



Episode 05

Plastic, real, or something in between?

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Podcast Transcript

Music Intro

Sara: Hello and welcome to this episode of Canadian Turf Talks, where we're going to talk a little bit about sportsfields today. Plastic, real, or something in between? There's been this debate about whether real turf, you know, living, growing grass is better for sportfields or maybe it should be artificial plastic turf. Today we're going to be interviewing Rob Heggie, the Director of Grounds at Toronto Football Club, which is also known as BMO Field in Toronto, Ontario. And I'm here with my co-host here Reg Langen. And, uh, Reg, why are we interested in talking to Rob? What are you hoping to get out of this?

Reg: I think Rob is one of the most innovative and clever grass managers, or turf managers, I've seen. I mean, BMO (field) poses a ridiculous challenge for him and he's out there, you know, working through a gauntlet of events and working with, you know, the highest of the high-end athletes and trying to make sure the surfaces are the way they are. I think Rob's done a really great job of coming up with some creative solutions and I'm really interested to hear a lot more about how he – him and his team – have really taken on these, you know, almost – I would say impossible – challenges in Canada and managing turf in the cold climates, and all of these other things. So, I'm really excited to see – to learn a little more about how they've gone through that process and also, you know, learn a little bit more about him and his role at MLSE.

Sara: Speak of the devil, here he is.

Rob: How's it going?

Sara: We're good, we're good. Thanks for asking. So, we're here with Rob Heggie, the director of grounds at the Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment partnership, but we also call your field BMO field, right? Why is it called BMO field?

Rob: Uhh the bank sponsorship. The Bank of Montreal has always been a sponsor.

Sara: Ah... yeah. I mean, the first question we always ask everyone is, tell us a little bit about your background and how you got into the turf industry.

Rob: I find a lot of people that end up in the turf industry – No one goes looking for it. If you ask any kid in high school, no one's gonna say, “I want to grow grass on the golf course.” It was just one of those things. I think I was 15, 16 and started working on a driving range, which kind of turned into me working at Rattlesnake Point before I'd gone to school for anything in horticulture or anything like that. And I just kind of kind of fell into it. It's a sweet summer job and then you see the superintendent rolling around in a nice truck and you're like, “Oh, that could be for me.” Hahaha. So, it was one of those things, I never went looking for it, but I found myself very comfortable in it.

Reg: So, that said, what do you really love about turf?

Rob: Well, the funny thing is I originally went to school for horticulture out in Ridgetown College. At that point I had more in my mind that I wanted to be a landscape designer, or landscape construction. The more I got into that, the more I realized how much is on my shoulders when I'm running my own business and that really wasn't for me. And a lot of the time with landscaping, you're doing odd jobs or \$50,000 job here, \$100,000 job there, which is cool. But then working on the golf course and looking at what the golf guys got to do. When you get to do these huge gardens, you got to do waterfalls, you get to do lakes, you get to do... It's the epitome of horticulture. So, I kind of gravitated from horticulture, and then once I finished my horticulture – to be a superintendent, horticulture is not really good enough. You need that turf background as well. So that's what brought me into the turf industry. It was basically Golf Management was the epitome of horticulture.

Sara: Yeah, so you said you did your program at Ridgetown, so that's the university program in Hort. So, then you did a second degree at the University of Guelph in turf management. So, you did the diploma in Hort, then diploma in turf, how did you first hear about the program at Ridgetown? And then was that like, what segwayed you into the turf program at the same....?

Rob: Well, I wasn't the best student in high school, let's put it that way. I did the victory lap in high school. So, I was kind of at a loss of what I wanted to do. So, I started doing a bunch of night course programs, and I'd always know what I liked mucking around in my dad's garden. I built a lot of his garden. I did a lot of landscaping on the side. And then I did this night school and horticulture almost came naturally. I was doing soils and I was getting like 90%, 95%. When in high school that really wasn't my type of average just because I didn't like what I was taking, essentially. So, I started realizing I was – I inherently had a green thumb. Did some night school programs, saw how good I was at it, kind of did -kind of looked into what universities there are in Ontario that offer horticulture. At the time, I think there was Kemptville, Seneca, Fanshaw, Ridgetown, maybe one more. But if you talk to anyone – Ridgetown, before the affiliation of the University of Guelph, I might not have gone there. But with the affiliation of the University of Guelph, it was an easy decision when you talk to anybody in the industry.

Sara: Oh, for sure. Yeah. It kind of shows when you enjoy what you're doing, you can excel at it, right? Like, I think you even got an award for being the best grade in the Hort program. Right?

Rob: Yeah, no had the highest-grade point average or whatever for Horticulture.

Sara: yeah, that's awesome.

Reg: It's funny, I'm the same. I was the exact same. I was as a terrible high school student. I went to college... as soon as I went to Seneca I was like, “I'm paying for it. I'm interested in it. I'm invested. I want to do it.” Right? So, you guys went under a huge renovation in 2016. And I mean, a lot of people consider it now to be a feat of engineering, with heated flooring and hybrid turf and all those, you know, fancy things... so, you know, what does it mean to have hybrid turf and how have your management practices changed since you underwent that renovation?

