

FIELD COVERS, THE FOUL WEATHER PLAYER



The Covermaster AFC Raincover in use at CNE Stadium in Toronto, Canada.

By Barbara Augsdorfer

During every baseball game they are there, waiting along the warning track somewhere between home plate and first or third base. Major League Baseball rules state that they must be at every game. The National Football League also requires that stadiums have them on hand. No, we aren't talking about referees. We're talking about field covers.

These foul-weather friends earn their keep by saving games from cancellation and by protecting players and the playing surface from damage. However, ingenuity has enabled them to do much more. They can speed up germination of seed, accelerate grow-in, and even advertise the favorite team.

"Covers are as exotic as the grasses and turf they protect," says Joan Koza, executive vice president of M. Putterman & Co. in Chicago, IL. "Essentially all covers, whether they are vinyl or polyethylene, will keep a field dry," Koza continues. "What you want to

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Cover by Reef Industries in use at Cameron Field at Rice University.



Field Covers

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consider are durability, strength and life-expectancy." A field cover used only to protect from rain will be much different from a cover that will protect a field from snow and ice. "Covers meant to

protect from snow and ice must be able to not only keep the turf dry, but also sustain the wear and tear of people and equipment on top who will scrape ice and shovel snow before rolling the cover for storage," Koza explains.

Established in 1920, Putterman

covers put engineering applications first. There are six engineers on staff who design and construct the desired cover from the ground up. "We recommend a cover that suits the sport, the climate, workers, equipment and budget," Koza says. Putterman makes sure its cus-



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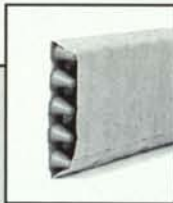
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tomers get the cover that will protect the customer's specific field, be easy for their staffs to handle, support their equipment, and be within their budget.

Customizing is big within the industry of field-cover manufacturing. "We customize every cover, because every field is just a little bit different," Koza said. "We can even customize handling accessories."

The unique aspect of Putterman field covers is their interlocking closure system for its covers. The Ziploc-like zippers make the covers air- and watertight and prevents puddling on top. Putterman has provided field covers for many professional sports organizations such as the Los Angeles Dodgers, Kansas City Royals, Florida Marlins, Chicago Bears, New England Patriots, Green Bay Packers and San Diego Chargers.

Of course, there are some dangers in using a field cover too much. "You really want to avoid having the tarp on the grass too long," says Steve Wightman, turf manager at Jack Murphy Stadium in San Diego, CA. "Depending on the color of the cover, you can burn the turf in as little as 10 minutes."

In Southern California, where turf managers must be on guard against everything from occasional frost to a tropical storm from Mexico, preparation is the key. "We have a direct phone line to the National Weather Service," Wightman continues. "If there is even a chance of rain or frost, we'll have the staff there to get the field covered." The three covers

used at Jack Murphy are gray on both sides, weighing 10 ounces per square yard. "We use a 170' x 220' to cover the baseball field, and add two 100' x 220' covers to protect the field during the football season," Wightman explains. "When we remove it, we fold the tarps into fourths, sending the water to drains along the warning track."

Custom Sizes and Colors

"Our niche is customizing," says Brian Hatfield, sales manager with Anchor Industries, Inc. in Evansville, IN. "What sets one field cover apart from another are the graphics and lettering on them. We have an in-house graphics department."

"Most of our covers are laminated or coated vinyl, or coated polyethylene," Hatfield says. "These are the three most-requested materials." Canvas, according to Hatfield, is no longer practical as a field cover. "Since it is a woven material, water will eventually drip through," Hatfield explains. "It also gets dirty, and when wet, is extremely heavy."

Anchor covers are currently in use by the grounds crews at Royals Stadium in Kansas City, KS, Three Rivers

**In this highly
visible industry,
each company
tries to introduce
something innovative
to remain
competitive.**

Stadium in Pittsburgh, PA, and Comiskey Park in Chicago, IL.

