

A PLACE TO PLAY

By Joe Zagorski

Gameday in the National Football League! Thousands of spectators make their trek to the stadium to watch their team in mortal warfare with the enemy. The fans move like weekend warriors themselves, through bumper-to-bumper traffic in the overcrowded, often tailgated parking lots, through the stiles and past ticket-takers, around ushers and by hotdog-wielding vendors.

A singleness of purpose reigns today for the fans – get to that seat and cheer our team to victory. The team, however, must do the playing and – if possible – the winning. That is the goal. And, if the goal is to be accomplished, it does not matter whether it be on real grass or artificial turf, whether under a cold and rain-filled sky or beneath a lighted plastic dome. In pro football, a win is a win, and a game is a game, be it home or away.

Fans and players alike both play their parts in making The Game the most exciting spectator sport in America. In the world! The stadium also makes its contribution to the superheated mix.

All of the 28 NFL Stadiums have their own flavor and mystique. Some are larger, some are older, and some are simply better places to watch from. Some have astroturf, and some have grass that could make a satiated sheep salivate. Some have luxury suites that include wet bars and chandeliers, and some are strictly beer and pretzels. Nevertheless, all are cathedrals of capacity crowds and houses of hits and hustle. Pro football's places of play are mighty special indeed.

A Dome by any other name ...

When the Houston Astrodome opened in 1965, it caused quite a stir in the NFL community. No longer was weather a factor, and before long, the Astrodome was being called the "Eighth Wonder of the World." Yet, despite its popularity, the Astrodome ranks as the smallest NFL stadium in seating capacity at 50,452.

While luxury boxes fill one entire level around the field, the scoreboard scopes around the whole east end of the complex. Messages and animated sequences dominate the enormous 4-story high, 474-foot wide scoreboard. Each seat in the Astrodome is cushioned to give each fan all the comforts of home.

There are now six domed stadiums in use around the NFL. They suggest little relationship to the early years of the game when weathered and splintered wooden stands faced dusty and often muddy fields. The domed stadiums invoke the future as they gush with plastic glamour, recalling the glitzy, neon of a Broadway marquee.

Three domes differ from their ancestor Astrodome in one major way – the roof. The Hoosier Dome, the Metrodome, and the Silverdome are all air-inflated buildings that keep their roofs on a never-ending current of hot air, propelled through ducts to the top of the balloon-like coverings.

Sometimes, because the covering is not made of cement or such, these types of palaces can be quite unprepared for the extreme elements. In 1982, the Hubert H. Humphrey Metrodome in Minneapolis had a little problem to contend with. The week before the Vikings' final regular season game, high winds and snowstorms caused the seams in the dome cover to split. While stadium personnel worked around the clock to repair the cover and re-inflate the dome, an outside view looked like a fallen souffle.

In 1976, the fiberglass roof of the Pontiac Silverdome was pelted with huge amounts of rain. So much so, in fact, that the rain soaked through the roof and left a five-yard puddle around the 40-yard line.

Fortunately, these occasions are the exceptions. One exception to all domes is the aptly-named Kingdome in Seattle. Its dome is the world's largest self-supporting concrete roof. The walls around the outside hold up its huge weight.

Yet, even the king kneels before one dome that stands head and shoulders above all others. Its name underlines its herculean quality. The Louisiana Superdome was built at an incredible cost of \$163 million – easily the most expensive stadium in America. It opened in 1975.

Though this edifice is still young in comparison to the Astrodome, the Superdome has already housed more Super Bowls than any other domed stadium. Although New Orleans has hosted five Super Bowls, the first three were played at Tulane Stadium. Then, # XII in 1977 became the first Super Bowl played indoors. In January, 1986, # XX will be the Superdome's third. The only other indoor game was also the only northern Super Bowl – XVI, at Pontiac, Michigan. To honor the return of America's hostages from Iran in January, 1981, the Superdome donned a giant yellow ribbon for Super Bowl XV.

The Superdome's party atmosphere goes hand in hand with the annual Mardi Gras celebration in New Orleans. In fact, several Mardi Gras events are held inside the structure.

When you go inside this gargantuan gridiron house, you get the feeling you're there for anything BUT a football game. Hovering above the field is a hexagon of television screens to give every fan a bird's-eye-view of each play. A layer of concrete circles the field, and the artificial turf has been called "Mardi Grass."

Many players dislike the Superdome, or any domed stadium, for that matter. They prefer being outside, where sunshine, rain, or snow rule, and where they feel the game belongs.

Others, including most kickers, prefer to play where weather is not a factor.

Crowd noise inside a dome can be a nightmare for visiting teams. Fans know that diligent yelling, trapped inside the dome, can drown out even the loudest signal calling and disrupt an offense.

However, domed stadiums are not the only places where boisterous fans can affect the outcome of a game. On November 30, 1981, the West End of Miami's Orange Bowl produced such noise that the decibel level would have shamed an AC/DC concert. The Philadelphia Eagles happened to have their backs against their own goal post, facing a third and eight.

Twice, Eagle quarterback Ron Jaworski refused to take the snap because of the noise. When he finally realized the fans would not calm down no matter how much both teams pleaded for quiet and took the snap, he threw an interception that led to a go-ahead touchdown for Miami. The Dolphins (and their fans) eventually won the game, 13-10.

