By Matthew Trulio

On any given frosty fall evening at Mile High Stadium in Denver, CO, stadium turf manager Tom Lujan may "tuck away" the turf for the night using a turf cover. During a rare June rainstorm this summer, Steve Wightman used a cover to help save an important game for the San Diego Padres. Last November, Scott Gaunky, grounds foreman for Mundelein High in Illinois put down a cover to protect his school's newly sodded baseball diamond infield for the winter. He removed it in early March and within a month the Mundelein High Mustangs were playing ball.

Used in emergency, short-term, or long-term applications, turf covers and tarps are among the most versatile tools in sports turf management. Although the terms are often used interchangeably, tarps tend to have little or no porosity, which means air, water, and sunlight have a more difficult time reaching the turf. Tarps are generally used for immediate protection, such as keeping baseball diamond infields from becoming marshes during sudden downpours. Once the rain stops and the water is squeegeed off the tarp to the outfield, the game can begin or resume.

Turf covers can also be used to handle harsh weather. However, their greater porosity or permeability makes them well-suited to seeding and overseeding applications — through the "greenhouse effect" they create when placed over newly seeded ground, freshly sodded, seeded, or overseeded turf, they cut establishment time and enhance root growth.

Yet turf covers and tarps are like any other tools — use them improperly and they'll do more harm than good. Leave a tarp on a field too long on a hot day, for example, and the turf below may burn. Store a tarp sloppily and by the time you get it out in an emergency, it may be too late. The keys to success are proper selection, timing, and handling.

Tarp Management at Jack Murphy

While Southern California's weather doesn't often bring tarps onto the field at Jack Murphy Stadium, Wightman and his crew are always ready to go should the need arise. It's a preparedness habit Wightman got into as turf manager for Mile High Stadium.

In addition to reducing establishment time in sodded, seeded, and overseeded turf, turf covers can be used to promote early spring green-up. Photo courtesy: Covermaster.

Familiarity and practice with tarp and turf cover handling simplifies installation. Photo courtesy: Contech Construction Products, Inc.

Turf Covers and Tarps: SECURITY BLANKETS

To stay current on tarp handling procedures, the Jack Murphy crew holds tarp practices prior to the Padres' season opener. These practices generally last four hours and include unrolling the tarp, water removal, and re-rolling the tarp.

To physically move the tarp into place over the infield, they constantly lift the tarp up and down to "pump" air underneath it. Their goal is to get the tarp on the field in approximately one minute, because if it takes much longer the tarp can become too heavy to move. A rain-soaked tarp can be twice as heavy as a dry tarp.

When it comes to tarp selection, says Wightman, weight and color are crucial. "In the southern regions of the country, where you don't have much snow or ice, a light material of perhaps seven ounces per square yard would be suitable," he explains. "In the colder regions of the country you might need something as heavy as 14 ounces per square yard."

"Remember, the darker the tarp, the hotter it gets underneath," Wightman says. "With a dark tarp on a hot day, 15 or 20 minutes on the grass may be all it takes to burn the grass." Wightman adds that leaving tarps on too long "sets up a situation" ideal for turf diseases.

Stretching Growth at Mundelein High

While turf cover use is less than common at the high school level, Gaunky found his 90-x-90-foot Covermaster Evergreen Turf Cover indispensable in getting his sparkling new diamond through the winter. The cover is white and made from a woven polyolefin so that air, water, and sunlight can penetrate it.

"The year we built the field, I didn't get the sod in the infield down until the middle of November," he recalls.

"We were concerned that without extending the growing season, through the use of a turf cover, the sod wouldn't knit by March 23, when the baseball season started. I talked to Ken Mrock first [Chicago Bears Stadium Turf Manager] about covering it, and then did it. It worked well. When the cover was removed in March, the turf was ready to go."

Prior to covering the infield, Gaunky applied high K fertilizer and a snow mold control product. The turf cover was held down with six inch staples every six or eight feet along its seams.

Gaunky also uses the turf cover following overseeding. "One of the things you've got to do, especially in the spring, is use a soil thermometer, to keep the turf from getting burned," he advises.

Multiple Applications at Mile High

As a former Wightman protege, Mile High's Lujan *knows* turf covers and tarps. In fact, he uses three different products to meet his various needs.

"For baseball, we use a polyethylene tarp from American Tent and Canvas," he explains. "It weighs 6.3 ounces per square yard and is black on one side, silver on the other. The ideal colors would be white on one side, black on the other, but this material isn't available that way yet. In early April, when we still have a chance for snow, we use it in unheated areas of our field, over the snow. We also put it down immediately when it's raining."

Lujan's football field tarps are from Putterman & Company. They weigh 14 ounces per square yard and are made of vinyl. They are black on one side, white on the other, and are joined dialectrically. Lujan uses three tarps, from sideline to sideline, to blanket the entire field.

"The covers being black on one side, white on the other, gives us the flexibility to use them when baseball and football overlap," he says. "We can use the white side up during pre-season football, but in the late fall we can use black side up. It retains the sun's heat and helps us get through any early frost or snow we get."

For overseeding applications, Lujan uses Covermaster's Evergreen high-density woven polyolefin turf covers, which are the same size as the football field tarps.

"We run our field heating at 55 degrees F at the root zone, seven inches below the surface, so the roots stay nice and warm," he explains. "We're not getting a lot of growth — all we're doing is cutting off the tips of the grass when we mow. When the team is out of town, we aerate the field, overseed with Medalist 8, and then mat drag it in. Then we roll out the turf covers and use six-foot lengths of galvanized pipe to hold them down. The open weave turf covers allow water, air, and sunlight to get through, and at the same time a 'greenhouse effect' is created. If the temperature gets above 55 degrees, I pull the covers off quickly. But if it stays around 30 or 40 degrees, I can leave them down for three days straight."

Turf covers and tarps can be significant investments, so it pays to do your homework before you buy. That means talking to turf managers using them successfully in your area, as well as manufacturers. Ask about color availability, weight, and application requirements as they pertain to your situation. Naturally, covers and tarps are no substitute for sound cultural practices such as proper irrigation, fertilization, and aeration. ❑