Rob: Yeah, so like you said, MLSE spared no money. Since I started there, 13 years ago – Originally, it was the heating system with sub air, 12 inches of sand.... a two-acre USGA green, essentially. And then the team was okay at that point. And then they kept on striving for more and more, attracting better

and better talent. So, the expectation of turf becomes greater and greater. And that's when we started to look into grow lights. And we started looking into the hybrid options. And we started looking at all these things that, basically, they're doing in Europe. So, the thing that really brought the hybrid on was the team got to a point that the games were being played till December, and the games would start again in February. Right? I can make grass look green with a heating system and the technologies we have, I can make the grass look green in February and March, April, November, December. I can put lipstick on a pig – is my example – once in a while. But we had no structure because there was no root mass, nothing would hold together, as soon as you run the players through it, it's kind of exploding under their feet. Just because obviously, low light levels, it's cold, all that kind of stuff. So that was the real addition of hybrid is because we knew we had to go to till December and start in February. And once you have that hybrid, the fields could look disastrous. It looked pretty bad at the beginning of this year. But it doesn't matter because it has that reinforcement through the soil profile. So even though it's only 5%, artificial, it's enough that you could run your cleats through there, you could change direction and you're not going to heave the dirt at all. So, it's from an expectation and predictability standpoint, for a player. It's been fantastic. But obviously, it comes with its problems. From a maintenance standpoint, when you can't hollow core, you can't do certain things that you'd normally traditionally would. And you've jammed up the system with all this plastic, right? So, the downside of a hybrid field is that accumulates organic build up naturally, because the players aren't removing it as quickly, because it actually holds in the ground. But then you accumulate so much organic matter that you start outgrowing the actual fiber length, right? And then the fibers get hidden in the organic and now becomes slip-and-slide. And then to get rid of that organic, you can't hollow aerate, which would be the way that you'd think you'd want to. So, it's a lot of different – utilizing different equipment that we wouldn't traditionally use. A lot of raking, deep tine raking, to try to get that organic matter out. In the perfect world, a hybrid field should be renovated. So, at the end of every season in Europe, they run a fraze mower through it, which is kind of a mower that has teeth, remove all organic, all grass, all everything. And surprisingly enough, all those plastic fibers get left behind. You bring the sand back in, you bring the seed back in, and you start fresh.

Sara: So, if I'm understanding – and now I haven't been to BMO field because I keep missing the field trip that you guys host, and thank you again. You always host this, and the students come back from it and they're just like, mind blown so I'm excited to come – but it's like you're growing grass on a plastic mat of fibers.

Rob: Yeah, essentially and then obviously, you could see where that would become challenging at certain points.

Sara: Yeah, that's bizarre.

Rob: But like I said, like, it always holds together and always plays well. There's examples, like Lambeau Field a bunch of years ago – they had a game and field looked disastrous. It was in January, I think, against the 49ers. Field looked disastrous, they have hybrid, and it held together. Wembley over in Europe, they had boxing last year. Boxing moves out, it looks disastrous, field holds together. So, it might not look pretty, but it'll always hold together and then the problem – the good and the bad of it is if you could just resod, you would have ripped it out and started again. But once you go hybrid, you're only seeding. There is no sod anymore. That's not an option. So, you tell ownership to spend a pile of money and it's not always gonna look nice but...

Reg: So Rob, coming out of the golf industry I mean, like, you're not focused necessarily 100% on just turf management as much as you're like, "What is the surface like? What's the playability of it?" That's much more important and...

Rob: Oh, 100%, 100%. The return on investment is much greater if your surface managing than trying to have perfect grass. An NFL team can get away with having 11 events, 10 events in their stadium for the year, and making money. Major League Soccer and CFL, I don't think those are the ones that you

could just have one tenant playing in a stadium and expect to make a whole pile of money off of it. So, we try to – we always try to over book it, or book it to the capacity to make money, right? They're not going to spend money on hybrid and grow lights and all this kind of stuff if there's no return on it.

Sara: Well, before you did the renovation, it was only the soccer team Toronto Football Club, right? And then now after the renovation...

Rob: Yeah, it was only the soccer team, and then they added the roof, and they added the Argos it was like, "Hey, you're adding a roof you took away my sunlight. So, you're buying me grow lights?" Right? It was tit for tat, kind of thing. And like, if you want to have the Argos come in and play and TFC still have an okay surface, then we need the grow lights. Right? We need the hybrid; we need all these things. And even that, like it's still a challenge. When you have 10 football games and 17 soccer games: Canada soccer, Canada rugby, all that kind of stuff. The expectation of the team is the field is perfect, and there's no paint. They can't see a football field when they play soccer...

Sara: Oh yeah, you got to change the paint!

Rob: Oh Yeah! Hahaha! It's a big thing. The thing about the paint is that's my responsibility. If the field's chewed up, that's not my fault. I didn't put cleats on run up and down the field and chew your field up, right? That's an expectation of your sport. Compared to if you have disease, if you have weeds, if you have insects, if you have line paint, if you have trash all over the place. That's the job of the superintendent. Your grass having ball marks and things like that, like it is what it is, but the tangibles and the things that are within reach you need to deal with. So, the paint again, like we have to bring – you know, I trialed all these paints from all around the world. And of course, the one that I find that works best comes all the way from Sydney, Australia. And it takes three and a half months to get here by boat like that. But it's the only product I could find that you could actually paint and the next day you will put a remover product on it, hose it down and, it's still eight hours for eight guys to clean the field off. But we can essentially remove 90% of that thing in the night.