But woven covers have their place for field warming and as a compaction guard against traffic, chairs, television cameras and players in bench areas. "Our covers are a woven polyethylene," says Graham Tanner, a sales representative with Hinsperger in Mississauga, Ontario, Canada. Hinsperger started with golf course

covers to protect turf from harsh winter weather and speed spring green-up. Hinsperger's Evergreen cover, which is used by golf courses and athletic fields in the U.S., Canada, Europe, Japan and Korea, works similarly to a greenhouse. The clear material draws the warming effects of the sun, and depending on the geographical area, can warm the soil 10°F compared to surrounding uncovered areas.

In this highly visible industry, each company tries to introduce something innovative to remain competitive. "We manufacture our own material," says Mark Young, sales representative with Reef Industries in Houston, TX. "We use a 10-mil nylon-reinforced polyethylene with UV and/or cold-crack protection," depending upon the client and region where the cover will be used. Young said that the cold-crack protection will protect a field cover in temperatures as low as -75°F. Reef field covers are also marketed with a package—if the customer desires. "This includes 100 sand bags and a patching kit," Young says.

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Field Covers

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"We generally do not manufacture covers of canvas or other woven material," Young explains. "However, the customer is king—if the client wants a woven cover, we'll make it." Custom covers, of course are not a problem. "If the customer will draw what he wants, we'll make it."

Reef field covers are currently on fields such as RFK Stadium, Fulton County Stadium in Atlanta, GA, and many colleges such as the University of Southern California, Rice, Auburn, and the University of Houston.

If "necessity is the mother of invention," then field-cover manufacturers are procreative. Basically, anything goes. Covermaster manufactures covers that protect fields from inclement weather, as well as covers that act as growth enhancers. Wall padding and windscreens are also in its product lines.

A new twist for 1994 is the upper-deck seat cover. The idea is to cover the upper-deck seating area, making a large stadium cozier and appear as a facility specifically built for baseball, rather

than a football stadium that is only partially filled for baseball.

Winter Protection

In addition to protecting the fields from rain and winter weather, field covers act as mini-greenhouses at golf courses and other landscape operations. "Our Wintergreen turf covers are used at hundreds of courses around the country," said Tom Baas, group manager for Allied Products, which manufactures Contech Wintergreen turf covers. The nonwoven, 100 percent polyester geotextile blankets, which weigh in at only 3.5 ounces per square yard, are lifesavers when it comes to protecting delicate turf. "The blankets allow in air and water, while also offering temperature control," Baas explained. "They improve germination and speed spring green-up, and are specially treated to resist debris cling."

The heaviest cover *sportsTurf* found is Turf Armor™ manufactured by Barney Professional Turf Services (BTS), based in Belle Vernon, PA. Weighing in at a hefty 16 ounces per square yard, "it is tough stuff," says Joe Barney, president of BTS. "It's manufactured from recycled

plastic two-liter soda bottles—the same stuff used in truck-tire sidewalls." Yet, despite its weight, the material allows turf to breathe. The covers can be used during batting practice to protect infield turf, or even as a backstop in the bullpen. They have also been used to protect goal areas during field hockey and lacrosse practice. Turf Armor™ products are used at many sports facilities including the Oakland Coliseum, Penn State, Notre Dame University and the Cotton Bowl in Dallas, TX. Two stadiums in Argentina have also purchased the covers.

Boys Just Want to Have Fun

Field covers are necessary, useful tools in maintaining healthy turf and safe playing fields, but they can also be fun. Rain delays for the Triple-A Denver Bears brought out the playful side of some athletes. Wightman, who was the turf manager before moving on to San Diego, would help his crew to get the field covered. "Then a couple of the guys would remove their cleats and slide on the tarp. It kept the crowd entertained while waiting for the storm to clear." After all, sports are part of the entertainment industry. □

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