Despite all the pros and cons that surround domes, one dispute leads all in fan interest – no matter what the stadium – the playing surface.

The Great Artificial Controversy

During the decade of the 1970s, the NFL witnessed the coming of age of plastics. Never before had player apparel and equipment been so tested, innovated, and improved. Certainly, one area where science and technology left an indelible mark was in the playing surface.

Some fans like it. Most players hate it. Every television director loves it. It still causes as much controversy as a U.F.O. sighting. Of the 28 NFL stadiums, 16 employ some sort of artificial surface, the most popular of which is Astroturf.

Astroturf is formed out of three layers of nylon fibers, nylon and polyester tire cords, and, finally, a padded-rubber bottom. It was first used in 1966 by the Houston Oilers in the Astrodome (hence the name).

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With free enterprise being what it is, new artificial surfaces soon appeared – Poly Turf, Tartan Turf, and Super Turf! Poly Turf is a polypropylene plastic derivative that is claimed by its supporters to "withstand adverse conditions better than the other surfaces."

Miami's Orange Bowl used a Poly Turf surface during the early 1970s. By Super Bowl X in January 1976, the carpet was so torn, had so many shredded seams, and pitted by so many cigarette burns that it looked like the surface of the moon. The field crew spent the entire week prior to the game stitching, sewing, and re-painting the Poly Turf. After the game, the surface was ripped-out and real grass was planted. Poly Turf hasn't been found in an NFL stadium since.

Tartan Turf also had its heyday back in the 1970s. Pittsburgh's Three Rivers Stadium, Kansas City's Arrowhead Stadium, and Dallas' Texas Stadium all used Tartan Turf during the last decade. None do any more.

Like AstroTurf, Tartan Turf is made of woven nylon. The difference is that Tartan Turf has more padding underneath. Despite the hoopla over Tartan Turf, Super Turf – the new kid on the block – has become dominant. It is made similarly to Tartan Turf, with one major difference: Super Turf's carpet is made of nylon coils which attach inside the rug, much like a folding leaf on an ear of corn.

Tartan Turf and Super Turf are softer surfaces than AstroTurf, despite the fact that AstroTurf has more layers. The question of which is best has -- naturally -- three different answers.

Tartan Turf has disappeared from NFL stadiums, according to some, mainly because television networks want a color and tint as close to natural grass as possible. Tartan Turf happens to be a very pale shade of green. Artificial surfaces have glamorized the sport. Supposedly, TV favors televising games on artificial surfaces because "less dirt and mud means more clean uniforms to identify the players."

Most players hate artificial surfaces like taxpayers hate the I.R.S. It has been proven that artificial turf is responsible for more minor injuries (cuts, abrasions, etc.), and many players claim that swollen joints in ankles and knees are more prevalent on fake grass.

When a runner cuts back, grass gives. Artificial turf does not. As a result, injuries occur. Although it has not been proven that more major injuries happen on artificial surfaces, 80% of the players in the NFL believe they do.

Part of the problem rests with shoe manufacturers. There are many different types of shoes, some for one kind of field and some for another. There are special shoes for AstroTurf, grass, Super Turf, mud, wet AstroTurf, frozen grass, and on and on. Shoe manufacturers claim any injury problems belong to the turf manufacturers and vice-versa. Sounds a little like Coke and Pepsi, doesn't it?

Believe it or not, some players besides kickers prefer and even ENJOY playing on artificial turf. The majority of these are offensive linemen. Needing all the traction they can get to make and sustain blocks, they like the firm footing of artificial turf.

Several defensive linemen also claim they would rather play on artificial turf, mainly because the first few steps they take are crucial. Again, traction is the key. Different stadiums have different surfaces because of either tradition or expense. Fake grass is easier and cheaper to maintain than the real stuff. In the end, how much would you pay for tradition?

All for the Price of a Ticket

The characteristics of each NFL stadium represent a smorgasborg of sellouts, sidelights, and superlatives. Each one has many features; and more importantly, its own personality.

Chicago's Soldier Field, for example, is the oldest stadium in the league, opening way back in 1926. The Hoosier Dome in Indianapolis is the youngest ballpark. It opened in 1984.

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Cincinnati's Riverfront Stadium encompasses more than eight acres. The roof of the Louisiana Superdome is up there 273 feet, over twice as high as the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, D.C. The Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum has the most seats – 92,516. Miami's Orange Bowl has the fewest parking spaces – 3,600.

Feature-wise, the stadiums of the NFL house a variety of extras. Animated scoreboards and flashy cheerleaders are just a couple of visual treats. Kansas City's Arrowhead, built especially for football, is a complete bowl, with every seat facing the center of the field. Buffalo's Rich Stadium is 50 feet below ground level.

The grass on Green Bay's Lambeau Field rests on top of electric heating coils to keep the field from freezing. Vince Lombardi had them installed before the 1967 NFL Championship Game against the Dallas Cowboys. Unfortunately, the -13 degree temperature froze the coils.

Speaking of the Cowboys, Texas Stadium is in one way the most interesting of all. Above the field rises a partial dome, with an opening that traces the framework of the field itself. When the rain comes down, only the players get wet.

All in all, these stadiums are more than just places to play. They are places of joy and pain, of love and hate, of pride, passion, history, and memories.