Ed Bouchette on the Steelers: The Grass Menagerie

Front office is still mulling its options for the surface at Heinz Field, and that includes keeping the grass.

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Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

"Don't rule out grass," one official cautioned as mounting sentiment grows inside the organization to install artificial turf.

They've already chosen the type of artificial surface if they make the change -- the new generation of FieldTurf that West Virginia University installed last summer and the New England Patriots put down in 2006. It's called Duraspine and it cost WVU $901,152 to install.

The cost has little to do with the Steelers' decision. They paid $150,000 last November to have sod placed over their deteriorating DDGrassMaster field, which is grass tied together and down by synthetic fibers.

The DDGrassMaster, which also is used by the Denver Broncos, was supposed to be an improvement over Heinz Field's original all-grass field. It was great in September and October. By November, after poundings by Pitt and the Steelers for two months, the five
high school championships played at Heinz Field applied the coup de gras.

Injuries and their own players' professed preferences for grass are reasons the Steelers have stayed with the grass that turned to dirt and mud by late season. They believed it to be safer. In that sense, it's been a well-intentioned experiment.

But when the Steelers played on the rock-hard artificial surface at Three Rivers Stadium for 31 years, they often cited studies that showed there were fewer serious injuries in games on those old artificial turfs than there was on grass in the National Football League.

As part of their investigation, the Steelers have gathered research from the NFL on injuries -- how they occurred and on what surfaces. They will use those studies as they determine whether to make the switch to FieldTurf's Duraspine.

Some in the organization believe the grass at Heinz Field has become a national embarrassment heightened by the Monday Night game against Miami and the downpours that occurred often during home games this season. The field also ranks at or near the bottom of annual NFL Players Association surveys of its members. Pitt officials have urged the Steelers to switch to artificial turf.

A new artificial surface also could help the Steelers on the field in a couple of ways. First, as they evolve under quarterback Ben Roethlisberger and Willie Parker from the old plowhorse offense into something sleeker. Parker has said he prefers artificial turf, which is no surprise because of his style of running. Second, by increasing income to help with the ever-increasing cash outlays for signing bonuses. Although there is a salary cap in the NFL, the cash needed for signing bonuses has become a problem for some teams in smaller markets.

By having artificial turf, the Steelers can attract more events like the Kenny Chesney concerts, knowing the field can hold up. The Rolling Stones, one source said, wanted to play in Heinz Field during the fall but were turned away because of concerns about the grass. The income from such events could help fund signing bonuses.

There really is little downside to having the new, safer generation of FieldTurf at Heinz Field. The Steelers have been practicing on FieldTurf since 2000 at their UPMC indoor facility on the South Side with no known serious injuries coming from it.

For those into aesthetics, the field would be forever green -- unless it snows -- and those slanted white lines the Steelers and Pitt use can disappear and end zones for each team zipped in and out.

Nothing 'special' in snubbing deserving hall candidates

The next former Steelers player to make the Pro Football Hall of Fame will be Rod Woodson next year. He should be a shoo-in.

A teammate of his should have been voted in by now but center Dermontti Dawson, selected to seven Pro Bowls and considered at least the equal to Hall of Famers Dwight Stephenson and Mike Webster, hasn't even made it to the semifinal 25 let alone the final 15.

Yet a punter, Ray Guy -- not even close to the best in the history of the game -- keeps making it to the final 15. The hall of fame should have a special wing -- make that a closet -- for special teams players. That would be better than having punters such as Guy -- who
participated in probably an average of five plays a game -- somehow knocking real players such as Dawson out of spots in the finals. Put Guy in the special category, along with Steve Tasker if you must and a few kickers. They can even put in a long-snapper because, as the supporters of kickers and punters have argued for years, they are part of the game too.

Sometimes hindsight isn't 20-20

It's good to see Mike Tomlin stick by his guns, but does he think we believe that if he had to do it over again, had he time to think about it, he would really order his team to go for a two-point conversion from the 12 with 10:29 left in his first playoff game?

