

New Omni-turf beautifies Autzen, makes game safer for the athletes

By Joshua Perry
Of the Emerald

Oregon football fans will have a treat in store for them this season when they take in a home game at Autzen Stadium. But it won't be due to unusually enthusiastic crowds or the concession-stand food... the highlight is the new playing field.

A new \$363,500 Omni-turf system, the first of its kind installed on a United States football field, replaced Autzen's 15-year-old Astro-turf surface last August. The new surface was funded largely through the Athletic Department's successful "Quack Attack" promotional campaign.

"Omni-turf is a complete system," said Mike Sweeney of OmniSport International based in Holland. "Astro-turf is more or less a carpet with no substance to it."

Omni-turf is different from other artificial surfaces because there is 250 tons of sand between the fibers to simulate natural grass, Sweeney said. The sand aids in drainage, which helps the polypropylene fibers stay erect, last longer and allows good traction. This results in less sliding for players when they're tackled.

"With the Omni-turf system, you always have three-quarters of an inch of cushion," Sweeney said. This helps to alleviate injuries caused by many artificial turfs. Oregon, over the past several years, has had problems with injuries directly related to Autzen's old hard surface.

"It's like going to the Oregon coast and playing in the dry sand," said Oregon fullback Kevin Willhite, who was troubled with a shoulder injury throughout last season.

"When a player impacts on an artificial turf, he just has the fibers to absorb the energy of the impact, and he



Emerald file graphic

more or less just bounces off," Sweeney added. "With Omni-turf, it is very similar to natural grass because the sand actually absorbs the shock as the player hits the turf.

"It's softer, and we've got it wall-to-wall, which makes it safer," said Oregon head coach Rich Brooks. "I think it's going to reduce our injuries."

This surface has another pleasing feature as well. Instead of painting the yard lines onto the surface as is done on Astro-turf, Omni-turf white fibers because paint has a tendency to cake and harden.

"When you paint synthetic carpet, it becomes very hard," Sweeney said. "With the Omni-turf system, you never have that paint build up.

"The fact that we don't have painted-on lines, which was dangerous, is very pleasing," Brooks added.

Even though the surface has just been installed, the praise is already coming in. "A lot of people are saying, even now, that the Oregon football field is the most beautiful and best in the world," Sweeney said. "You have to see it to believe it."

Willhite plans for record season

By Joshua Perry
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The past two years haven't been the best ones for Oregon football — and particularly so for tailback Kevin Willhite.

Willhite, a sophomore, was highly touted when he signed with the Ducks in the spring of 1982. At that time, he was picked as one of the best recruits in the nation after rushing 4,901 yards and scoring 72 touchdowns during his prep career in Rancho Cordova Calif.

But the 1982 football season was met with disappointment for Willhite. He was forced to redshirt the season because of a recurring torn hamstring injury he had suffered as a senior in high school.

Willhite was finally given a clean bill of health at the beginning of the 1983 season, and was again billed as the cure-all for Oregon's rushing problems. But injury struck again, and this time it was Willhite's shoulder. Even with the injury, the untested freshman started three games, carried the ball 41 times, gained 222 yards on the ground and caught seven passes for 66 yards.

"I dislocated my shoulder 16 times last year," Willhite said. "But I play with a lot of heart, and I didn't really care about the shoulder."

During the '83 season, the media had many expectations of Willhite and often criticized his play as well as his lack of time on the field.

Willhite said he tried not to let media pressure affect his playing last season, though it wasn't always easy. "The media kept saying 'this is going to be a great year.' So everybody said that I wasn't doing what I was supposed to do," he added.

"A lot of pressure is off me this year because I established myself as a blocker and a player in the Pac-10 last season," Willhite continued.

To keep his spirits high, Willhite has set a personal goal for himself to rush a total of 1,000 yards this season. "All I want to do now is go in there and play, so I can try to get a lot of carries and reach 1,000 yards."

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With media pressure and two injury-laden seasons behind him, sophomore tailback, Kevin Willhite, has high hopes for this year.