

Montreal-based FieldTurf under fire for quality of fields in the U.S.

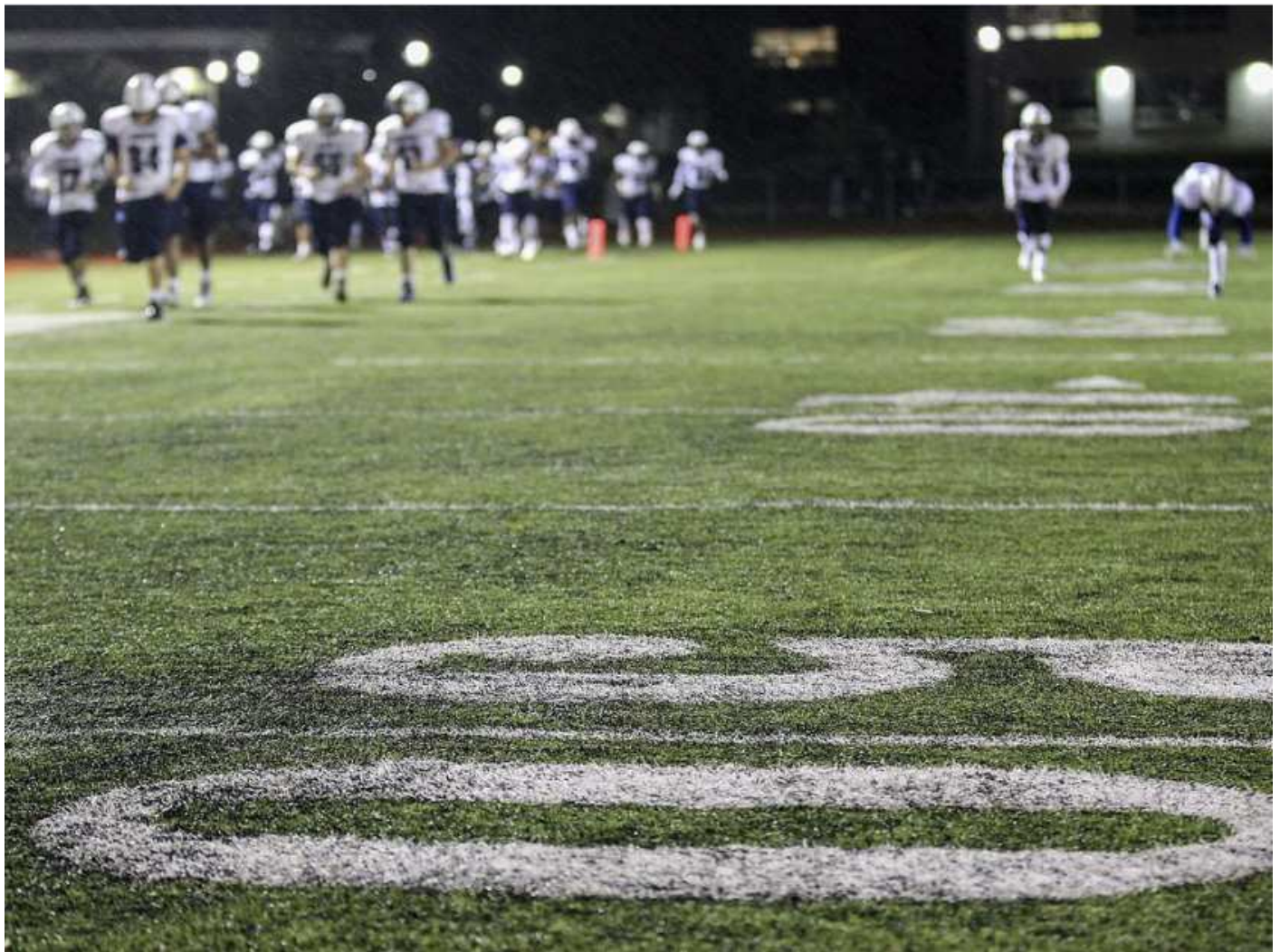


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This Sept. 30, 2016, photo shows a Duraspine turf field in Highland Park, N.J. FieldTurf, the country's leading maker of artificial sports turf, sold more than 1,000 fields to towns, schools and teams nationwide after its executives knew they were falling apart faster than expected and might not live up to lofty marketing claims, according to an investigation by NJ Advance Media. *ANDREW MILLS / NJ ADVANCE MEDIA VIA AP*

WOODBIDGE, N.J. — The leading maker of artificial sports turf sold more than 1,000 fields to towns, schools and teams across the United States after its executives knew they were falling apart faster than expected and might not live up to lofty marketing claims, according to an investigation by a news organization.

