

# High School Sports

ONLY IN NEWSDAY

# TURF BATTLE

Aaron Rodgers' injury reignites debate about turf vs. grass on Long Island **B2-5**

## KICK IS UP, IT'S HISTORIC!

Elmont soccer star Elrington-Edwards blazes trail on football field **B10-11**



MORGAN CAMPBELL

HOWARD SCHNAPP

# GRASS VS. TURF: THE DEBATE

Most schools have switched to turf because grass is difficult to maintain

## ONLY IN NEWSDAY

BY GREGG SARRA

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When Aaron Rodgers tore his left Achilles on the fourth play of the Jets' regular-season opener on Sep. 11, it reignited the longtime debate over the difference between playing on artificial turf vs. natural grass.

The debate also hit home for Comsewogue football player Nick Zampieron, who broke his leg in two places while playing on a turf field during his first varsity game on Sept. 1.

"I knew Rodgers was hurt when I saw his cleat get stuck underneath him in the turf," Zampieron said. "The turf is just brutal and dangerous for athletes. I would rather play on grass. Cleats don't get stuck in the grass."

On Long Island, most high schools have made the switch to turf fields. Of the 111 varsity teams, only 11 have grass football fields.

Newsday interviewed more than two dozen Long Island high school coaches and school administrators, and most said they prefer turf because it is easy to maintain, dries quickly

and players can run faster and make sharper cuts. They added that grass fields require heavy maintenance that is not practical when there are multiple teams and sports playing each week, and also said playing on a grass field that is not well maintained poses an increased risk for injury.

Doctors say foot, ankle and knee injuries are more likely to occur on turf and that proper footwear is important on both surfaces.

"Our school just got a new turf field and I love it," Westbury coach Charles Savalis said. "I feel like the kids run

faster on it, cut harder and they're stronger on it. It's unfortunate what happened to Aaron Rodgers, but it can happen by slipping in the mud or putting your foot in the wrong spot, so I'm for the turf."

Less than 48 hours after Rodgers' injury, the NFL Players Association repeated its call for the league to switch to grass fields, which players prefer because they believe playing on grass is safer and can prolong careers. The NFL continues to argue that there's no statistical difference in the number of major injuries — Achilles tears, ACL tears, even

concussions — from games played on turf vs. grass.

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell pointed out that the other Achilles tendon tear in Week 1, suffered by Baltimore's J.K. Dobbins, happened on grass.

### 'Both injuries were avoidable'

Zampieron is convinced his injury, which was noncontact, could have been avoided if he were playing on grass.

The senior is a star athlete who earned a scholarship to play baseball at Stony Brook University. He wanted to give football a try this season and



Comsewogue's Nick Zampieron was taken off on a stretcher after breaking his leg in two places while playing on a turf field during his first varsity football game on Sept. 1.

# RESURFACES ON LONG ISLAND

## WHAT IS ARTIFICIAL TURF?

Athletic fields will have different turf designs, but most consist of fields of synthetic "grass" placed atop layers of structural and cushioning materials.

### "GRASS" BLADES

Fibers commonly made of nylon or polypropylene.

### INFILL

Fine particles of sand, rubber or other material that hold the turf blades upright and provide players with traction and shock absorption.

### BACKING

Sheet of woven plastic to which the blades are attached.

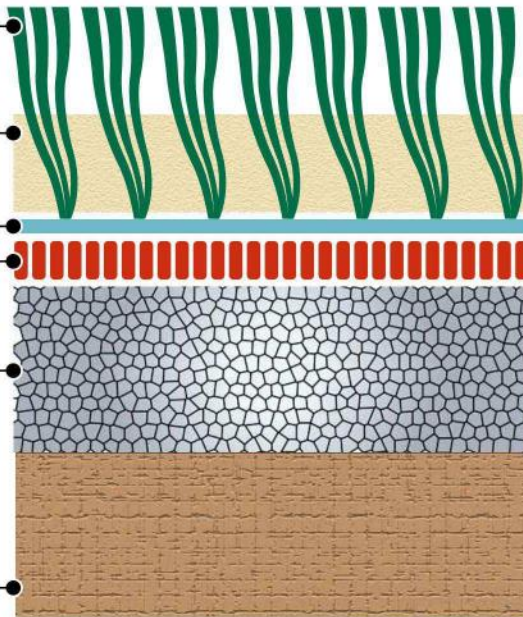
### SHOCK PADDING

Adds to the structure of the turf and enhances cushioning for players.