Reg: And I'm sure that you saw no COVID slowdowns with the paint deliveries, and the paint shortage too, remember that?

Rob: Oh yeah, Hahahahaha!

Sara: On that same vein thought, what was your experience during the height of the COVID pandemic with like shutdowns and restrictions and space and how many people could be in a room? What was that like at BMO field

Rob: Drive to work was beautiful. Right? It was tough on my guys, we had to lay off a lot of our hourly. I went from 14 people down to two, essentially. Not just at the stadium, that's across the stadium and the training grounds, which is 4 natural grass fields with gardens and all that kind of stuff. Because we had to educate on how important a groundskeeper is, I got a lot of my guys back quickly. People don't understand that we're the ones that are stopping overgrowth, we're the ones that are stopping mice and rats from getting into your building, we're the ones that are doing everything. And they didn't really realize that. Luckily, all my life I've been told that I fall into the agriculture industry, and I never got paid overtime. But this was the first time that I came back that hey, I'm in the agriculture business and I can go to work. Haha.

Reg: Hahaha!

Rob: I was an essential service! Hahahahaha.

Sara: Grass is agriculture! I need that written somewhere. I want that on a post it note, I want that as a bumper sticker.

Rob: Well, my whole life, I was like, "I don't get paid overtime?" It's like, "No, you don't get overtime. This is agriculture, buddy."

Reg: It's the world's largest crop. Alright, let's flip back to some questions. So, there's a little bit of a debate throughout the sports world. And I know, you know, given the group that sitting here – where I think I know the answer – but you know, artificial turf versus real grass, where would you say you stand and why?

Rob: Agggh. It's one of those gray areas. Like, the STMA, was the Sports Turf...No, it used to be the STMA – it was the Sports Turf Managers' Association. This year, they changed it to the SFMA, the Sports Field Managers' Association to please all the plastic guys. Umm... Artificial serves its purpose in January and February, when it's under a bubble and you want to play some sort of sport and get some exercise. I think natural grass doesn't get the leverage it needs. They're, okay, for some reason, someone's okay with spending a million and a half dollars on an artificial field. But they won't spend half a million dollars on a natural grass field and then invest that other million dollars into maintenance spread over the next 10 years. Right? Because the lifespan of an artificial field is 10 years, right? So, if it's a million and a half and a million and a half, you might not get the playing hours out of the natural grass field. But you could have a really nice natural grass field if you maintained it right. The problem is most natural grass fields, in Canada especially, aren't maintained to the caliber they need to because the resources just aren't there. Versus the States, where I think, they love sport down there.

Sara: And their shoulder seasons are smaller.

Rob: And their shoulder seasons are smaller! So, I'm not a fan of artificial turf. I see its place, though. Because we're in a cold climate, right? And that's where I think the hybrid lends its hand to the natural grass surface. It's only 5% artificial, but it plays like a natural surface, right? There's pros and cons of both, but I don't think...

Reg: Well and you get that injury piece, right? The injury piece is a big one for the artificials. Right?

Rob: Well and that's it. Like, this year TFC used the stadium, I think 14 times in the month of March, right? So, it's minus five, minus whatever. I pulled the tarps off, it's freezing, they'd rather do that than go inside of a bubble and play on artificial turf. Yeah.

Sara: Yeah, I'll take grass burn over rug burn any day.

Rob: No, exactly. Just you can't convince these, like, high-end athletes, you can't convince professional athletes to go on artificial turf for more than a day or two, essentially.

Reg: That's their livelihood. Right?

Rob: That's their livelihood! And the research says they're going to shorten their career and they're going to injure themselves. Right?

Sara: For sure. Now, you've been at the MLSE for – I don't want to count, but –

Rob: Thirteen years.

Sara: Thirteen years! So over that career so far, what's your biggest challenge? You know?

Rob: Ah, that's a good one. Umm... The biggest challenge? Well, it's keeping your cool, first of all. Not just exploding. Because you do get – haha – Every year everyone has selective amnesia and seems to completely forget what they did last year, or they completely forgot what they did last week – to damage your field. So, it's just, I think my communication has come a long way. I'm not the superintendent to say no, don't do that. I'll say, Yeah, you do whatever you want. It's your field. Here's what's going to happen." Right? And I think I've gotten – gained a lot more respect from the team and everyone because they know I'm not the guy saying no. If I say no, I'm actually doing it for a reason. And I think getting to the point of not being a turf perfectionist was one of the hardest things. Like, we all want this perfect square of the grass. We all want perfect greens, but ownership builds these things for a reason. And it's not to be perfect. It's to make money. Right? So, once I figured out how to not take damaged grass – and things like that – so personally, I think that really helped me just not be so stressed.

Reg: What's your highest achievement? Or proudest moment? Since you took the role 13 years ago.

Rob: Well, that whole run like 2017, 2016, there was two MLS Cup runs in a row for Toronto FC. One of those years we had the MLS Cup. A couple days later, we had the Grey Cup. A couple of weeks later, we had the centennial. We had the Leafs play there against Detroit. We resodded the field January 14th, and then we had our first game Marched second.

