

Baseball and Ryegrass Fit the Need in North Texas

By William Knoop



Baseball fields are fertilized four times; prior to seeding, in late fall, early spring and late spring.

Spring comes early in the South and so does baseball. In fact, baseball comes so early that there may not be grass to play on, at least no green grass.

Most of the baseball fields in Texas are bermudagrasses. While a few may be one of the hybrids, the old standby common bermudagrass has been the standard choice.

Common bermuda is a great turfgrass for southern athletic fields. It can take a beating and come right back for the next game. The only real problem with bermudagrass, as far as baseball is concerned, is its winter dormancy. It is designed by nature to avoid damage from the winter cold by going dormant just like the northern grasses do to escape damage from the summer heat by turning brown.

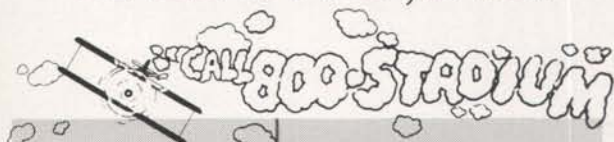
Baseball's season of play and the bermudagrass plant's growth pattern just

don't fit together well in many parts of the South. The fact is that it may be toward the middle or end of the baseball season

**Baseball's
season of play and
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well in many parts of
the South**

before bermudagrass begins growing well enough to provide a thick green playing field.

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The growth patterns of the northern turfgrasses, like perennial ryegrass, better fit the season of baseball play in the South. Perennial ryegrass will grow well through the spring baseball season, but it won't necessarily do well through the long, hot southern summer, and that's probably why it hasn't been used very much.

The inability of northern grasses to survive the southern summers is reasonable cause to reject their use for perennial baseball fields. A perennial field is one established and maintained in permanent grass all year round.

If the field is treated as an annual, it may be possible to use one of the northern turfgrasses successfully. The annual concept simply means that the turf playing surface is reestablished each year as is deemed necessary.

The program that will be tested in the fall in North Texas begins with killing all undesirable vegetation on the field in late summer or early fall. The field will then be seeded to a perennial ryegrass at a rate of not less than 200 pounds per acre.

One of the keys to the success of this program is using the right kind of seeder. The best seeder is the drill seeder like the one currently being offered by Olathe Manufacturing Co. Its true value will become apparent by the second and succeeding years.

The field will be mowed at two-inches and not allowed to get any higher than three inches between mowings. It should be well established by the time freezing temperatures arrive.

***The plan is
to reseed
these fields each fall to
reestablish turf density
needed for play***

The fields will be fertilized prior to seeding with a complete fertilizer, such as 15:15:15, at a rate of about 15 pounds per 1,000 square feet. In late fall, a 15:5:10 fertilizer will be applied at a rate of seven pounds per 1,000 square feet. That same application will be repeated in the spring when growth starts, and again six weeks after that.

These procedures should produce an excellent playing surface by the time baseball begins in the early spring.

A total of eight high school baseball fields will be established this fall. Most of these fields are not used to any great extent during the summer and fall. Many

small schools do not have the facilities or resources to care for these fields over the summer. This fact is one of the reasons why the annual concept in maintaining baseball fields is valid and will be tested.

Two big questions yet to be answered are just how well perennial ryegrass can take the hot dry summer without a lot of care and what kind of a population will remain when the cooler weather returns.

The plan is to reseed these fields each fall to reestablish the turf density needed for play. It is possible that a fair amount of perennial ryegrass will persist. This is where the Olathe seeder pays its way. It can successfully seed into whatever stand of ryegrass remains. The intended reseeding rate will be 100 pounds per acre.

Obviously, there is no one right way to provide a safe, durable baseball field. But experience has taught us tricks that make the sports turf manager's job more scientific, in other words repeatable by following certain important steps. Every possible option should be considered for improving our sports fields. ▶

Editor's Note: Dr. William Knoop is a turf specialist with the Texas Agricultural Extension Service, Dallas. He is organizing a sports turf workshop for next March at Arlington Stadium.

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