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Life

Thanks to artificial turf, Toronto beginning to look like Teletubbyland

Chemgrass becoming increasingly common on our playing fields, but trend is spreading to sidewalks, schools and parks.

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SHAWN MICALLEF PHOTO /

Our great athletes run around on artificial turf at EarlsCourt Park, near St. Clair Ave. W. and Caledonia Park Rd. It's one of a long roster of playing fields in this city with a synthetic surface.

By: Shawn Micallef Living Columnist, Published on Fri Oct 18 2013

Parts of the GTA have begun to look like the set of Teletubbies, the children's television program where green toddler-like aliens bounced around Teletubbyland, a strange blend of real animals roaming an artificial landscape of padded and perfect ultra-vivid green lawns. Here, our artificially covered playing fields are similar; we just have more raccoons scurrying about.

At one time artificial turf was only found in a few places, like the Astrodome, the covered Houston stadium that found it couldn't grow natural grass indoors in 1966, lending the first mass-marketed artificial surface, originally called "Chemgrass," its famous name. The turf then spread to other stadiums, domed or not, including our own SkyDome (now the Rogers Centre), and today artificial surfaces produced by a variety of manufacturers are creeping onto everyday playing surfaces in schoolyards and city parks everywhere.

A recent high-profile turf war over the University of Toronto's plan to install it on the back campus playing field for the upcoming Pan Am games saw many people rallying behind the existing natural surface. Today the field resembles an Amazonian clear-cut, with bulldozers scraping back the soil.

Once complete, the artificial turf here will join a long roster of Teletubby landscapes. The new sports fields near Cherry Beach are perhaps the biggest carpeted area in the city, and there are artificial surfaces at individual pitches and football fields at EarlsCourt Park, Weston Lions Park, Esther Shiner Stadium, and Centennial Stadium.

High schools, from private Upper Canada and St. Michael's Colleges, to those in the separate and public systems like North Toronto Collegiate and Father Henry Carr, all have artificially turfed football fields now.

The trend is not just institutional, as residential homeowners have even started to install fake lawns, whether downtown postage-stamp yards or expansive suburban lots. Even our sidewalks are not immune. Go for a stroll along Queen St. E., in Riverside, or along Bloor West Village and updated versions of Chemgrass have appeared where mulch or a flower patch might have surrounded trees before.

There may be genuinely good reasons for artificial turf in some places, like around street trees that have a tough time surviving and need some tougher protection. The argument for playing fields is the season can be longer and maintenance issues are reduced. Yet with so much of our open land being covered up, environmental concerns including rainwater runoff, heat island effect, and a reduction in air filtering and oxygen production that plant life affords have risen. With green roofs being encouraged and installed across the region to naturalize more of our hard surfaces, artificial turf seems like a step backwards. BMO Field, home to the Toronto FC, even replaced their artificial turf with grass.

Apart from these concerns, has the ethos of sport changed so much over the years that artificiality is now the desired state of the playing field?

Though arguing against artificial turf runs the risk of being beholden to nostalgia or sounding like an annoying "Back in my day..." lecture, there indeed was something noble about mud-covered athletes who played no matter the conditions.

The great thing about sport is adaptability and the ability of the body to figure out conditions on the fly. Baseball is particularly interesting because of the idiosyncrasies in stadium design, with "Green Monsters" and varying distances in outfields to contend with. A muddy track is a celebrated game changer in horse racing, when the "mudders" prevail. Recall the Olympic athletes that dealt with the high altitude and thinner air of the Mexico City games in 1968 or the Los Angeles smog in 1984. Even the Jays had seagulls, wind, and cold temperatures to contend with at the old Exhibition Stadium. All were a triumph of humans over obstacles.

During a recent conversation, a supporter of artificial turf argued that "the ball goes where you kick it" on soccer pitches now. Is it just about precision and predictability then?

At the same time the back campus debate was happening, concern was mounting over the upcoming Winter Olympics in Russia, where anti-gay laws and rhetoric are creating a human rights crisis for LGBT people there.

"Sport is not political," was a common response I heard.

It's a curious position given how political the Pan Am games have become, whether it's turf issues or budgetary spending, the latter being addressed by both the mayor and premier of late.

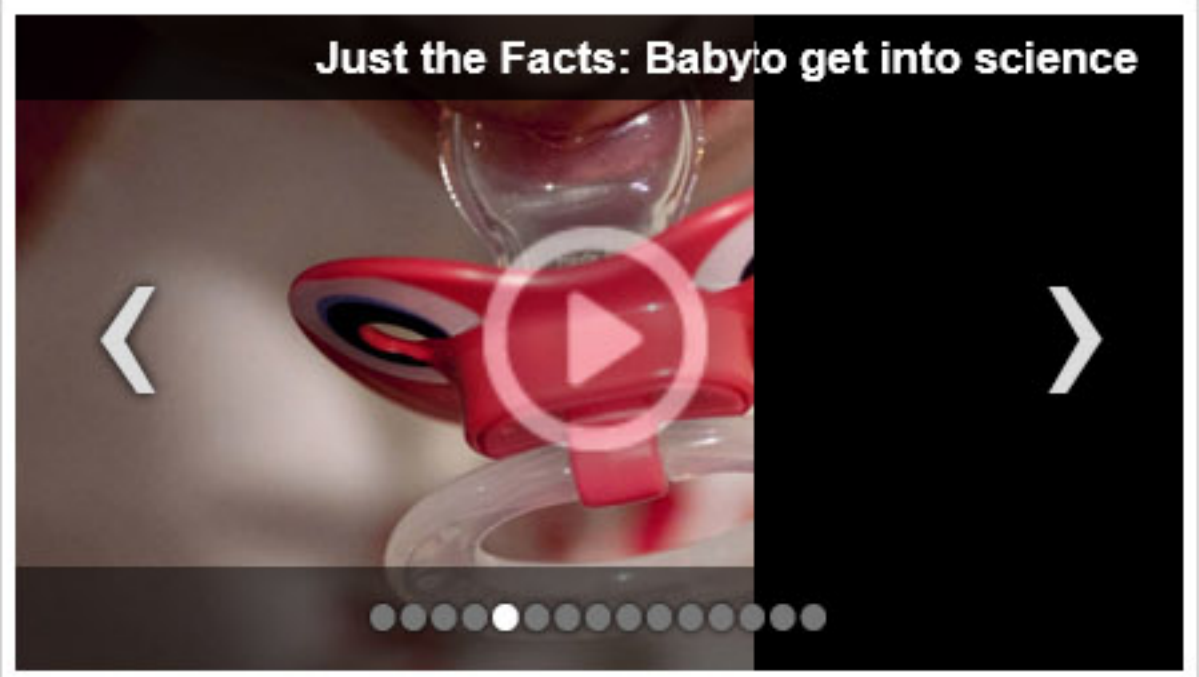
Sports and sport policy is inherently political and always has been. The Black Power salute at those 1968 games and Jesse Owens standing on Hitler's podium in 1936 remain indelible images.

The notion that athletes are innocents who float in an apolitical Tellytubby-like land is insulting to their intelligence. Athletes should be thought of as the best we've got, able to deal with physical obstacles, such as mud, and as champions who themselves champion our best human ideals, such as freedom.

Why else would we want to play all these games?

Shawn Micallef writes every Friday about where and how we live in the GTA. Wander the streets with him on Twitter @shawnmicallef

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