Sara: That's a hell of a turnaround.

Rob: Oh, yeah, no. We actually harvested the sod in October, rented a greenhouse in Jordan, Ontario, laid all the sod out in the greenhouse so it wouldn't rot and then re-harvested it in the greenhouse and brought it down to BMO, and then put it underneath this giant inflatable cover that I convinced them to buy. So that was a feat of engineering, a feat of groundskeeping and all that.

Reg: I gotta ask an off-the-cuff question; but you just explained how you guys went through, I would say, a gauntlet of events, right? Questions that follow: One) How do you keep all your guys motivated? Because I can imagine going to them and saying, "Hey, guys, we're gonna lay all this sod out in this greenhouse, then we're gonna come back. We're gonna roll it back up..." Hahaha. You know what I mean? What? Like, Rob, you're crazy. This doesn't make sense. And then my second question follows. Are you married? If so, how is that still possible?

Sara: I thought you were gonna propose, Reg. Haha!

Rob: Right?

Reg & Rob: Hahahah!

Rob: Uhhh, so 1) I surround myself with really, really good people. It wasn't just us. Because Green Horizons was a big part of that. They did a lot of legwork for us, but it was me and Steve Scheidel kind of figuring out how we're going to do this. The main reason for the greenhouse was: keep the snow off of it, and when we need – to be able to warm it up, so it'll thaw and roll it up – we can do that. Right? So, the sod actually went frozen solid in the greenhouse, we saw a window in January that we'd be able to resod. We closed the louvers on the greenhouse and within hours that sod's already thawing out. Greenhouses are – even the middle of winter – it's amazing how quickly a greenhouse heats up once you close those, just from the sunlight. So, I'm good – I'm the – people have always said that I'm good at getting people to sign the blood contract. It's how I've been described. I'm all in myself though. I have work pants. I have worked boots, they're very dirty. I'm out there with everybody. I have no problem with working arm to arm with everybody and I think that does get a buy-in from my guys. And I'm a very positive person. I always try to look at things on the more positive side of things. Like, we can all sit here and mope and say, "Woe is me." Or we can try to come up with a reason or a plan and move forward. So, I've always been good at getting the people with the buy-in. And yes, I am married. I've been married for six years, kid's four now, I've been with her for a while but a very understanding wife. Much like the golf industry – a very understanding wife – she doesn't see me enough in the summer and she sees me too much in the winter.

Sara: This made me think of another kind of related question. You said, you know, like you keep your guys but we're trying to get more women in the industry, and I wonder what the breakdown is on your staff. Do you notice that there's more women in the industry now or is it still mostly guys?

Rob: I'm trying! Like, myself, I'm looking through a foreman or a fore-person that I keep saying to them, "I want a woman foreman!" But they're not easy to find either. So, we need more numbers. But yeah, no, I have out of 12, I always have two or three girls on staff. A couple of them. I had an intern that was a woman. She came from a university in the States... I forget where it was now... It's where Frank Rossi is.

Reg: Cornell.

Rob: Cornell! That's the one. Yeah, I had a girl out of there. When I was in Barbados working down there my staff was probably 90% women. I'm a Bajan myself and a lot of the local Bajan men just don't work as hard as the women down there for whatever reason. I find women have a much better eye for detail they don't rush through the processes or rush through the tasks.

Sara: Totally depends on the person, for sure.

Rob: It depends on the person but yeah, no; I try to keep 25%, 15%. Whatever the percent needs to be. Whoever's right for the job, is right for the job. Right?

Sara: That's fair. Well, so you kind of mentioned this, but like, you started in the golf industry. Now you've managed turf for soccer and football. What's the difference in user expectations? And then management needs of these two very different types of turf?

Rob: So, golf industry, I was always at the private high-end golf courses. I went to Rattlesnake, did my internship at Sandy Lane and then I went back to Barbados, and I worked at Apes Hill and did a construction. So, money has never really been an object in any of those golf courses. So, coming off the golf; I thought golfers were bad. When I first started at TFC, the soccer players weren't so bad because we weren't that caliber of soccer club. Around 2015, 2016 when Jermain Defoe came, Michael Bradley came, and we started actually making a push to be a professional level club. I started finding out the professional soccer player is the exact same as a professional golfer. The way the ball rolls the way you cut it this morning, how high it's been caught, what time did you cut it? How many times did you cut it? All those things go into play for a soccer player. Michael Bradley comes out, I know exactly where he's gonna walk, I know exactly what he's gonna look at. So, I'd say and what's the challenge is. So, I have soccer players which are like golfers because they have a surface and ball interaction sport. And then on the weeks off, I have football come in. Football is cleat and surface interact. Doesn't care about the grass, really, as long as their cleats are getting into the ground. So, the two don't lend to themselves to each other. At all. And that is a big part of the challenge.

Sara: Yeah.

Reg: When you said the team, my first thought is, "Wow, that's one of the toughest Greens committees."

Rob: Yeah, soccer is that – it's just like golf. I know, I'm not cutting it at silly heights, but it's still bluegrass cut at just under three quarters of an inch. So, the stresses are there. And the expectations are every week, the grass is perfect.

Reg: Yeah, so like, from that, that's a tough job. There's a lot of pressure. Right. And I know you got a great team and that's key for sure. But like, how do you handle all that pressure?