Montreal-based FieldTurf said that the turf it began selling in 2005 was revolutionary for its “unmatched durability” and that it would last a decade or more. But records obtained by NJ Advance Media (<http://bit.ly/2fN3gxH>) show that as early as 2006, key FieldTurf executives became aware the turf, known as Duraspine, was cracking, splitting and breaking apart long before it should, and long before the public had been promised.

FieldTurf — a division of publicly traded French flooring maker Tarkett — said it never misled or defrauded customers and called such claims “completely false.” The company stressed that the problem does not compromise player safety.

Most of the fields, which fetched \$300,000 to \$500,000 or more, were paid for with tax dollars. FieldTurf sold 1,428 of those fields in the U.S. to everyone from small towns to NFL teams for an estimated \$570 million from 2005 until the product was discontinued in 2012.



This Sept. 28, 2016, photo shows a Duraspine turf field in Newark, N.J. FieldTurf, the country's leading maker of artificial sports turf, sold more than 1,000 fields to towns, schools and teams nationwide after its executives knew they were falling apart faster than expected and might not live up to lofty marketing claims, according to an investigation by NJ Advance Media.

ANDRE MALOK / NJ ADVANCE MEDIA VIA AP

Despite several internal email discussions about their overblown sales pitches, which were reviewed by the news organization, executives never changed their marketing campaign for Duraspine fields. Company officials said in a statement that most Duraspine customers have never been told about the problem and how to identify signs that their field might be prematurely falling apart. The officials said the problem was better handled on a case-by-case basis.

The company said that the problem has not affected the “significant majority” of Duraspine fields, and that failures came primarily in places like California and Texas, where intense ultraviolet radiation caused the product to break down after only a few years of use.

FieldTurf concedes nearly one of every five U.S. Duraspine fields has been replaced under warranty — sometimes with Duraspine fields and sometimes with a new kind of turf. The true number of afflicted fields could be far higher, however, because many customers haven't been notified, and the company does not proactively monitor all Duraspine fields for the problem.

Only after customer complaints spiked in 2009 and 2010 did FieldTurf conduct an internal investigation and pin the problem on its supplier, a division of Netherlands-based Royal TenCate, according to a federal lawsuit.

FieldTurf claimed TenCate altered the chemical formulation of the fibre, making it more susceptible to the harmful effects of ultraviolet radiation. TenCate denied the allegations, and the two settled the suit in 2014 for an undisclosed sum of money. Neither party admitted wrongdoing.

Public schools and towns across the U.S. have had to replace their expensive turf fields far sooner than expected and often much earlier than promised.

In Oklahoma, the superintendent of the Skiatook Public School District said it took three years to get FieldTurf to agree to replace its \$300,000 field — and only after it threatened legal action. In Wisconsin, Middleton-Cross Plains School District officials said they complained about their field in 2014, and FieldTurf reps told them there was no known issue with premature failure of Duraspine.

FieldTurf declined to comment on specific customers or fields.

Many stand by FieldTurf and its willingness to address problems. Erik Rosenmeier, the football coach at Cranford High School in New Jersey, said that his 2009 Duraspine field was “outstanding” and that the school’s experience with FieldTurf “has been extremely positive.”

But in Newark, the football coach at Malcolm X Shabazz High School says that the turf was so bad last year that the school considered cancelling games.

“You grab it and it rips. It rips like grass,” said coach Darnell Grant. “We deserve better, our community deserves better and our kids deserve better. Give the kids, give the community what they paid for.”

[State-by-state \(http://bit.ly/2fWG3Lg\)](http://bit.ly/2fWG3Lg) listing of fields.

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