



*The 1994-1995
STMA Soccer Field
of the Year:*



The Sportscore soccer fields suffered substantial turf damage following the torrential downpours that flooded the complex in 1993, but Steve Roser and his staff had the fields back in excellent condition just a few months later.

The Sportscore Complex in Rockford, IL

By Bob Tracinski

Over the past two years, the multiple soccer fields of the Sportscore Complex in Rockford, IL, have survived the worst of times. Sportscore Superintendent Steve Roser and his able staff faced the ravages of 1993's 100-year floods — twice. Throughout the flooding — and the aftermath of the flooding — the scheduling and the maintenance staff were tested to the limit.

"Our fields were under water during March and most of April of 1993," says Roser. "When the waters receded in late April, we thought the worst was over. We'd been lucky. Minimal silt was left on the field surface, and though the fields were soggy and the turf in a very weakened condition, we were able to begin play.

"As the grounds began to firm up and after much aerifying, seeding and top-dressing, conditions were just starting to turn around as we approached summer and the bread and butter of our soccer season."

Sportscore is located on a 100-year flood plain bordering the Rock River, a tributary of the Mississippi. The complex opened in the summer of 1983 and features nine in-park soccer fields, five outlying soccer fields, eight lighted baseball diamonds, nine sand volleyball courts, three boat launches, two outlying parks and five miles of bike paths, for a total of approximately 140 acres under Roser's care. "Though we deal with spotty, wet conditions when rains are heavy, we had few problems prior to 1993," he notes. "The fields within the complex, with the exception of the sand volleyball courts and the skinned areas of the ball fields, all are composed of native soil. Though a lot of native topsoil was moved around, there is limited use of other than native materials."

Because of environmental restraints on wetlands areas, the Sportscore staff can move soil around a bit but not change the overall consistency or basic topography. Above-ground drainage is achieved by a slight crowning of the

fields and channeling natural drainage with a minimal grade.

The groundwater table at the facility is high. If the river is at a high level, water can be less than 3 feet below the soil surface. If the river water level is down, the fields can percolate 1 inch of rainfall overnight. Percolation rates fluctuate with the river.

On Tuesday, June 28, Roser judged field conditions to be good enough that he and two staff members could attend an STMA Midwest Chapter meeting in Wheaton, IL. "Though 2 inches of rain had fallen the evening before, and we had 124 soccer teams coming in on Friday, things were looking OK," Roser says, "so we left for Wheaton at 6 a.m. The drive to the conference included three detours for rained-out roads, and the radio reported that 7 to 11 inches of rain had fallen in Wisconsin the night of the 27th.

"I called Sportscore at noon, and we headed back immediately. The rest of my crew had been hauling cans, tables,

benches and everything else to high ground. By the time we got there, the water on the soccer fields was from 1 to 2 feet deep. Our three boat docks were 2 inches away from going over their safety pipes. We worked for two hours in water up to our necks securing them and pulling them to high ground to avoid losing them altogether. We worked late into the night, and by early the next morning, water was 4 to 5 feet deep on the soccer fields."

Alternate Fields

With 124 teams coming in two days, Roser had his work cut out. Fortunately, the complex is located in a large industrial park, and the state mental hospital is just up the road with several large plots of land. "We needed 10 fields by 3 p.m. Friday," says Roser, "and only four of our 12 fields were usable. I spent Wednesday going to the state hospital and area factories and businesses, and was able to secure six additional fields."

The response was phenomenal, says Roser. "My crews and I set up fields at the state mental hospital, Dierks Food Warehouse and Atwood Mobile Products. We worked 15 hours Wednesday, Thursday and all day Friday. We bought lumber for makeshift goals, laid out and painted the fields. We hauled benches, bleachers, cans, nets and all the other paraphernalia needed for soccer. Play started on time.

"We used these off-site fields throughout the season, naturally assuming all insurance coverage and taking over all maintenance. This allowed us to salvage our summer tournaments, but we suffered big losses on concessions."