### GRAVEL BASE

Provides a stable foundation for the entire turf system. Often made of a combination of coarse and fine gravel, or limestone.

### EXISTING SOIL



NEWSDAY / ANDREW WONG

the coach was thrilled to have him on the team.

"He's one of the top two athletes in our school," Comsewogue football coach Sean Tremblay said. "He's a Division I scholarship talent in baseball. He's extremely fast, has great hands and is just super athletic. We were so excited and he was unstoppable in practice. We knew he was going to be an impact player."

Zampieron made his debut in Comsewogue's season opener against Smithtown West. On the first play from scrimmage, Tremblay called a long pass play designed to capitalize on Zampieron's speed and skill.

Zampieron was open but the pass was underthrown, forcing him to slow up to try to stop the defender from intercepting the ball.

"I pivoted to make a play on the ball and prevent an interception," Zampieron said. "And my cleat got caught in the turf and snapped my leg."

Zampieron crumbled to the ground, breaking his leg in two places.

"I tried to get up right away and when I looked down,"

Of Long Island's  
111 HS varsity  
football teams:

**11**  
USE GRASS FIELDS

**100**  
USE TURF FIELDS

Zampieron said, "my leg was bent the other way.

"Rodgers only played four plays for the Jets and his season was over. I only played two plays, so I guess my season was shorter. Either way, both injuries were avoidable."

### Injuries are going to happen

Rodgers, 39, signed with the Jets this past offseason after spending the first 18 seasons of his career with the Green Bay Packers. He had not missed a game due to injury since 2017.

The injury to Rodgers cannot necessarily be blamed on the turf field since there was contact on the play. Rodgers previously argued for grass fields in the NFL, saying that grass allows cleats to pull away from the playing surface, which reduces the risk of injury.

The NFL Players Association cited a study conducted as part of the NFL's collective bargaining agreement that uses science to measure injuries. According to that study, there has been an increase in noncontact injuries on turf compared to grass.

The NFL, citing the same study, defended the use of turf. They pointed to 2021 when data for injuries on both surfaces was about equal.

"Injuries are going to happen, whether it's turf or grass," Longwood football coach Sean Kluber said. "For our level, I'm not sure you really see a difference. There are pros and cons to grass, and there are pros and cons to turf."

See TURF on B4



NEWSDAY / STEVE POST

"The turf is just brutal and dangerous for athletes," Comsewogue WR Nick Zampieron said. " . . . Cleats don't get stuck in the grass."

I've done this forever and coached on absolutely horrific [grass] fields. You're not going to have a nice field with grass here . . . because we play soccer on it three times a week.' — Buddy Krumenacker, Farmingdale High School football coach



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NEWSDAY / HOWARD SCHWARTZ

# SCHOOLS HAVE SPENT MILLIONS ON TURF FIELDS

**TURF** from B3

## Grass field challenges

Eleven Long Island schools have grass football fields: Bellport, Brentwood, Glenn, Ward Melville, Riverhead, Sayville, Wyandanch, Amityville, Greenport, Center Moriches and Oyster Bay. Three of those schools — Center Moriches, Sayville and Oyster Bay — also have turf fields and play home games on both surfaces.

The remainder of schools have made the switch to turf due to the cost and difficulty in maintaining grass fields, which require almost daily maintenance. With football, soccer and field hockey all being played during the fall season, it's difficult to keep a grass field from getting holes and divots, which can make the surface unsafe.

Dr. James Paci, the director of orthopedics and sports medicine for Orlin & Cohen in Suffolk County, served as the team physician for Stony Brook University Athletics for eight years, LIU for two and Farmingdale State for eight.

"In an ideal world, a well-maintained, pristine grass field that doesn't get chewed up is the safest surface," Paci said. "But the ability to maintain that grass surface is near impossible."

Weather also is a problem. When it rains, a grass field can be unplayable for days, which causes scheduling issues. Turf fields dry quickly.

Buddy Krumenacker has been a high school football coach for 55 years, first at Hempstead and now at Farmingdale. He agreed the work involved in maintaining a safe grass field for multiple sports is nearly impossible.

"From a practical standpoint, you're not going to have a great grass field at a high school," Krumenacker said.

"I've done this forever and coached on absolutely horrific [grass] fields. You're not going to have a nice field with grass here . . . because we play soccer on it three times a week."

## The doctors' opinions

Dr. Megan Paulus, chief of foot and ankle surgery in the Department of Orthopedics at Stony Brook Medicine, said there is a higher risk for foot, knee and ankle injuries playing on a turf field.

