

"Although Mr. Wilpon has voiced opposition to artificial turf and acknowledged yesterday that such a surface was not popular among all fans, he said he agreed to it 'in the co-operative spirit of a deal.'"

— The New York Times, April 11, 1984

"In the co-operative spirit of a deal." Fittingly soulless words to make known tragedy and inflict heartbreak. For when Fred Wilpon, the president of the Mets, announced the team's surrender to the city's ignorant and shortsighted wish for artificial turf at Shea Stadium, he pronounced the death sentence on baseball in New York.

The real game of baseball is played by nine players on an outdoor field of grass and dirt. The Yankees, who do play on grass, are disqualified from real baseball because of the American League's idiotic designated-hitter rule — that "loathsome ploy," as Red Smith called it. The National League has (so far) resisted this debasement. But, sad to say, it has led the way in baseball's herbicidal charge into the future, which began in the Houston Astrodome nearly 20 years ago. Now, only six National League teams play on grass. And if the Mets and the Mayor don't repent, in a few years only a heroic four will remain, for the San Francisco Giants before long will be playing domeball.

The advantages of artificial turf to



baseball are minimal, the detriments profound. Imitation grass does cut down on rainouts (because water can be vacuumed from the outfield by noisy "Zamboni" machines) and it doesn't have to be mowed — just reglued once in a while.

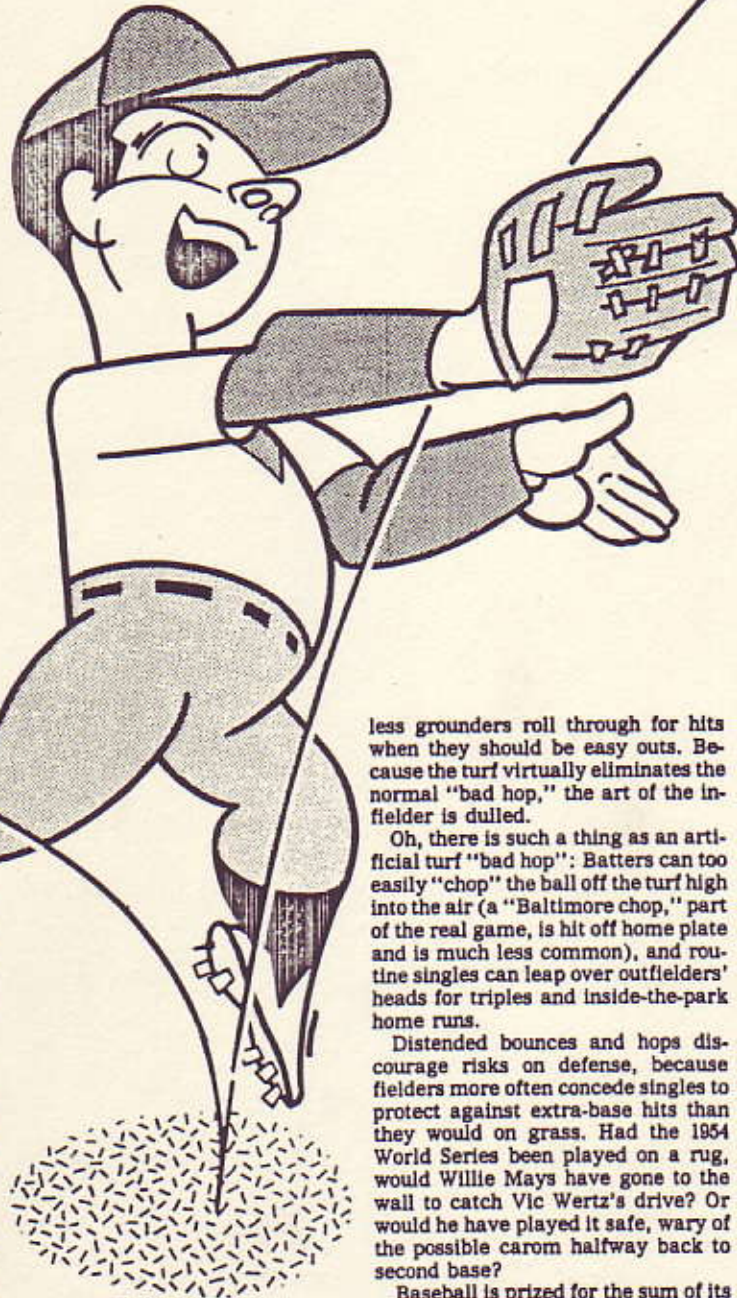
But the evil non-weed upsets the game's fundamental, historic proportions, which have served so well till now. Its weapon in this attack is its surface: Slick and hard, it dramatically distorts the movement of the batted ball.

Because the ball moves so quickly on the ground, bunting becomes almost too risky to attempt and count-

Michael Takiff belts 'em out as an opera singer.

Pseudo Turf at Shea? No Hit and a Big Error

By Michael Takiff



less grounders roll through for hits when they should be easy outs. Because the turf virtually eliminates the normal "bad hop," the art of the infielder is dulled.

Oh, there is such a thing as an artificial turf "bad hop": Batters can too easily "chop" the ball off the turf high into the air (a "Baltimore chop," part of the real game, is hit off home plate and is much less common), and routine singles can leap over outfielders' heads for triples and inside-the-park home runs.

Distended bounces and hops discourage risks on defense, because fielders more often concede singles to protect against extra-base hits than they would on grass. Had the 1954 World Series been played on a rug, would Willie Mays have gone to the wall to catch Vic Wertz's drive? Or would he have played it safe, wary of the possible carom halfway back to second base?

Baseball is prized for the sum of its

parts, and to exaggerate one is to shrink the whole. Artificial turf places too much emphasis on speedy players who can chase the skidders. "If you find a big, lumbering guy who hits home runs, you might take a second look now," says the Mets' general manager, Frank Cashen. ("Sorry, Mr. Ruth. Have you tried the haberdashery business?")

This disastrous alteration is proposed for Shea because the city wants a football team there. When Leon Hess stole his Jets across the river, one of his main complaints was about playing September games on a field that included the dirt of the Mets' infield. Remedies to Mr. Hess's other objections — messy bathrooms, heavy winds, low seating capacity, a raw deal on concessions revenue — are included in the renovation plan.

Since no National Football League teams are available, city officials are looking for a team from the United States Football League, which appears to be ready to switch from its nonsensical spring-summer schedule to the fall. So, for no other good reason except to marginally improve two games every September, played by a team that does not yet exist, in a league that has yet to stand on its financial feet, the city will adulterate 81 baseball games a season.

The obvious solution, if the city must have artificial turf football, is to wait a couple of years until the state builds a domed stadium and put the football team there, where sightlines and seating can be designed expressly for that game. Why not wait for the outcome of the state's study of the issue? What's the rush?

Mayor Koch, Mr. Wilpon, Mr. Cashen, forget about "the co-operative spirit of a deal." Forget about the U.S.F.L. and Zambonis, plastic grass and silly non-hit hits. Remember baseball, our delightfully anachronistic national treasure.

To install artificial turf is to create a stadium that is feasible for everything and good for nothing. Don't do it, Mr. Mayor. Please, say it ain't so.