Rob: No, like I was saying – so part of that releasing the perfectionism was a part of it. And then the communication, communication, communication. Like, a few years ago when I had grass, I had one blade of grass out of place in year two of me working there, I'm sweating buckets. I'm on year thirteen now, there can be a lot bigger of a dead spot before I start to sweat. Haha!

Reg: Hey, we better do something about that soon. That's starting to look not great.

Rob: No, you know what I mean, like, you do gain confidence as you gain relationships with ownerships. You gain the relationships; I think you gain the trust of them. And whenever you do stress out, like it – again, you just don't take it so personally. When someone or when the team or when you have two teams playing and you have eleven events in the month or whatever it is, and your grass is chewed up, like, you can't stress out about that. There's nothing – as long as there's nothing that I could have done personally to make it better. And I didn't personally do anything to make it worse. Then, what can I do?

Reg: So, you're going [Kentucky] blue[grass] at three quarters of an inch. What do you seed with? So, I gotta ask, because if you're coming in, you're seeding, you're getting beat up, you're not getting bluegrass germinating that fast unless you're using Jumpstart or something like that.

Rob: It was blue.

Reg: Haha! It's all Rye now.

Rob: Haha! Umm. I went heavier on the rye last year because soccer players were playing on rye grass. It's a lot of greasier, as they say, when you do a knee slide or you slide like, the cells explode, and you move. Versus bluegrass, I've seen it all the time, new bluegrass field, a soccer player will score, they'll go to do a knee slide. BOOM! Face first, right into the grass! Haha. Because it doesn't have that slide.

Reg: There's that tensile strength below, right?

Rob: Yeah, yeah, yeah, and it holds together, right? So obviously I want a bluegrass stand. This year, I had a lot of snow mould and a lot of problems. When you start turning heating systems on and you have a grow cover on in March and it snows. And this, and this, and this.

Reg: Mhmmm.

Rob: And then our lovely government doesn't like you use have products that you should be using. It makes it difficult, so you get disease, and a lot of that disease was leaned on the fact that TFC likes ryegrass. This year, I've tried to get my bluegrass stand a little bit more, because bluegrass as we all know is a lot better through the winter. So, my season, early season in March when I have no grass, I throw annual rye grass it. Right? Because I don't care what grass grows, as long as it's green and it shuts these soccer players up. I'm okay with it. Haha! Right. So? So, there's a lot of very quick germinating ryegrasses out there. Obviously, they're not going to get through summer, they're not going to get through winter, but it'll give you a stand. And then I'll start going back into the blues. I'll start going back into the ryes. So, through the season, it's not unlikely for me to be at like 40% bluegrass mix 60% ryegrass mix. And then what I get towards the end of the season, and I know it's shutting down again and let's get bluegrass stands back up. Then, obviously when you start in February, and you go to December, *Poa* is your best friend. Sometimes I wish they'd sell *Poa* seed in a bag and I'd just go out there and... ha ha ha ha!

Reg: Just grass, man. Just keep it green. The funny thing is, though, *Poa*'s like, as far as surface – it's one of the best it's just keeping it alive is impossible!

Rob: Oh, it looks great, those little spots, of like, this much, look great. Ha ha!

Reg: Right? It stands right up, it cuts beautifully. It's like – this roll is amazing. I mean, ask Pebble, right? That's what they are. But it's – you know, come the heat, good luck. Right? Come on the cold. Good luck. Come the ice, good luck. Right? It's just....

Sara: Looping back a bit and speaking of Barbados, you were there for the construction of a golf course there. Right?

Rob: Yeah, no, well, during my – my internship in Barbados – or sorry, my internship for the Guelph program I decided to back to Barbados. I was born in Barbados, so I don't need work permits, I don't need any of that, I just need a plane ticket and away I go. So, 23-year-old Rob thought it was a great idea. Let's fly to Barbados and work on a golf course!

It's been Sandy Lane – Sandy Lane was a great experience. Two 18 holes, one Bermuda, one paspalum, with an old nine. Beautiful golf course. It's a Green Monkey course. It's where Tiger Woods got married to his wife. Uhh... the original wife. So, a really, really nice spot. Met the right people through that, got the opportunity to go back after university and do a construction. And you can't – you

only get one opportunity to do a construction, I think – maybe two in your life – as a superintendent. So, I went down, and I was the Assistant Grow-in Super, or whatever you want to call it.

Sara: Uh huh.

Rob: Yeah, fantastic opportunity. Warm season, different culture, different climate. Like I said, majority women working on my staff. Not an easy place to grow grass. You need a product? Yeah, we'll put it on a plane from Florida and get it in there in a couple days, kind of thing. Nothing's local. Nothing's domestic.

Sara: Yeah.

Rob: One of the biggest challenges down there is just theft of equipment. Right?

Sara: Oh no!

Rob: Right? I know. But a fantastic opportunity. Whether it was in Barbados or Canada or wherever it was, I felt a lot of the students – my assistant, actually, now was an intern for me years and years ago and then after he was my intern he went and he did Port Dover, he did a construction out in Port Dover and then realized he liked working for me better. But he – like I told him, “Go do the construction. Construction it's interesting. When you understand the golf course, the bones of the golf course, and the construction of a golf course, it really teaches you more than you can learn from just looking at it.