"The speed and ability to cut can play a big role in injuries," Paulus said. "You can increase the power and increase the torque on the lower extremity [on a turf field] and place the athlete at risk for sustaining an injury."

Paci agreed that lower extremity injuries are more likely on turf, adding that it can be difficult to blame the surface in a contact sport such as football.

"Contact injuries become multifactorial," Paci said, "which makes it difficult to 100% blame the field surface."

Paci and Paulus said proper footwear can play a role in helping reduce the risk of injury.

"You don't want a cleat that sticks in the ground too much and doesn't release," Paulus said. "When you don't have that nice release off a turf field, that's when you can have those foot, ankle, knee injuries."

Sayville High School star running back Kyle Messina said wearing the proper cleats is important.

"Footwear is completely different on grass and turf," Messina said. "When I play on turf, I need rounded cleats on the bottom and not the spikes that dig deeper into the turf. If I'm on grass, I wouldn't wear turf shoes because they wouldn't give me the grip that I'd need to make a cut."



Ed Morris, the commissioner of parks and recreation for the Town of Brookhaven, said the town has seven multipurpose turf fields and seven multipurpose grass fields that are used for football, flag football, soccer, lacrosse and field hockey. The town also has 26 turf fields for baseball and softball.

The cost to install a new turf field is about \$1.2 million and the field has a life span of 10 to 12 years, depending on the amount of usage, according to Morris. Replacing an existing

turf field costs about \$550,000, Morris said.

A grass field costs between \$75,000 and \$100,000 a year to maintain, and a turf field can "pay for itself in the long run over time," Morris said.

## Bellport sticks with grass

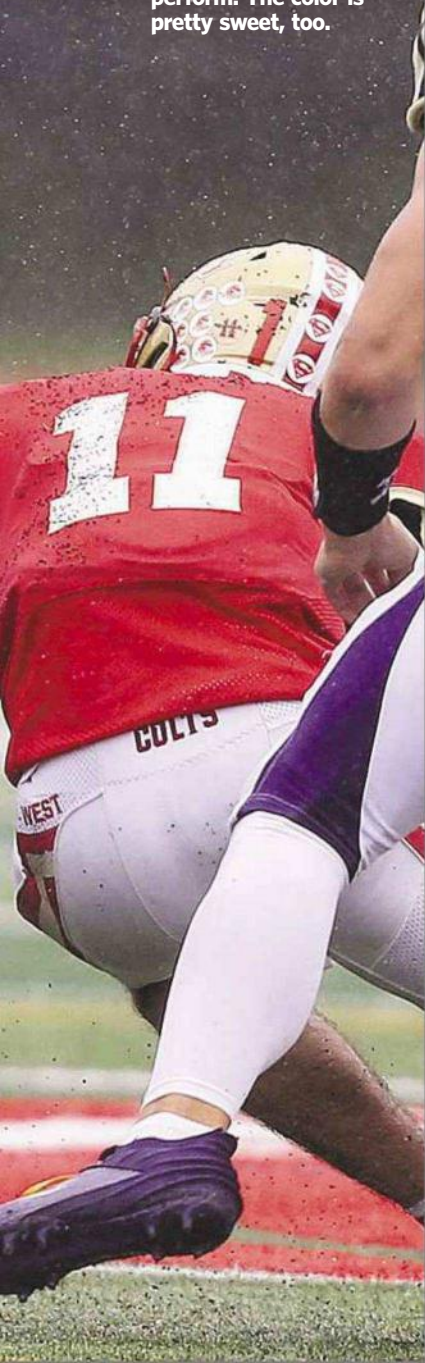
Bellport High School has a grass field that is only used for football games. The team practices on a separate grass field. The school has one multipurpose turf field for soccer, lacrosse and field hockey. Its

baseball and softball fields are grass.

Joe Cipp Jr. coached the Bellport football team for 32 years until he retired in 2010. He was the district's superintendent from 2009 to 2012. Cipp said the district considered switching to a turf field 10 years ago.

"We played in the Long Island championship games in the early '90s and lost significant players on the artificial turf at Hofstra University," Cipp said. "We dreaded playing on that turf. It was like playing on a pool

Sayville's Kyle Messina said that wearing the proper cleats is important to perform. The color is pretty sweet, too.



BOB SORESENSEN

When I play on turf, I need rounded cleats on the bottom and not the spikes that dig deeper into the turf. If I'm on grass, I wouldn't wear turf shoes because they wouldn't give me the grip that I'd need to make a cut.

