't start out as an opponent of using artificial turf to replace the worn-out natural grass fields near the western reaches of the park adjacent to the Beach Chalet, which are pocked with gopher holes. But the more he studied the matter, the more convinced he became that a redesigned natural grass field would be superior to a fake one.

"'Once you look into it, natural grass wins on almost every aspect over artificial turf,' he said, explaining that synthetic turf also requires maintenance and must be replaced every 10 years or so at substantial cost.

"But Kathleen McCowin, a single mom with an 18-year-old soccer playing daughter who also opposes the artificial fields, said the rubber crumbs were the primary factor for her.

"The kids get covered with it, and it's acknowledged they breathe it in and they swallow it," she said. 'We're worried about the longer term health risks to our children with this stuff.'

"Ginsburg, the head of the parks and rec department, takes issue with both arguments. Replacing the existing grass fields with synthetic fields and adding lights will save about 4 million gallons of water a year, he said, and expand use of the fields in rainy periods and through the evening hours.

"The goal of the program is to make sure we have enough field space and enough hours of play for all of our kids in San Francisco,' he said. 'We're able to add 10,000 hours of play right here at a time when San Francisco is struggling to keep families living in the city and there simply aren't enough fields for our kids to play.'

"As for potential health risks, Ginsburg said the evidence isn't there.

"This might be the most vetted soccer field in U.S. history,' he said. 'We've been working on this for six years. .... We have had approvals from local government, we've had environmental impact reports, we've had the California Coastal Commission support this project and we've had the Superior Court in California approve this project. Yet there is a small group of rather determined people who decided to put a measure on the ballot to try to stop the project, so here we are still trying to provide fields for our kids to play.'

Debate over the planned replacement of a natural grass field with artificial turf in New Jersey has been only slightly more subdued since the mayor and council of Glen Rock voted on May 7 to go with an artificial turf field at a cost of \$3 million, part of which will be borne by private and nonprofit sports groups.