

Oh no! Turf Toe!

By Carisma Briscoe

“This game will break your heart. See you soon.” Said Joe Burrow in an Instagram post following his turf toe injury.

Often times sports networks like the NFL and many more report that a player has been ruled out of the game or season with a turf toe injury. But in reality, fans everywhere are left with questions or lacking an explanation of exactly what this injury entails.

A local Tampa Podiatrist, Dr. David Auguste, breaks down the injury into simple terms for a better understanding.

“Turf toe is caused by a hyperextension injury of the big toe joint. It happens when the forefoot is planted on the ground, and an external force pushes the toe upward beyond its normal range of motion. This overstretches or tears the supporting structures around the joint, ligaments, joint capsule, and sometimes the plantar plate. It often occurs on artificial turf or hard surfaces where the foot doesn’t slide as easily, hence the name “turf toe.” Said Auguste.

Although the injury name is so commonly used and can sound like something minor, in some cases, it is such a severe injury to a player that it is a season ending injury that requires surgery like in Joe Burrow’s case during week two of the NFL season.

An injury report from the official Cincinnati Bengals website said that Burrow was placed on the injury reserve list with a toe injury but does not go into any detail about the cause, recovery time, or severity of the injury.

Less severe cases like Brock Purdy's in week one of the season, might sideline a team's starting quarterback for a few weeks as they recover from their injury, however, this recovery process is usually much shorter, and they will likely play again during the regular season.

USF athletic trainer Sarah Merriwether provides her expertise of the turf toe injury between the two athletes cases.

"Between Purdy and Burrow, I assume they have different grades of turf toe. I think Purdy has a mild case, likely grade one or two, where rehabilitation exercises and pain management is appropriate. But for Burrow, surgery is required for a grade three injury since his plantar plate was severely compromised. That's why Purdy was only ruled out for a couple of weeks, and Burrow needs surgery."

Dr. Auguste also provides more context to how the artificial turf that football and other sports are played on can lead to further injuries.

"Chronic or repeated turf toe injuries can lead to arthritis or stiffness in the big toe joint, limiting mobility long-term. Factors that could help reduce this injury would be changing field conditions back to natural grass surfaces. Cleats with more rigid soles would help reduce the risk also."

Similar research supports Dr. Auguste's professional observations that the trend of continued use of artificial turf over natural grass fields, or a similar alternative, tends to lead to a higher number of injuries for players because of the conditions of the field.

Many former NFL players who are now a part of the National Football League Players Association (NFLPA), recognize the continuous patterns of injuries such as turf toe, that are still prominent in the current NFL season.

“Players have a 32% higher rate of non-contact knee injuries on turf and a staggering 69% higher rate of non-contact foot/ankle injuries on turf compared to grass.” Said NFLPA president JC Tretter in an article titled “Only Natural Grass Can Level the NFL’s Playing field.”

The association’s president also wrote about their efforts to ban the artificial turf or at least find a safer alternative to prevent further injuries.

“The NFL and NFLPA tasked artificial turf manufacturers with developing a surface like natural grass that meets the specifications developed by our respective engineering experts. We also challenged cleat manufacturers to design innovative footwear that is safer and tailored to both players’ needs and to specific surfaces.” wrote Tretter.

From multiple perspectives such as podiatrists, players, and parents, to fully prevent serious injuries like turf toe, there needs to be a better field surface alternative.

“I absolutely hate turf as a sports mom. Hate.” said Sara Lussier.