

City Fields Foundation, started by Bill, John, and Bob Fisher, raises funds to renovate local playing fields. First up: facilities in the Mission and Bayview neighborhoods.

By Debbie Cohen
Photographs: Spencer Brown

Turf's Up!

RELIEF. That's the emotion conveyed in Gail Meadows' warm brown eyes as she stands in the Mission District's Garfield Square, shielding her face from the sun. She's watching students engage in an activity many kids simply take for granted: playing soccer after school on a sunny day.

Meadows is principal of an elementary school located near the square—the first park to be revamped as part of a landmark

joint project by the nonprofit City Fields Foundation and the city to improve local athletic fields. It may sound like a cliché, but there's nothing quite like the sound of children at play.

To the casual observer, the picture-perfect scene with Meadows and her young charges looks like nothing more than a group of school kids happily chasing after a soccer ball. It could be any park, anywhere. But Meadows and her kids avoided this run-down field until its completed renovation last October.



"It was unusable. It was gross," says Meadows, keeping her voice low so the kids won't overhear what she has to say. "Before they fixed this place up, there was trash, there was graffiti, there were people doing drugs."

Checking out the venue while listening to Meadows talk about the new soccer clinics she's got going, it's almost impossible to imagine that Garfield was long known around the neighborhood as "*el parque donde te rompes el pie*," or "the park where you break your foot."

That nickname, given due to the park's uneven natural grass and rutted surface, no longer applies, thanks to the City Fields Foundation. Gone is the park's formerly bare, dusty (or muddy, depending on the weather) playfield. In its place is a state-of-the-art multi-use athletic field.

Formed in 2005, the park restoration project is the brainchild of Bill, John, and Bob Fisher, San Francisco residents and sons of Gap Inc. founders Donald and Doris Fisher. They created the foundation to address the chronic shortage of adequate playfields in San Francisco, and to help the city provide equal access to sports facilities by athletic leagues, school teams, physical education classes, and informal neighborhood play. The partnership between City Fields and the city was initially accepted by the Recreation and Park Commission, with the Board of Supervisors and Mayor Gavin Newsom giving the final stamp of approval last May.

Today Garfield park shines with high-grade artificial turf, new goals, a picnic area, and improved fencing, lighting, and bathrooms. It serves as a model in an ambitious plan for renovating other playing fields throughout San Francisco. So far, the park's getting rave reviews from adults and kids alike.

"No more rug burn, no more mud in your face," enthuses 11-year-old Kha'la, who lives near the park and attends Meadows' school. "And you don't lose your shoe any more when you slide for the ball."

While Kha'la and her pals are busy trying to score a goal, there's more action down at the other end of the field, where a group of three- and four-year-old "tiny tots" chase after soccer balls of their own. "There's no playground at our school," explains the tots' soccer coach, Fabio Cano, who works for the local Head Start program. "Now that it's so clean and nice we come here once or twice a week."

From the sidelines, City Fields Foundation staff Patrick Hannan and Susan Hirsch survey the action, looking more like two proud parents than organization representatives.

They are dressed casually and wave and say hello to several folks they know from their frequent visits to check up on things.

"We are all about follow-up," asserts Hannan, foundation spokesman. Noting that ongoing maintenance is a key aspect of the program, he adds that contact information for the site manager and the Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Services is included on signs at renovated fields so the public can notify the city of any problems.

He looks over at Hirsch, the foundation's project director, to see if she has anything she would like to add. Then a car goes by. A bird chirps loudly. Somewhere someone yells "that was a goal." But Hirsch, busily snapping photos with a camera, hardly seems to notice. She's totally focused on getting good shots.

"I always bring my camera when I visit the fields," she explains. Earlier in the day she was over snapping photos at Silver Terrace, the second and only other park to be redone so far by the project (though many more are in the works).

"You should have seen it," she says, putting down the camera, her posture radiating pride. "There were seniors walking on the path, a man doing *tai chi*, girls having a soccer game, and little kids playing catch with their parents. There was such a sense of community."

Back when Garfield Square was first completed, the city held an elaborate ribbon-cutting ceremony and attracted media attention. At the time, Newsom told the crowd gathered at the park, "This is the first one in San Francisco—not in Pacific Heights, not on Russian Hill, not on that side of town. It's here in this community."

**There were
seniors walking
on the path,
a man doing *tai
chi*, girls having
a soccer game,
and little kids
playing catch
with their
parents. There
was such a
sense of
community.**

—SUSAN HIRSCH

Show Us the Money (For the Love of Sports)

Speaking on behalf of his brothers, Bill Fisher recalls that, growing up in Presidio Heights, playing sports was one of their favorite and most rewarding pastimes. The siblings played soccer and baseball in parks all over the city. "We had the bruises to show for it."