The flood waters began to recede in late July, after the fields had spent a total of 10 weeks under water. The sight was horrifying for Roser. "The fish population was so extensive [that] we had bow and arrow fishing on the fields," he says. "Debris was scattered everywhere. Over our eight main fields, we lost 60 to 70 percent of our turf. The turf on fields 6, 7, and 8 was 95 percent destroyed. Field surfaces were covered with silt up to an inch deep.

Rebuilding the Fields

"Luckily, soccer takes a four- to five-week break in August, and the weather was cool and dry. For the first seven to 10 days all we could do was let the fields dry. Once the fields could sup-

port activity, we removed the large debris. Then one crew member spent two days running a Gill spiker over the surface, chipping the dried silt and pulling it into piles. Other crew members raked up the piles and hauled the silt away.

"We had several hundred pounds of grass seed on hand, and immediately ordered another 2,000 pounds. We used a combination of our regular bluegrass blend of Medalist Athletic ProTurf II and a blend of three premium perennial ryegrasses mixed with a starter fertilizer. Following specifications from George Toma and past STMA articles, we began pre-soaking the seed."

The Sportscore staff made full use of the facility's three tractors. They used a 6-foot swath Ryan core aerifier behind a Gill spiker to double- and triple-aerate the fields. They rented a slicer seeder for two weeks and borrowed one from a local golf course for another week to apply pre-soaked seed to the most heavily damaged areas of the field. Dry seed was broadcast over the less-damaged spots, and they mixed their own topdressing to fill in the low spots.

With high school teams, fall leagues and four tournaments scheduled to begin in September, the crew had just a few weeks to get the turf established. As Labor Day approached, the results of their efforts began to show. "One by one we put our fields into play, still using our neighbor's fields to limit turf wear," relates Roser. "By the week after Labor Day we had a decent stand of grass — not great, not good, but decent."

Roser and his staff kept working on the weak areas, aerifying the fields and applying topdressing. They also continued seeding and used nearly 100 bales of straw.

"By October, the fields were looking pretty good and with a cool, moist fall, we eased into winter in fine shape," admits Roser. "We overseeded the entire complex, spending well over \$10,000 on seed and fertilizer alone. Fortunately, 80 percent of that cost was covered by the Flood Disaster Act."

Along with the Chicago suburbs, Rockford is a hotbed for soccer in the Midwest, and 1994 turned into a banner year for Sportscore. "Rockford ranks very high in the U.S. in soccer participation per capita," notes Roser. "In 1970 we had one field with limited use. In 1974 the city's first American Youth Soccer

Organization (AYSO) program was established with a total of 16 teams. In 1994 Rockford had the third largest AYSO per capita in the U.S., with 4,000 participants that play well over 800 games at our facility."

Several premier soccer clubs use the Sportscore facility to host both spring and fall seasons, pretty much dominating the scheduling on those weekends with 30 to 40 games. The clubs also host several summer tournaments that involve up to 164 teams. "We've had to turn away some of the 180 to 190 teams that wanted to participate in these tournaments," admits Roser. "We also have 10 to 12 local high schools, both private and public, that use Sportscore regularly, five of which designate us as their home field. All of the high schools run a girl's season in the spring, a boy's season in the fall and also bring us some excellent tournaments. Several middle and grade schools use Sportscore for their leagues and games each spring and fall. The Rockford Park District Adult League runs 30 to 40 teams in the fall divided into three groups: men's open, men's 35 and over, and women. This league runs from September 1 through early November and combines with club soccer to keep us at capacity each fall. Finally, Sportscore hosts one or two soccer clinics each summer."

Sportscore hosted a total of 3,700 games in 1994: 2,000 in tournaments, 800 for AYSO, 500 for clubs, 200 high school games, 100 for middle and grade schools and 120 for adult leagues. The demand continues to grow. "We hope to sign a five-year lease on a plot of land adjacent to the complex where we'll be adding five more soccer fields," says Roser.