Sara: Have you been able to go back to that golf course and see it, and like, maybe like look at it and see like – oh maybe you should have done something different?

Rob: Oh yeah. Well, I go back to Barbados yearly to see family and stuff like that. I think a written rule – an unwritten rule – is if you had a construction, if you were a part of the construction, I think you got free golf for life. Hahahahaha! That's my understanding at least. Ha ha ha.

Sara: But like, have you seen like the course has changed or like you see something you're like, “Oh, that was a bad decision.”

Rob: Well, the funny thing is, that course actually it went to wrack and ruin. Like in 2020 it actually went out of business. Kyle Williams sold it, now it's owned by a guy out of Montreal. So, they went down and they actually redesigned it – a five-year-old golf course – they actually went and redesigned some of it, rebuilt some new greens, kind of changed the layout of some of it. I don't think any first owner of a golf course makes money. I don't think this second owner makes money. I think maybe the third owner makes money. Hahaha! If you're getting into the business of building a golf course to make money, you're in the wrong business. Right?

Reg: So, you do play some golf still, when you have time, so we're just curious like, if you had to pick between the three games that you've kind of been around. So, golf, soccer, and football, what would be your choice and why?

Rob: Can I play baseball?

Reg: Yeah, you can play whatever you want! It's your life. Hahah!

Rob: Haha! I like, I was a baseball player when I was a kid. My dream is still to go to Major League Baseball and do that somehow. Obviously, a tough go when and your only turf is artificial up here and everything's run by the States. Soccer, I think my dad said I played one year, and I was too busy playing with the dandelions, which sounds right for where I am now.

Reg: Right!

Rob: Right? That checks out. Hahaha. But yeah no, and then football – I think it's a dying sport. Like with what we know about concussions and all that kind of stuff. Unless you're somewhere that your only

out is football. I don't see anyone signing their kid up for football. Out of those three, I'd say golf. I do enjoy a round of golf. I'm terrible at it, but I enjoy a round of golf.

Sara: What do you like about your current work? What's your favorite thing that gets you up out of bed, and you're excited to go to work?

Rob: Oh, it's all such a blur. Like, how I've been there for 13 years now and how I've been in the turf industry for 25 years, or something, I have no idea how. I don't see myself aging until I look at people that I knew was like, two, and now they're 20. And I'm like, "What the hell happened there?" So, like, I've never had never had a bad day going to work in the golf industry, so to speak. I've had some hung over days and days with no sleep, but I still made it to work.

Reg: That was always the rule, right? It doesn't matter what you did the night before, as long as you're there at 5:00.

Rob: I had times at Rattlesnake that they'd get there and be like, "You got here early." It's like, "No, I slept here, and I was here at 4 in the morning." Hahaha! No, like I've never -like, to get me up in the morning, like I truly love what I do. I think turf found me. I've been quoted to say I've never worked a day in my life." I do have a high stress job. I don't – I don't really notice that it's a high stress job just because I put a smile on my face. And I just, I really enjoy going down to the stadium every day. And I really enjoy what I do. So, it doesn't really take much motivation. Right? I just really like where I'm at.

Sara: You drank the Kool Aid.

Reg: Fueled by passion. That's what I call it.

Rob: Yeah, yeah! But then you start having kids and then you're looking at your kid it's like, "Okay, I'm partly going to work for me when I'm partly going to work for you every day."

Reg: So, you've been around a long time, I guess. And I'm interested, Rob, what are the issues you currently see? What do you think is going to be the largest issue going forward in the industry

Rob: I think supply of students. Supply of workers is a huge one. I just made significant increases in my hourly pay. I thought for 25 bucks an hour you should be getting some applicants. Crickets.

Sara: Cricket, cricket, cricket. Yeah.

Rob: Hahaha. Right? Yeah. And it's astonishing because like I thought, like, there's a lot of people out there looking for work, but there's not. Like, there's 30 students a year that come out of the turf program. There's 30 students a year that come out of the Horticulture Program. So, there should be – just between the University of Guelph and Ridgetown – there should be 60 students a year looking for something. And it's just crazy that you can't find anybody. Right?

Sara: So, with COVID we had actually only 12 or 14 graduates, we had over 100 people approach us with different really great jobs. Umm. And the mom and pops nine-hole courses from around here, they're like, "Why didn't I get anyone here?" And I'm like, "Well, because they went to Augusta."

Reg: One of the things I recently learned about is the Grow Program from Landscape Ontario and helping them try to do some work with – trying to just get some interest, and not even in just turf but in every aspect of... Because going forward, guys like yourself and me who have operations, we need people and we're going to have to go attract. And that's – I don't know how you do that in a way. I think it's guys like yourself and Cam who are out there doing that kind of work that's really critical to the future of our success as an industry, whether it be in turf or landscapes because it's necessary. Like, I worked at the city, we couldn't find full time people we were willing to give pensions to. I was like, and it's kind of like, "What is going on?"

Rob: But that being said, like it's an oddball job. Like, I remember I told my dad, "I'm gonna go to school for turfgrass management." He said, "Why?" Hahaha!