You can argue one way or the other about him going for two at the 2, but once the penalty came, he had to kick it for the small chance of making it from the 12 -- the risk vs. reward was not in Tomlin's favor on this one.

"Yes, I'd do it again," Tomlin said. "I throw caution to the wind. I play to win."

On this one, however, he threw common-sense to the wind.

First published on January 20, 2008 at 12:00 am
Police were called to the scene of a dispute in Pine and neighbors were forced to leave their homes. Neighbors said the incident was at a house owned by Steelers wide receiver Cedrick Wilson.

Police were called to the home of Pittsburgh Steelers receiver Cedrick Wilson in Pine yesterday after receiving an emergency call about a woman threatening to commit suicide.

Police responded to the scene early yesterday afternoon and after a short while, several residents were forced to leave their homes and others were prevented from entering the neighborhood.

Police would not discuss the nature of the dispute at the house, but residents said the house was owned by Mr. Wilson. It was not immediately clear whether Mr. Wilson was inside, but neighbors said they believed he had been out of town.

As the drama continued to unfold into the night, police barricaded traffic from entering Blue Heron Drive, a cul-de-sac that runs off Route 910. Ambulances and fire trucks also were on the scene.

Around 8:30 p.m., a county SWAT team also arrived on the scene, as temperatures dropped below 20 degrees.
Earlier in the day, a line of cars was backed up on Route 910, as residents tried to get back to their homes.

A large contingent of news media were on the scene, but reporters and cameramen were prevented from entering the housing plan.

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I don't know anything about Jeannette's Terrelle Pryor other than the fact he might be the greatest high-school athlete to come out of Western Pennsylvania, but I do know something about Charlie Batch. Pryor couldn't have picked a better mentor to lean on during the final, frantic recruiting chase leading up to Feb. 6 when he will make his choice of colleges. I'm just hoping Aliquippa's troubled Herb Pope is watching and might learn something from Pryor.

"I have some feelers out there, reaching out to him," Batch said last week.

"If I'm Pope, I'm reaching hard for that lifeline."

Batch is best known as the Steelers' backup quarterback, living a quiet, comfortable life in Ben Roethlisberger's enormous shadow. But Batch has done his best work giving back to kids in the community -- our community, yours and mine. Among his philanthropic efforts is the Charlie Batch Summer Basketball League, getting ready for its seventh year on the 16th Avenue playground in Homestead, his hometown. It is there he met and became close to Pryor, Pope and many other talented young athletes from the area, including DeJuan Blair, whom you might have heard is making quite a name for himself as a freshman basketball star at Pitt.

Pryor asked Batch to join him on his remaining football recruiting visits. The two were scheduled to be at Michigan this weekend. Trips to Louisiana State and Oregon also might happen before the Feb. 6 signing date, which would force Batch to miss attending Super Bowl XLII. In the end, Pryor is expected to choose between Ohio State and Michigan.

"He asked me if I would help him and I'm glad to do it," Batch said. "There's really nothing in it for me. I went to Eastern Michigan and have no ties to any of the schools he's looking at."
I just want to help him in any way I can.

"I guess I just bring a little different perspective for him. I'm not his parents and I'm not the people around him. I'm just someone who has been through the process and made it to the NFL. I don't know if he's going to ask for my opinion or not. But, if he does, I know this -- I'm going to be honest with him."

Do you think maybe Pope could benefit from Batch's wisdom?

Pope is a gifted 6-foot-9 freshman basketball player at New Mexico State, struggling to find his way in life. He was just cleared by the NCAA after some eligibility questions and was expected to play for the first time this season against Louisiana Tech last night.

Pope, a Parade Magazine All-American at Aliquippa, has had a variety of personal and legal issues that have been blamed on his unstable upbringing, his hot temper, his poor choice of friends and his lousy decision-making. Last March, he was shot four times during a fight in Aliquippa. In December, Moon police found him unresponsive behind the wheel of a vehicle on Business Route 60; he will be arraigned March 26 on three counts of drunken driving.