— Kyle Messina, Sayville running back

green all season is costly. Our grounds crew maintains the fields and paints the graphics and the lining of the fields. But the aeration, fertilization, seeding and weekly maintenance is subcontracted.”

“The Bellport field is kept in unbelievable shape,” West Islip coach Steve Mileti said.

### Schools invest in turf fields

Schools across Long Island have spent millions of dollars installing new turf fields and upgrading their athletic facilities. Unlike the NFL, which can afford to change its playing surfaces, schools are unlikely to go back to grass.

Uniondale High School broke ground on a new turf field in August that is expected to be completed in December.

“There has been a big push for this by the students and community members for a long time,” Uniondale Superintendent Monique Darrisaw-Akil said at the groundbreaking. “Athletes have used the same grassy field since 1949.”

The \$3.85 million turf field and track is the last phase of a \$158 million bond that was approved by voters in 2018, and included expansion, renovation and upgrades around the district. The school also plans to update its locker and weight



NEWSDAY / JOHN PARASKEVAS

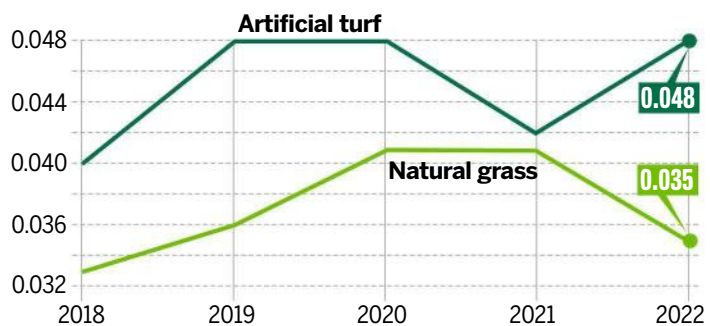
The speed and ability to cut can play a big role in injuries. You can increase the power and increase the torque on the lower extremity [on a turf field] and place the athlete at risk for sustaining an injury.

— Dr. Megan Paulus, chief of foot and ankle surgery, Department of Orthopedics at Stony Brook Medicine

## ARTIFICIAL VS. NATURAL

NFL Players Association released results of their study they say show an increase in injuries that occurred on artificial turf compared with natural grass. The data are from plays that did not involve direct contact with other players.

### NFL non-contact injuries per 100 player-plays



Data excludes contusions and inflammations SOURCE: NFL PLAYERS ASSOCIATION; AP

rooms by the end of 2024.

Hempstead High School is playing on a turf field for the first time after being on grass for nearly 50 years. The \$6.2 million renovation plan also included the addition of lights, and the school played its first night game on Sept. 14.

“It was special,” senior DeAndrew Leonard said. “This is history . . . There was this atmosphere and it just felt different.”

Half Hollow Hills West football coach Gerald Filardi was a

linebacker at Penn State, which plays on grass. He said most of his players prefer the turf field.

“I played at Penn State and I think they have the best grass field in the country,” Filardi said. “I don’t think they’ll ever change to turf, even though most have. I understand why you would — the economics of it.”

“ . . . But I would like to see more grass, personally. I think the kids prefer turf, but I say that because they’ve never played on a really good grass

field. If they played on a really good grass field, I think they would love it.”

### No regrets

Zampieron said he resisted the urge to play football for years so he could focus on his goal of playing Division I college baseball.

After his injury, he underwent emergency surgery to have a titanium rod inserted from the top of his knee through his shin bone.

Asked if he had any regrets about joining the football team, Zampieron said he did not.

“Personally, I would have done it the same way,” he said. “You can’t live your life in fear. I feel like I’m a great athlete because I’m not afraid to take risks and make plays.”

Laurie Zampieron, Nick’s mother, said her son is already walking without crutches and is ahead of schedule in his recovery.

“If the doctor says I’m healthy enough and I’m good to go, I’m coming back for the playoffs,” Zampieron said.

“That’s not happening,” his mother said immediately. “We want you ready for the baseball season.”

With Owen O’Brien, Roger Rubin and John Paraskevas

table — the surface was so hard.

“We had a turf field built for all of our sports,” he said. “But football was staying on the grass. We don’t have high-traffic areas and worn-out sections of the field that create safety issues. Our field is beautiful.”

Bellport athletic director Pat Hayes said it spends about \$45,000 a year to maintain the grass field, which is only used for four football games.

“Grass fields aren’t cheap to maintain,” Hayes said. “The irrigation to keep it watered and