

THE FRONT OFFICE

OPINION PAGE

THE NEEDLE IN THE HAYSTACK



Simple mathematics is all it takes to figure out that the surface of the sports turf industry has barely been scratched. There are untold millions of acres of athletic turf in the U.S. that need professional care badly. While recent efforts have begun to make a dent, the condition of these turf areas remains unsafe for one simple reason — finding the person in charge is like finding a needle in a haystack.

It's not a matter of placing blame, it's a matter of recognizing those who have the ability and power to do something about the safety of sports turf nationally.

There is a common expression, "If you aren't part of the solution, you are part of the problem." In other words, if you are waiting for others to improve conditions at your facility, you are part of the problem. If, on the other hand, you take every opportunity to educate the ultimate decisionmakers and fellow sports turf managers about better turf management, you hold the future of the industry in your hands.

It's very difficult to find and influence the people who can make a difference in the condition of athletic fields. To reach them you need the persistence and determination of a salesman. You may have to talk to three or four people before you find the person in charge of field maintenance. That person could have any number of titles, ranging from superintendent to physical plant director, coach or even head custodian. When you find him, carefully explain that a lot of things have changed in the past ten years and you just want to help. All you are selling is better and safer turf.

For two years, I've been trying to donate my time and knowledge of sports turf maintenance to the Little League where I live. Field maintenance is run by a committee of volunteers headed by a policeman with a night beat. Our paths never cross. I've written him letters, but he must feel he has matters well in hand. Apparently, no one is complaining and I'll admit he does a good job. But still, isn't he at least a little curious about what you, the readers of sportsTURF, do to maintain fields in top condition?

This year I spoke to a few board members to repeat my offer. Their answer was first become a manager, then run for the board, and then make my offer in a board meeting. I already help coach both of my kids' teams on weekends. I figure in about three years I'll be able to have some impact on the fields.

The irony of the whole thing is that the director of education at Little League headquarters in Williamsport, PA, called a couple of weeks ago to say how much he enjoyed the magazine. Suddenly, all the managers of fields played on by more than three million kids could be reached. You can bet that this opportunity won't slip past.

If every sportsTURF subscriber spent a few minutes each week contacting fellow sports turf managers at schools, parks and sports organizations, the quality of sports turf in this country could skyrocket in a matter of months instead of decades. Try to get together with those you reach periodically to compare notes. Help each other out. Join together to make your point at meetings about field maintenance needs. Tell them about sportsTURF magazine and the organizations serving the market. Get them involved.

The sports turf battle has to be waged on both local and national levels. Locally, it begins with you. I urge you to organize sports turf managers in your area for a trial meeting. Let me know how things go. If you are successful, let's tell others how you accomplished what you did.

The improvement of millions of acres of sports turf can start with the two acre stadium field of a high school or 40 acres of a park. Be a leader and be part of the solution. If you break a haystack down into small piles, finding the needle is much easier.

Bruce F. Shank

EVENTS

CALENDAR

FEBRUARY

29-2 Midwest Regional Turf Conference, Stewart Center, Purdue University, W. Lafayette, IN. Contact: Jeff Lefton, Dept. of Agronomy, Purdue University, W. Lafayette, IN 47907, (317) 494-9737.

29-2 Massachusetts Turfgrass Conference and Show, Springfield Civic Center, Springfield, MA. Contact: Dr. Joe Troll, Massachusetts Turf Council, PO Box 489, Hadley, MA 01035, (413) 549-5295.

MARCH

2 Professional Turf and Plant Conference, Nassau Veterans Memorial Coliseum, Uniondale, NY. Contact: Nassau/Suffolk County Landscape Gardeners Association, 59 Orinoco Dr., Brightwaters, NY 11718, (516) 665-2250.

6-10 Canadian Turfgrass Conference, Toronto Hilton Harbour Castle Convention Center, Toronto, ON. Contact: Mary Gurney, Canadian Golf Course Superintendents Association, 2000 Weston Rd., Weston, Ontario, Canada M9N 1X3, (416) 249-7304.

APRIL

7 South Florida Turfgrass Exposition, Ft. Lauderdale Research and Education Center, Ft. Lauderdale, FL. Contact: Dr. John Cisar, 3205 SW College Ave., Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33314, (305) 475-8990.

11-12 Southeastern Turfgrass Conference, Coastal Plain Experiment Station, Tifton, GA. Contact: Dr. Glenn Burton, Coastal Plain Experiment Station, Tifton, GA 31793, (912) 386-3353.