"I feel for that kid," Batch said.

He can relate.

Batch was raised in a solid home by a devoted single mother, but he knows how brutal the mean streets can be. His sister, Danyl, an innocent bystander, was caught in gang crossfire in Homestead and was killed in 1996. She was 17.

Batch also knows the agony of feeling isolated a long way from home. Pope signed with New Mexico State because of coach Reggie Theus, but Theus left to take the head coaching job with the NBA's Sacramento Kings last summer before Pope arrived on campus. Batch signed to play at Eastern Michigan because of coach Tom DePuit, but he said DePuit was fired early in his freshman season.

"Suddenly, you're 17 or 18 years old, by yourself, having to depend on people you don't really trust," Batch said. "That's not a cool situation, especially when you're away from home.

"This kid needs as much support as he can get right now."

That's why Batch is trying to reach out to Pope. If Pope wants to make the smart decision this time, he'll reach back -- today, right now, not tomorrow or next week. It can't hurt him. He almost certainly would be a better person for it.

The No. 1 lesson that Batch tries to teach in his work with young people is this: Keep looking for a reason to succeed, not a reason to fail.

Pryor gets it.

It's not too late for Pope, is it?

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2004 draft yields quality QBs

By John Harris
TRIBUNE-REVIEW
Sunday, January 20, 2008

Eli Manning, Philip Rivers and Ben Roethlisberger were selected No. 1, No. 4 and No. 11, respectively, in the 2004 NFL Draft. Rarely in the league's history has a group of young quarterbacks made such an impact.

Roethlisberger quarterbacked the Steelers two years ago when they won Super Bowl XL. As a rookie, he started in the AFC Championship Game.

Today, four years after the quarterback draft that changed the fortunes of their teams, Manning and the New York Giants face the Green Bay Packers in the NFC Championship Game. Meanwhile, Rivers helped lead the San Diego Chargers to the AFC Championship game against the unbeaten New England Patriots.

Three quarterbacks, three satisfied teams.

"I would just say, if you had said that to me: 'Wow, I'm shocked,'" said Phil Simms, the former Giants quarterback and Super Bowl XXI MVP, now an NFL broadcaster on CBS. "I can't imagine three organizations taking a quarterback high and making it work."

Said Fox announcer and former Super Bowl-winning QB Troy Aikman: "It's a good group of quarterbacks. To take those three guys and the success all three have had, that's pretty uncommon."

It isn't always so rosy for quarterbacks taken high in the draft. The quarterback class of 2004 is an exception.

Quarterbacks that last
A look at the NFL's longest active streak of consecutive starts by a quarterback:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Player</th>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Games</th>
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<tr>
<td>Brett Favre</td>
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<td>Peyton Manning</td>
<td>Colts</td>
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<td>Eli Manning</td>
<td>Giants</td>
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http://www.pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/sports/print_548325.html
1/20/2008
Of the five quarterbacks taken in the first round of the 1999 draft, only Donovan McNabb and Daunte Culpepper have started a game in the past four seasons. McNabb is the only quarterback from the first round of that draft to reach the Super Bowl.

"For whatever reason -- head coaching, offensive coordinators -- there are so many reasons why it doesn't work," Simms said. "All three (Roethlisberger, Manning and Rivers) found themselves with organizations that backed them. They were going to build their teams or make it work with them."

The 2004 draft class also included J.P. Losman, who was taken by the Buffalo Bills with the 22nd pick. Matt Schaub was taken in the third round by the Atlanta Falcons and now is the starter for the Houston Texans.

### Proven winners

A look at the active NFL quarterbacks with the highest regular-season winning percentage, minimum 50 starts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Player</th>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Record</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tom Brady</td>
<td>Patriots</td>
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<td>Ben Roethlisberger</td>
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<td>39-16</td>
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<td>105-55</td>
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<tr>
<td>Donovan McNabb</td>
<td>Eagles</td>
<td>70-40</td>
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</tbody>
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**Source:** Pittsburgh Steelers

Roethlisberger is the youngest quarterback to win a Super Bowl and, this year, set team records for single-season passer rating (104.1) and touchdown passes (32).