Sara: Listen, my mom, the other day, I blew her mind because I told her backyard is turf grass. She was like, "What? Really? I thought you were only doing golf course grasses." I'm like, "Pffft... okay"

Rob: And well, that's why I like to bring the turf students down to BMO every year. It's because they think they're only in golf courses. Right? Like they think they're in golf course management class. No, you're in the diploma for turfgrass management. There's sports field jobs that pay very well. And there's hundreds of municipal jobs that pay more than any superintendent in Ontario. Right? And that's why I like bringing them down to open their eyes that oh, it's not just golf.

Sara: I saw, you actually wrote an article – well, or someone wrote an article – about how earlier this year about how cold it was earlier this spring. And then I know we had a really dry and hot summer like how did that affect your turf and your playing conditions this summer in 2022?

Rob: Well, it was a tough start. We had a new coaching staff start this year. They came out of LA, great people, but coming from LA to Toronto, obviously a big learning curve there. So, we got a little aggressive on the usage of the field in March because grass doesn't grow in March quite like it does in Toronto like it does in LA. So, we were living with that through March, April, May-ish and just as we got the stand of grass nice, this summer was vicious. I think we had three rain events for the entire summer. Four rain events that entire summer. It was a tremendous drought this summer across all Ontario. When it rained, it poured. You got an inch and a half. A little bit of that goes in the soil and most of it goes down the drain. The practice facilities, where I really saw it this summer. What you said, Poa doesn't like heat. I have never seen grass so angry as at this facility. Hahaha! We didn't even do anything wrong. Hahaha! Because when like the practice facility is 10 years 11 years old, we've never resodded it. So, it's probably 50% Poa. Right? In the summer when the Poa starts to hide, it looks like it's 25% Poa. In March it's 50%, 75% Poa. If you know what I mean. But when it gets hot and dry, oh wow. I thought the whole field was about to check out and die. Because between the seed heads and the color of the grass it just looked vicious. Not an easy growing season. But every season seems like it's not an easy growing season anymore. The 100-year storm comes every week or every month now. The highs and the lows are just crazy. It's hard to predict. We actually raised this as a point with ownership was like, I don't think December is December anymore. I think December is January. And I think March is April. I think everything is just moved. Like it doesn't snow till January now and the snow is not leaving till April. So, it's really wonky and it's hard to look at what you did in the past and have any continuity when you're looking at today with the temperatures and everything else that's going on.

Reg: Your next career when you retire, Rob, you can become a meteorologist. Right?

Sara: Yeah.

Reg: Alright, so let's talk about – I'm a big people person. Who do you admire in the industry and why? Who's really helped you grow to the point where you're at now?

Rob: Um, my cousin actually runs a golf course up in Barrie, he's superintendent. Dave Caldwell up in Barrie, Vespra. So, he was kind of a guiding light, younger in my career was in the golf industry. When I jumped boat from the golf industry and I went to the turf industry, I just emailed everybody that was within major league soccer. And I said, "Hey, I've never run a soccer field before, I come from the turf industry, what's going on?" So, I got in contact with a couple guys. Jared Minich is one of the guys I kind of look up to. He's been around, and he runs his own consulting company out in the States now. He's always been showing me that I kind of vent to him. And then Paul Burgess would be another one, which is the Real Madrid. And then a few guys out in Europe. So, Canada is a small pool of people, unfortunately. The state's Alan Johnson out of Green Bay, he's always been great. Similar climate, similar challenge. He has hybrid, he has grow lights, he has a lot of what I have. He's always been great. So, I've never been shy to say, "Hey, I know nothing! Do you know something?" Haha.

Reg: But when you're doing the things you're doing, and you're doing things that are way out – like way out – like, I remember your presentation. Like, "I just keep coming up with ideas and MLSE says

SURE!" And you're like, "Really?" Like, you must be a hell of a salesman. So, you know? And you sit ther, and you go, like, "Who else is doing this? That if I don't know, can help me?"

Rob: Well, and that's the hard part. When ownership says, "Oh, just reach out to some people that have a similar thing that we do get some answers." It's like, "WHO?" Haha.

Reg: Calling people in Sweden like, "Hey, what's up? Do you have any sports fields up there that you're keeping alive?"

Sara: And when you're doing something so specific, like pulling sod off and putting it in a greenhouse and try to rethaw it, no one does that. No one even thought of that.

Rob: Yeah, yeah, nobody does that.

Reg: But yea, superintendents – I'll tell you this. Grass growers or superintendents are the most innovative people. They have to be. Because they – you have no, sometimes you have next to no resources. And you're consistently asked to do things that Mother Nature doesn't want you to.

Rob: 100%

Sara: You talk to our students all the time, but there are people who are new in the industry and not necessarily coming to the DTM and getting the one-on-one tour at your property. Is there any advice you would give anyone that's interested in coming to the turf industry?

Rob: Cam used to ask me that question even Witherspoon used to ask me that the question every year. What should you do? And my answer was when you're at the STMA, when you're at the GCSAA, go to the bar, go to the pub, and talk to those superintendents that you wouldn't normally talk to when you're too shy to talk to them. Umm. But yeah, no. Like, don't be afraid to ask question. Like, the way I got my internship in Barbados – Yeah, I was from Barbados – I just went on to Sandy Lanes website and I emailed Contact Us. And I was like, "Hey, I'm from Barbados, and I want to come down and I want to do my internship. How do I meet people?" And they emailed me back, they're like, "Yeah, come on down." So don't be afraid to superintendents. I'll get emails all the time from people saying, "Hey, I'm from so-and-so and I'm in Toronto, I want to tour your stadium." I'm like, "Yeah, cool. Come on down. I'd love to share my wealth." Right? I'm not scared to share any of my knowledge because I'm more than comfortable – if you want my job, here it is. Haha. But I'm more than comfortable with sharing my knowledge because I think that's what this industry is built on. It's shared knowledge and shared wealth. Right?