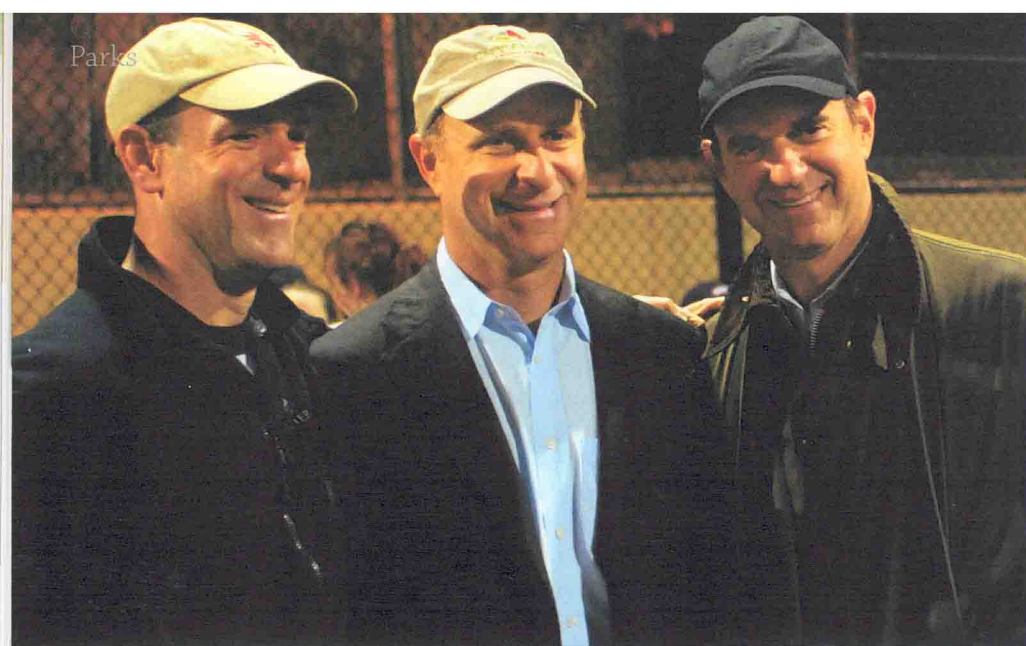
Much like the characters in that old television show "My Three Sons," the Fisher brothers were close in age and had a happy childhood with "wonderful parents." All three went on to spend some time living elsewhere, but ultimately chose to return to their beloved City by the Bay.

"This is a great place to live," says Fisher, noting that he and his brothers now reside near each other with kids of their own, and appreciate the importance of good-quality parks. But in San Francisco, as any soccer mom or dad can attest, the need for more athletic fields and for the improvement of existing ones is obvious.

The city boasts a vibrant adult and junior sports scene year round, including baseball, softball, and soccer leagues. Counting soccer alone, 300 teams participate from every part of the city. Yet, despite San Francisco having more than three times the

national average of soccer players, many kids living in the city are turned away from organized sports due to lack of playing fields. Moreover, many of the existing fields in San Francisco are in poor condition and routinely taken out of commission for weeks at a time to recover from heavy rain and constant use (though kids and their families still show up every Saturday hoping to play).

So the Fisher brothers borrowed the concept of public-private partnership from the successful Take the Field Foundation that has worked with New York City to improve its public school fields. The idea appealed to them as a "win-win" situation, and they sought to make it work in San Francisco. Officials at the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department couldn't have been more thrilled. A previous assessment they had conducted found that to adequately



At play in the city fields: City Fields Foundation creators John, Bill, and Bob Fisher (top, left to right). Garfield Square before its renovation (above) and as the new turf was being laid down.



serve children and adult athletes, the city needed an additional 27 baseball and softball fields and 33 soccer fields.

Raising funds is an important goal of City Fields. "This is not really about us writing a check," explains Fisher, who chairs the foundation's steering committee. "We just got it going. It's really all about trying to get everybody on board. Ultimately, we want the community, the people who live there, to take pride of ownership. The success of this program is dependent on raising funds other than our own and making sure the city participates to its fullest."

After visiting parks and speaking with members of the community, it became clear to Fisher and his brothers that the best way to increase play capacity was to renovate existing fields with the new generation of artificial turf and help update the fields' reservation system—two longtime goals of the Recreation and Park Department. A computerized permit and reservation system for athletic fields around the city is expected to be online by the end of the year. And City Fields anticipates it will take about \$60 million total, including \$20 million in city money, to renovate more than a dozen facilities around the city, some of which will have multiple baseball or soccer fields.

From Before to After As Garfield Square was being renovated, the City Fields Foundation went to work giving a similar facelift to the grounds at the Silver Terrace Playground in the Bayview district. In total, the foundation contributed some \$4.5 million to the projects at both parks, which was supplemented with \$1 million in city funds.

Silver Terrace is a large multi-sport park just down the hill from the Thurgood Marshall Academic High School. Its athletic field features a full-size baseball diamond with grandstands, a softball field, and extra space for a multi-use/soccer field. However, despite the high demand for city playfields, the formerly rough, weedy, uneven, and pockmarked field was rarely booked.