Manning and Rivers didn't enjoy immediate success like Roethlisberger, but each is making his mark in this year's postseason.

Manning had a career-high 132.4 passer rating in the Giants' upset of the Dallas Cowboys last week and has thrown 54 passes without an interception.

Rivers is doubtful for today's game against the Patriots because of a right knee injury. But he has thrown for 292 and 262 yards in back-to-back playoff wins, and some of his best work in the postseason has come on third down, when he has completed 16 of 20 passes for 264 yards. In the Chargers' eight-game winning streak dating to the regular season, he has thrown 14 touchdown passes.
passes and just five interceptions.

The '04 draft, although impressive, still takes a back seat to the 1983 draft, considered the grand daddy of all quarterbacks drafts.

In 1983, a record six quarterbacks were selected in the first round, all by AFC teams -- John Elway, Todd Blackledge, Jim Kelly, Tony Eason, Ken O'Brien and Dan Marino. Four played in the Super Bowl, and three were inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. In 11 of the 16 years following the 1983 draft, the AFC was represented by a team whose quarterback was taken in the first round of that draft.

The 1999 draft was the next big draft featuring quarterbacks. The first three picks that year were Tim Couch, McNabb and Akili Smith. Culpepper was the No. 11 selection, followed by Cade McNown one pick later.

Only McNabb and Culpepper remain. Couch, Smith and McNown are out of the league.

The 2004 draft was all about rebirth. Three of the four quarterbacks taken in the first round have led their teams to the playoffs.

"As it turns out, it's a pretty good class," said Aikman, a Hall of Fame Dallas Cowboys quarterback and MVP of Super Bowl XXVII. "It's a little bit like the '83 class. Not in sheer numbers, but just in terms of the debates as to, 'OK, who was right, who was wrong, should that guy have gone here?'

"All three have turned out to be very productive players. I know Ben was very disappointed he didn't end up with the Giants because that's where he thought he was going. He was led to believe that's where he was going, even as late as the day before the draft. (Instead) he goes to Pittsburgh.

"In a lot of ways that benefited him more than the other two, because it got him with a better football team. He has won a Super Bowl and had a great year this year."

Aikman and Simms were high first-round draft picks who struggled early in their careers before hitting their stride. They agree that a big reason for the early success of Roethlisberger, Manning and Rivers is because they have the full support of management and the coaching staff.

"I know how hard it is for quarterbacks. I know what it feels like to struggle," said Aikman, who was 0-11 as a rookie starter in 1989. "I know what it feels like to win. I know it goes beyond just how good you are as a player. You've got to have good players around you. But sometimes what goes unnoticed is who's coaching who? What's the environment like within the organization? Is it a team that has confidence in you?"

Said Simms: "Philip Rivers took off like a house afire. Ben Roethlisberger too. Eli Manning probably had the hardest time establishing himself. When he did
play bad, the Giants organization and coaches never quit backing him. There was never any doubt who their guy was going to be for a long time. They never wavered. That's a hard thing not to do in the NFL."

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Sources: Bills likely to get OK to play game in Toronto

By Chris Mortensen
ESPN.com

The Buffalo Bills almost certainly will get a regular-season game approved for Toronto and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers head a list of four teams under consideration to play in the NFL's 2008 game in the United Kingdom, a league source said Sunday.

Bills owner Ralph Wilson Jr. had petitioned the league to play one home game in Toronto to strengthen its Canadian fan base and the league source said owners are expected to approve the request. The opponent in that game is unknown.

Meanwhile, the source identified the Buccaneers, Kansas City Chiefs, New Orleans Saints and Seattle Seahawks as the leading candidates for the international series game to be played in the United Kingdom, probably in October.

The site of the game is undecided as the league is looking at two or three large stadium venues, as well as London's Wembley Stadium, site of the 2007 season's game between the Giants and Dolphins.

Chris Mortensen covers the NFL for ESPN.