Roser says cooperation from the park board, user groups, the city and the convention and visitors bureau has been great. "It's an excellent working relationship," he adds.

Aggressive Maintenance Program

Even without the flooding, the extensive field use at Sportscore requires an aggressive maintenance program. "We mow the soccer fields with reel mowers to a height of 1.75 inches in the spring and fall, and 2 inches in the summer," says Roser. "We trim with a 60-inch mower. Generally, we'll mow the fields twice a week, on Mondays and Fridays,

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Soccer Field

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though this is adjusted to match turf growth rates. We always mow prior to a tournament.

"We have both 72-inch and 30-inch core aerators. Fields are aerated between four and six times per year during the spring and fall. We usually leave the cores on the field since the gang mower rollers do a good job of pulverizing them.

"Our commissioners approved the purchase of a 72-inch Land Pride seeder to supplement our smaller one. Overseeding has become a regular part of the program. We like the strong recuperative ability of bluegrass and use the bluegrass blend as our prime seed. We supplement this with a perennial ryegrass blend only when fast fill-in coverage is needed."

Roser was able to establish an on-site, irrigated sod field by "borrowing" a 30-by-400-foot strip around one of the baseball diamonds when the outfield was reduced from 320 to 300 feet. "It meant a lot of work, moving the fences and swapping places between the warning track materials and the established turf, but the sod is a perfect match when needed for field repair," says Roser.

"We use soil testing every other year to tailor our fertilization program. We combine our seasonal orders with the local parks and golf courses to qualify for quantity discounts. To further reduce costs, we purchase our spring and fall complete fertilizer, with slow-release nitrogen, in 1,000-pound bags. We generally fertilize three times per year and have used 50-pound bags of a fast-release form of nitrogen as an in-season supplemental feeding as needed. We'll be using even more slow-release nitrogen in this year's program.

"The complex is equipped with underground piping and a quick-coupler system of approximately 280 couplers. We have a two-person watering crew that works from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. and handles 90 percent of the irrigation. Day crews water or syringe fields as necessary."

Because the fields are in an open area, broadleaf weeds can infiltrate easily, says Roser. "We spray all weedy areas in May, then spot-treat as needed in the fall. We use preemergence controls to combat crabgrass and goosegrass in the walkways that receive the heaviest use. We've had a few



The Sportscore Complex hosted a total of 3,700 games in 1994, and demand continues to grow.

patches of dollar spot and some areas where white grubs appeared. These problems are handled as they arise."

The staff paints the 15 soccer fields each week. For tournaments a 4-inch line is applied with a five-gallon power sprayer. Otherwise, two crew members handle the painting with three-gallon compressed air sprayers to save time.

Innovative Problem-Solving

Roser has also developed some innovative problem-solving practices. "Our cleanup crew moves the players' benches every Monday, Wednesday and Friday as part of their general routine. A four-person crew moves the bleachers every Thursday. At the beginning of each month — or sooner if necessary — we rotate the bench and bleacher sides of the fields. On busy weekends, we may move the players' benches several times during each day. Occasionally, we close one side of a field, putting the benches and bleachers on the same side. This allows for special maintenance on the closed side of the field."

Between 1983 and 1985, Sportscore spent thousands of dollars resodding goal areas. After close study, Roser found that goal areas actually get very little action during a game. "The major wear is inflicted by the 10 to 12 players who continually dive and slide in the goal mouth during pre-game warm-ups," he admits. In the spring of 1986 the facility posted signs to inform teams that no pre-game warm-ups could be conducted in the goal mouths. The signs are put out before each game with the corner flags. "Though we did get a few hassles over this

the first few years, local leagues and teams that play at Sportscore have come to understand and appreciate our efforts," notes Roser. "Several have even put it into their league rules." Since implementing the new procedure, Sportscore has not had to resod a goal mouth at the complex and has been able to keep the turf established with seeding and topdressing, despite 300-plus games per field during the summer months.

