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## Field should be done for Aug. 29 game

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O'FALLON --- With a little more than five weeks to go until the varsity football team's home opener, O'Fallon Township High School's stadium looks like a wreck.

But Principal Steve Dirnbeck said it will be nearly rebuilt from scratch in time for the Panthers' Aug. 29 home opener against Cahokia --- complete with new stands, concessions and an artificial turf field surrounded by an eight-lane track and a new lighting system. It's all part of a \$2 million off-season project to make the facility safer and more usable.

"Our stadium was much in need of a facelift, and that isn't even the right word for it. More like a complete overhaul," Dirnbeck said. "The bleachers were not safe to handle the overflow crowds we get, and the ability to get people in and around the stadium was not good."

Overuse had rendered the field itself a hazard.

"We had a wet field last year when we played Pekin and again when we played East St. Louis," Dirnbeck said. "After those games, it was pretty much destroyed."

The project, which will increase the field's seating capacity from about 2,000 to nearly 3,000 is being *handled by ATG Sports*, which is based in Wichita, Kan., but has a local office in St. Louis. Don Bolinger, ATG's president of construction services, said the stadium will be a first-rate high school sports facility when it's done.

In addition to football, the stadium will host soccer, track and field, lacrosse and marching band events.

"This field is designed to be used 365 days a year and last for about 15 years," Bolinger said. "According to our testing, it should show zero signs of wear after 12 years of use."

Bolinger said high schools across the country are switching to artificial turf because it's cheaper to maintain.

"If you have 11 or 12 football games in a year's time on a field, it's basically ruined, and you have to replace it," Bolinger said. "But you can play soccer on this field in the afternoon and then play a football game at night every day of the year with no problems."

Artificial turf got a bad rap over the past 20 years because it was rock-hard and unforgiving, causing lots of knee and ankle problems as well as nasty rug burns for players who were brave enough to dive for balls.

"The turf we are using, which is called Ram Turf, is actually quite a bit more forgiving than the regular ground," Bolinger said. "The old AstroTurf was abrasive. This material is soft."

Workers are finishing up the foundation of the field. The turf, which will be emblazoned with the Panthers' logo, will start to be laid down next week.

Dirnbeck said the money for the field came from funds left over from other projects, including a classroom addition at the high school and the construction of a new ninth-grade high school building.

School leaders said, while it will cost more up front to replace the field, they believe it will eventually pay for itself in saved maintenance costs.

"It's a whole-day job to stripe the football field," Dirnbeck said. "The new field has the stripes permanently on it."

Grass on an athletic field also needs to be cut often, fertilized, treated with chemicals and resodded, Dirnbeck said. And it takes tens of thousands of gallons of water a week to keep the grass alive during the summer.

Edwardsville and East St. Louis high schools recently have replaced their grass football fields with artificial turf.

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