

THE FRONT OFFICE

OPINION PAGE

THE BUSINESS OF COLLEGIATE SPORTS



Sports turf managers at many colleges and universities today find themselves in the middle of a marketing war, one they have little to no control over. However, when the dust settles, I believe that sports turf managers will have played a role that few athletic directors currently realize they can play in the success of collegiate sports.

Two thirds of NCAA Division I schools are expected to lose money on their athletic programs this year, up from 42 percent in 1985. Athletic directors find themselves increasingly occupied with the finances of sports, at the expense of

providing an important spirit of competition for students to apply to their future careers. The game isn't simply a matter of winning anymore, it's a matter of survival through corporate sponsorships, rights fees and merchandizing.

Athletic directors blame the present condition of college sports finances on three culprits. First is inflation. The cost of tuition, as well as the cost of athletic scholarships, has nearly tripled at many universities during the past ten years. A U.S. Department of Education study predicts that tuition to public universities will climb another 80 percent before the turn of the century.

Government intervention in the form of Title IX has complicated matters further by requiring colleges to increase their support of women's sports if they expect to receive Federal assistance.

NCAA's efforts to negotiate network television revenues and distribute them among all its members, something which has worked well for professional sports, was uprooted in the courts by a few disgruntled members. Now each school competes against all others for a share of television rights fees. This deregulation cost NCAA member colleges a total of \$24 million in 1986 in lost television revenues. Since the NCAA no longer controls the number of events on the air, a glut of games has driven the price per game down by more than 40 percent.

To recover these losses schools have been forced to raise ticket prices. This has backfired at some institutions by hurting ticket sales, especially with students. In some instances, fees from local cable television companies have not made up for lost ticket sales. Furthermore, non-revenue generating sports, such as wrestling, golf, tennis, and track, have been placed on the chopping block to reduce expenses.

One thing is clear, individual colleges must aggressively market their sports programs to corporate sponsors, television and radio networks, and ticket buyers.

For amateur events to compete against each other as well as professional events, they will need to create a "network quality atmosphere." That means they must offer professional-quality fields, golf courses, and other facilities. Only knowledgeable sports turf managers and golf course superintendents have the ability to meet these higher standards.

Don't be surprised when you are asked to paint a corporate logo in addition to team logos on stadium fields. Be ready when you are asked to make provisions for television cameras in stadiums and on university golf courses. Perfect your skills with mowing patterns, field marking, pregerminating seed, turf color enhancement, soil moisture control, and traffic tolerance. You will need to know what it takes to provide a championship golf course or stadium field.

College athletics today is a \$3 billion industry. To get their piece of this huge and growing pie, colleges will have to compete not just on the field, golf course, or court, but in the business office. In all places, the playing surface must be considered a critical factor in attracting fans, support, and rights fees. That makes the collegiate sports turf manager more valuable than ever.

Bruce F. Shank

EVENTS

CALENDAR

JULY

25 Midwest Regional Field Day, Purdue Agronomy Farm, West Lafayette, IN. Contact: Barb Meyer, Purdue University, Dept. of Agronomy, Lilly Hall, West Lafayette, IN 47907-7899, (317) 494-7899.

25 Sports Turf Manager: Field of the Future, Cooperstown Central School, Linden Avenue, Cooperstown, NY. Contact: New York State Turfgrass Association, P.O. Box 612, Latham, NY 12110, (800) 873-TURF.

AUGUST

7-8 Georgia Golf Course Superintendents Association Summer Meeting, Stone Mountain Memorial Golf Course and Conference Center, Stone Mountain, GA. Contact: George Kozelnicky, GGCS, P.O. Box 6377, Athens, GA 30604-6377, (404) 543-7720.

13-16 Park Planning and Maintenance School, Colorado Springs, CO. Contact: National Recreation and Park Association, Western Regional Office, P.O. Box 6900, Colorado Springs, CO 80934, (719) 632-7031.

17-18 Park and Recreation Safety School, Colorado Springs, CO. Contact: National Recreation and Park Association, Western Regional Office, P.O. Box 6900, Colorado Springs, CO 80934, (719) 632-7031.

30 University of Rhode Island Turfgrass Field Day, Turfgrass Research Farm, Plains Rd., Kingston, RI. Contact: Dr. C.R. Skogley, Plant Sciences Dept., Woodward Hall, Kingston, RI 02881.