The three-referee system has caused headaches for soccer field turf managers everywhere. With two linesmen running up and down over the same spot for the entire game, the sidelines show extensive wear, especially after multiple games in wet conditions. Sportscore suggested a more varied individual running pattern and asked permission to switch the linemen's areas diagonally but had no luck. "We then decided to make up five sidelines for each field," says Roser. "Because our fields are so large, no one is aware of this move except our staff. We start at the narrowest field in the spring, then move out 3 feet with each painting. After we reach the widest dimensions, we move back to the narrowest dimensions at the next painting. This gives us the opportunity to aerify, seed and topdress the previous sideline as necessary. All of the varied field dimensions fall within regulation size."

Roser has been with the Rockford Park District for 25 years. He took a year off from college with the intention of earning enough money to head back the next year. Because of his background with sports fields as a student athlete, he was put in charge of the athletic fields. He says, "I guess you could say I grew along with the program. It sure has been a learning experience. I knew enough to get started and hustled to pick up pointers from every possible source as I went along. As the fields and field use expanded, so did my understanding of sports turf needs and my love for the profession. Once I got started, I knew this was what I wanted to do for the long-term.

"I have an excellent staff. Everyone understands that this isn't just a job, it's a commitment. Even our part-time student employees put forth the extra effort it takes to keep things in top shape. Three key people are especially instrumental. Brad Hobson, who operates all the heavy equipment and is

basically in charge of the seeding and aerification, and Tommy Edell, who is foreman of all the soccer fields, are both full-time employees. Leonard Pinter, who says he's retired, does the lion's share of the mowing.

"Sportscore Manager Bob Papich has been with the park district for 30 years. We've been working together for 25 years and think alike. I couldn't ask for a better arrangement. Papich runs the programs, working with the various facility users, their staffs and associated personnel, such as the umpires and other officials, booster club groups, the park district board, the Rockford city government and the Rockford Convention and Visitors Bureau. While we each concentrate on what we do best, there's lots of interaction, and no one is above doing any task. We'll all pick up trash, move benches or work the concession stands if that's what needs to be done."

Concessions are a major money-maker for the park district, says Roser. "With all those players and spectators, we sometimes have as many as nine concession stands working." Roser's wife, Mary, supervises the concession operations. "We kid each other that the only reason she's put up with my long work hours all these years is that she's been out here working, too," quips Roser. "We celebrate all the major in-season holidays here — Fourth of July, Memorial Day, Labor Day and even our wedding anniversary that falls on May 20th."

Roser's three children thought of the complex as a very big backyard. Daughter Valerie, who's now in college, works at the complex; Steve Jr., who

is in the Army, worked at the complex as well, and even 13-year-old Jennifer helps out where she can.

Roser says joining the STMA was the best decision he has made in his 25 years at the Rockford Park District. "The information provided through STMA-related publications has been highly beneficial," he notes. "Going to the regional and national conferences has been an outstanding experience. The

opportunity to talk to and share information with other sports turf professionals, many of whom are coping with similar challenges, has been instrumental in our successful program." □

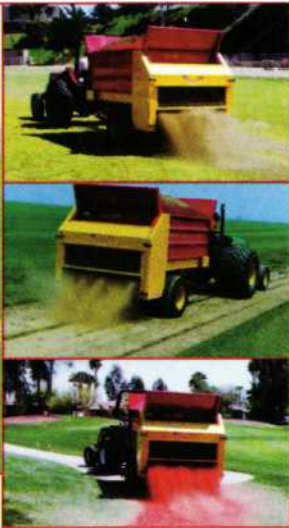
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Roser solved the sideline-wear problem caused by the three-referee system by making five sidelines for each field. Because the fields are so large, no one is aware of this move except the staff.

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