Then artificial turf was installed on the entire athletic field, and a soccer field, new fencing, lighting, and benches were also added. A popular walkway around the field was also restored, with improved landscaping. Since then, neighborhood use has increased and Thurgood Marshall uses the park for after-school sports.

Like many schools in the city, the high school relies on the city's athletic fields for physical education classes as well as team

sports. But, according to Principal Paul Cheng, “for years our closest field, Silver Terrace, was virtually unusable due to its poor condition.”

Now, with the new amenities, Cheng says the school’s girls’ soccer, softball, and baseball teams hold practice and play games at the new field 20 days a month. “In addition to being a much safer playing surface,” he says, “they have given our students a renewed sense of enthusiasm for playing sports and a strong sense of pride for their community field.” Cheng adds that sports programs are critical to the health and well-being of San Francisco’s

youth. They have the power to increase self-esteem, reduce teen pregnancy and drug use, improve academic achievement, and fight childhood obesity.

Girls’ sports also got a kick-start at Garfield. According to Jeanne Darrah, a soccer mom and Recreation and Open Space Advisory Committee district representative, the redone field at Garfield inspired the creation of a local girls’ soccer league. Her eight-year-old daughter plays on the new team called “The Queen Bees.” “Before, the field was completely unusable,” says Darrah. “Kids in the neighborhood had to take two buses to get to a field they could play at. Now we play all our games right here.”

Since the renovations, playtime at both fields has nearly tripled. It was not by chance that Garfield and Silver Terrace were selected as the first parks to get much-needed makeovers—becoming reality show-like before and after success stories. As part of a city-wide field evaluation by the foundation and the Recreation and Park Department, volunteers and staff walked, measured and assessed more than 80 public fields using the following criteria: current condition and use, ability to increase field capacity, cost, community value, and existing programming. The foundation and the city intend to continue improving as many fields as they can raise money to support. In fact, they say construction will begin on more parks this summer, and expect them to be ready for play by the end of the year. Working with Newsom, the foundation has again agreed to split the cost, with private funding covering two-thirds and the city paying the remaining third.

The next parks slated for restoration were selected with the goal of adding play capacity on fields primarily used by young people, and include: the Crocker-Amazon soccer fields in the Excelsior, South Sunset Playground soccer field and ball diamonds in the Sunset, the ball diamonds at Kimball Playground in the Western Addition, and adding lights to the existing synthetic turf field at Franklin Square.

San Francisco City Supervisor Tom Ammi-ano calls Fisher’s innovative public-private partnership “an excellent example of the tremendous progress that can be achieved when local communities, government agencies, and the private sector come together to reach a common goal.”

That said, while parents are breathing a collective sigh of relief over their kids being able to play in a sunny, safe, well-kept park, for the kids it’s all about scoring that other kind of “goooooaaal!” **B**

Going (Artificially) Green

In San Francisco, change happens. And when it does, it often becomes a role model for other cities. But why would a city so environmentally and politically correct choose to do away with grass and instead fill its athletic fields with artificial turf?

Remember growing up seeing the neighbor’s welcome mat made of Astro-Turf? You probably wondered how football players played on that hard plastic surface. Today’s artificial grass is a far cry from the original Astro-Turf, first installed at the Houston Astrodome in the 1960s. In fact, it’s often indistinguishable from grass, as safe or even safer to play on, and softer, reacting to foot pressure in much the same way as natural turf.

Artificial turf will allow San Francisco’s residents to get more use from their existing fields. Unlike grass turf, it can be used year-round, because it doesn’t need downtime after heavy rains and constant use. So kids will be able to play on “soccer Saturdays” even if it has rained all week, and hundreds of little feet chasing a soccer ball won’t destroy the field so that it needs to be shut down to dry out or re-grow. Moreover, replacing grass due to wear and tear comes at a high cost to the city, while artificial turf can last up to fifteen years. In addition to allowing for more play, the Recreation and Park Department estimates that because it doesn’t need to be mowed or watered, a renovated field can

reduce maintenance costs by as much as 75 percent.

Artificial turf is nothing new to the Bay Area. Numerous local schools and universities have artificial turf, including UC Berkeley’s Memorial Stadium. The well-used synthetic soccer fields at San Francisco’s Franklin Square and Youngblood Coleman parks are also very popular. In fact, it was the experience with these fields which led the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department to support City Fields’ proposal to use synthetic materials over natural grass.

From an environmental standpoint, use of synthetic turf most obviously conserves water, but it also reduces the use of herbicides, chemical fertilizers, and paint. And fertilizers are increasingly being identified as a source of ground water contamination. Having synthetic fields also reduces the use of gas-powered equipment, cutting back on the emission of air pollutants.

On the flip-side, synthetic turfs eventually (since their components do not biodegrade) will end up in a landfill, though alternate methods of disposal are being explored. But consider that the artificial turfs installed at Garfield Square and Silver Terrace were made of used California tires—rescued from a landfill fate themselves.

For more information on the City Fields Foundation, call 415-837-5403.