Reg: That's the value of teamwork. Right? That's how I always look at it. Like, I did a lot of work with OGSA. It's like, here's – you could put five guys together and they'll have 150 years of grass growing experience and you're like, "Why would I not ask the questions??"

Rob: And that's why my head groundskeeper came from turf. My assistant and his assistant came from turf. Our other assistant came from turf. Our foreman is currently in the turf programs. Every year, I do my best to send them your way deal with it. But I have no problem with surrounding myself with greatness and surrounding myself with people that I hope are smarter than I am.

Reg: So, all this, we're gonna wrap this up here. So, what's next personally or professionally for you and kind of what's going on the inside of the BMO field team?

Rob: Umm...World Cup 2026. Canada's the host, which is obviously huge first time ever in Canada. We're the venue – us and Vancouver.

Sara: That's amazing.

Rob: We're easy. Vancouver is growing artificial turf right now. So, they got bigger problems than I do. Hahaha!

Sara: They're "growing" artificial turf?

Rob: Hahah!

Reg: I think Rob may be on a plane at some point soon.

Rob: 100%. 100%. Actually, that being said, I'm going to Doha in two weeks. Actually, I'm going to Qatar in two weeks to go visit all the World Cup venues for 2022 to get our feet wet for 2026. I'm lucky like – I'm not friends but fairly good acquaintances with Allan at FIFA. He's the head groundskeeper there. He's not totally concerned with us. We have high roof, we have sub air, we have grow lights, we have heat. We have everything. We're a FIFA-ready club. Right? Bigger problems down in the States right now with all those artificial turf NFL fields that are going to hosting in 2026. But yeah, I'd say the 2026 is a big feather in the cap. That's our Augusta, that's our World Cup. I've done the Grey Cup. I've done the MLS Cup. I've done Centennial Classic. I've done everything, but I don't think there's any bigger show on turf than FIFA World Cup.

Sara: Yeah. That's like the crown jewel right there.

Rob: And even with that, I can't find anyone to work for me. Hahaha!

Sara: You know what, I'm sure some of our students are going to be interested in coming to work for you. And now this is also an infomercial to: if you're interested in working at the Maple Leaf Sports Entertainment partnership at BMO field, please contact Rob Heggie. Hahaha.

Rob: Hahaha.

Reg: For the four people that are listening, it'll work out well. Yeah.

Sara: Yeah, yeah. Hahah.

Reg: And it's funny. I said, like – my wife kind of gives me the gears sometimes just like, “You do too much.” I said, “Ah, it's fun.” right? And I said, “To me, it's like, if six people listened to it, it was successful.” Right?

Rob: Well and it's like me, and my wife, she's like, “What are you going to talk about?” Like, if you got me talking about grass, I could talk till... how much time you got? Till tomorrow morning? Hahah.

Sara: We're talking turf! This is what we do!

Reg: I love it. I just think it's the most cool thing. Anyway...

Rob: Yeah, yeah, 100%. You bleed green.

Reg: Haha!

Sara: Well, thank you so much, Rob, for taking this time to talk to us. And, you know, share your experiences. Because I think that the big point of this podcast is to see different perspectives and different career paths. And also just, you know, see people as people. And you know, like, you're this awesome, head of this giant field, and you're in all these magazine articles and stuff, but like, you're also a dad, and you're also a person, and you're also a team leader, and you want to be approachable, right? So, I think that's important too.

Reg: Just another guy at the bar, right?

Sara: Yeah. And with that – clink –

Rob: Clink! Hahaha!

Reg: Rob, it was a pleasure. It was great to sit and chat with you for the time.

Rob: No, thank you very much. I appreciate it. It was great.

Sara: I think today, Reg you can agree with me, that we learned everything from golf course construction in Barbados to uhhh...

Reg: Different strategies to manage turf at a level that – you know, from greenhouse usage to, I mean, what a level of creativity. So, it was really great to learn.

Sara: Yeah, I honestly don't know enough about hybrid turf, and I think I need to go home and do a bit of homework on this because that's just such a bizarre thing. You know? We talked about there's a debate about the artificial turf and real grass and maybe hybrid turf is that in between?

Reg: It's really interesting stuff. Really clever technology. It comes with some new challenges that I think, you know, you really got to be up to date on your cultural practices and things like that, but it seems like it's a really cool little tool that I think a lot of high-end field managers could do some more research on and learn a bit more.

Sara: Thank you all for listening to this episode of Canadian Turf Talks. We hope you enjoyed this talk with Rob Heggie and learning a little bit about BMO Field and how they manage hybrid turf for soccer and football at the Toronto Football Club. Thanks all for listening and we'll see you in the next episode.

Music Outro

Sara: This podcast is brought to you by the University of Guelph and the Guelph Turfgrass Institute.