You and your crews are the third team out there — and how you do your job dictates how the game is played.

Preparing Skinned Infields, Basepaths, Pitcher’s Mounds and Batter’s Boxes

By Jesse Cuevas

Infields are the cause of more groundskeepers’ nightmares than any other aspect of baseball-field development and maintenance. Get two or three of us together and the topic is sure to be discussed.

With a full contingent of managers, coaches and players on each team, you’re sure to be off the mark in the eyes of at least some of them. And there is no middle ground; you’re either doing a terrific job or a lousy one. If a player or team has a great day, you’re great, too. If a player has a bad day, and the team loses — well, it has to be your fault.

At Omaha’s Johnny Rosenblatt Stadium — home of the AAA Royal’s baseball team and host site of the NCAA College World Series — we’ve experimented with many different mixes for the infield and basepaths. We’ve settled on a base of native material, a light clay-loam, for 50 percent of the mix. After tackling this “discovery” process, I suggest the groundskeeper develop basic specifications first, then “shop” potential sources for a workable match. The low cost and ready availability of the material are well worth the extra effort involved.

The clay-loam base is augmented with 25-percent calcined clay and 25-percent sand. The sand is the same type and grade as the sand used in the root mix for the rest of the field, meeting the old USGA specifications for the sand used in greens construction. Since clay and fine sand are mixed to make bricks, and you sure don’t want a brick infield, avoid sand that is too fine. We order pre-mixed material for the rootzone of 85-percent sand and 15-percent Dakota Sedge Peat. The same source provides the straight sand at a cost just slightly above the price level of less compatible sand in the area.

We use the straight clay-loam for the pitcher’s mound and batter’s box. In rainy situations, we’ll apply a bit of calcined clay when the surface is wet, then sweep it off with a broom when the area dries.

We work the mound and home plate after every use or tackle them first as game preparations begin for the next day. We work the soil, pack it down and apply a good soaking of water. The amount of water must be adjusted according to weather conditions. We’ll water two or three more times before the game, so each application has to be judged according to current conditions, and what they probably will be later. If the day is cloudy and humid, less water is needed. If a hot, windy day makes it hard to keep the areas moist, we tarp them to retain an adequate moisture level. The mound and batter’s box should be firm, with just a hint of moisture, at game time. The trick is to let them evaporate into the condition you want to develop the “right” degree of firmness.

We’ve installed numerous basepath “test plots” behind the stadium using various additives and different mix proportions to find out what works best for us under our conditions. Keys to success are the type of sand selected, the amount of sand used and how the mixing is handled.

We strive for a firm and slightly moist base with a spike-depth (approximately 1/4 inch) of loose, dry covering

These photos were taken after batting practice and show final pre-game infield preparation. Jesse Cuevas is wearing a jacket and hosing down the infield.
between each nail. To turn over more
Another drag has a similar setup, but
uses fewer nails and has a wider space
boards within a 2-by-4 frame with 60 D
nails placed in three rows on each board.
For example, we have split 2-by-12
according to what you want to accomplish.

We split the game in half, shooting for
ideal conditions for the first half of play.
We'll have the opportunity to apply a light
layer of calcined clay if the skinned sur-
faces are too wet going into the second
half of play. If the surfaces are too hard,
we can loosen them up a bit with the
proper drag. The surface needs to remain
smooth, not choppy. If conditions keep
fluctuating, we're more inclined to lean
a bit to the hard side, to at least give the
proper drag. The surface needs to remain
smooth over any lines and re-mark any
damaged areas. We always re-mark the
batter's box. Then we use a small cocoa-
mat drag to finish the basepaths.

We mark the field before batting
practice, since none of our crew members
appreciate performing that task for a
packed stadium of spectators. Following
batting practice, we use a push broom to
smooth over any lines and re-mark any
damaged areas. We always re-mark the
batter's box. Then we use a small cocoa-
mat drag to finish the basepaths.

We turn over the entire skinned
infield area with a tiller two or three
times a year. The individual compo-
ents of the infield mix tend to separate
over time. During the tilling process, or
when constructing a new field, we top-
load the sand and soil amendments in
the top 2 inches of the field. For exam-
ple, if your infield mix depth is 6 inches
when you're starting from scratch,retain one half of the soil amendment and
sand for the top 2 inches of the field. This
provides that extra edge of drainage
that can pull you through two or three
innings in a rain.

Mixing the various components is a
seat-of-the-pants effort. Divide the soil
amendments equally for each side of the
infield. If you're adding two tons of
material, packaged in 50-pound bags,lay 40 bags — spaced as evenly as pos-
sible — on one half of the field; the
other 40 bags on the other. Space 20 bags
along the line from second base to third
base; 20 bags from third base to home.
Space 20 bags along the line from first
base to second base; 20 bags from first
base to home. Open the bags in place
and spread them evenly across the top of
the skinned surface. Then work the ma-
terial in thoroughly.

Adding the sand a little at a time, then
mixing it in, is better than adding the sand
all at once. It's easier to add a little
more than it is to pull some back out. It
could take two to three days to get the
proportions you want.

Use a trailer you're comfortable with,
or a topdresser at a low setting, to spread
the sand. Use one load for each half of
the field to balance the portions. Mix in the
sand. Then follow up with your standard
pre-game preparations. Check the results.
Talk with the players and coaches. Add
more sand, or adjust your finishing pro-
cess, until you hit the consistency you
want. Adding sand is like adding salt —
do it "to taste." The sand is the final touch
that brings the infield together.

Lip prevention is another aspect of
skinned-area care. Use a push broom or
stream of water from the hose to wash any
stray infield material from the edge of the
grass. Daily attention in this area will keep
a clean division between the turfed and
skinned areas and prevent "bad hops."

You'll spend lots of time on the infield,
because the players do. It can be the most
grueling part of your maintenance rou-
tine. You'll be out there when it's hot and
humid, gathering your own layer of
infield mix. And you'll be out there when
it's cold and rainy, getting your feet wet
and your hands icy.

But baseball is the only game of
major sports where someone outside
the game has a huge impact on the
game. You and your crews are the third
team out there — and how you do your
job dictates how the game is played.

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