



Are You Ready for Some Football?

By Steve and Suz Trusty

Long before Hank Williams, Jr., sings out his season-opening Monday Night question, "Are You Ready for Some Football?" sports turf managers across the country lay the groundwork for a positive answer.

Though the resources and rewards for high school field care aren't as extensive as those for college and pro-level fields, the intensity and commitment of the athletes, coaching staffs, team supporters and fans are par. High school programs don't just produce good players, they help mold good citizens. And sports turf managers play a vital role.

At the high school level, football practice begins in early August. Kick-off games come in early September. Fields must be in good, playable condition — despite challenging weather, tight budgets and limited preparation time. For sports turf managers, getting ready for football is a year-round job.

There's little downtime for fields in "good weather" zones like the Florida peninsula and the program of John T. Holecko, supervisor of grounds for the Collier County Public Schools, Naples, FL.

Resting in Florida

Holecko says, "With a total of 150 acres of bermudagrass turf within our school system, allocating money and



A pro team, like the Denver Broncos, may have bigger, better funded facilities than a high school, but the work that goes into each is basically the same. Photo courtesy: Steve and Suz Trusty.

labor power is a constant concern. Our four high schools each have a sports complex, with a football game field, combination soccer-practice field and baseball-softball field. Along with the full contingent of team sports at freshman, junior varsity and varsity levels, the fields are used for PE and for band practices and performances.

"Our fields are a very sandy native soil planted to Tifton 419 bermudagrass. By the mid-June end of the school year, the football game and practice fields are showing wear, especially across the lines and on the sidelines."

Holecko has a maximum of eight weeks to whip all the football and practice fields back into shape. These fields are overseeded with annual ryegrass immediately following football play each year to add density for winter soccer play and to keep the bermudagrass from getting "scuffed."

Holecko says, "We start getting ready for fall football as soon as school is out for the summer. Temperatures and use generally cause the annual ryegrass to 'melt out' in May. If any remains, we spot spray before moving into the field rejuvenation program."

"We core aerate in at least two directions, topdress with 45 or 46 tons of ortona sand (a coarse, angular sand) per field and apply 800 pounds of Milorganite per acre. The rainy season begins the end of June and runs through September, with rains tapering off in October. Adequate moisture and natural high temperatures are ideal for the

bermudagrass. We'll gradually raise the mowing height to 1 1/2 inches, and let the fields 'rest' so the existing turf can fill-in and regroup.

"As practice and game time approach, we'll gradually lower the height of cut to one inch and adjust timing of the twice-a-week mowing to fit team, band and field striping schedules."

No Windows in Massachusetts

The Nantucket Public Schools of Nantucket, MA, are located on an island 30 miles off Cape Cod. Grounds Supervisor Jim Davidson says, "This section of the northeast has been in near drought conditions for the past two summers, and it's been dry into June. We're fortunate that our school system has its own well and our three athletic fields have irrigation systems."

The high school has one football field, which is used for both practice and play by the varsity and junior varsity teams. The field also is used by PE classes. All of the athletic fields are "rented out" for community sports programs when not used by school programs during the summer months.

Davidson says, "As a community school with virtually non-stop field use from spring warm-up through November, we have no 'windows' for maintenance or field resting periods. All procedures must be 'worked into' play and practice schedules."

The native, sandy soil fields are on a regular fertilization program, with applications made four times a year. Lime is needed annually to keep pH levels in line

with turf needs. Ocean salt air is a continual influence.

Davidson says, "We need tough, salt tolerant grass varieties here. Our base turf is a combination of bluegrasses and perennial ryegrasses, but we're gradually moving to turf type tall fescues. We core aerate twice a year, allowing the cores to dry on the turf surface and breaking them up with normal mowing. We fertilize and overseed with the fescue in conjunction with our April aeration, then provide sufficient moisture to help the seed get established.

"We fertilize again in mid-June, then in late summer or early fall, with the season's last application made after football wraps up in November. Once practices and play begin, we'll fill in worn spots, reseed and irrigate as needed, always working procedures around field use."

"Cleating It" in California

Mother Nature is a little kinder to Gary Cook, director of maintenance for the San Benito High School District in Hollister, CA. He deems the climate "ideal," with

Maintenance crew installs sod at the Dallas Cowboys' Valley Ranch practice facility. Photo courtesy: Thomas Bros. Grass.



temperature variations generally in the 15 degree range year-round, and only occasional temperature "spikes" into the 100s.

Cook says, "Our football game field is reserved for games — by the freshman, junior varsity and varsity teams, along with the Pop Warner league. So the field is in play from the first part of September through the second week of November, with only a one or two week reprieve each year.

"Practices are held on the three soccer fields adjacent to the football field. Last

year, we moved the band on-field practice to the lighted soccer field, but with little visible change in field condition, we'll probably move it back to Wednesday nights on the football field this year.

"The turf is a combination of perennial ryegrass, bluegrass and dwarf fescue. We apply slow-release nitrogen fertilizer in January. In February, we scarify, then overseed with perennial ryegrass. We'll overseed with bluegrass the end of April. In the late spring, mowing height moves up from 1 3/4

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Football Fields

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inches to 2 1/4 inches. In July, we aerate, overseed with bluegrass again and apply a 21-7-14 fertilizer."

Cook gradually drops the mowing height back down on the practice and game fields to reach 1 3/4 inches before play begins. An application of liquid nitrogen fertilizer on the game field greens it up for opening night.

Cook says, "About three weeks into the season, we'll overseed with dwarf fescue without topdressing. Players 'cleat it in.' We generally get about a 30 percent germination rate, which helps thicken the turf for the remainder of the season."

Investment in Resiliency

Gregg Roberts, director of facilities and planning for the Placer Union High School District in Auburn, CA, has three high schools with comprehensive sports program facilities. He says, "We've been converting our sports fields from a mixture of 'clump' grasses to bermudagrass

over the last several years, usually tackling one or two fields each year. For 1995, we're doing the premier football field at Del Oro High School. We'll remove the sod from the middle of the field, re-establish the grade and re-sod approximately 2,700 square feet with Tifway 419 bermudagrass. We'll use Round-Up on the remainder of the field — from the hash marks out — and 'row plant' bermudagrass sprigs right through that treated turf."

Each of the district's game fields are used by freshman, varsity and junior varsity football teams. Their practices are held on the outfield section of the baseball field. Only one high school has a marching band, and their practices shift from field to field to minimize damage.

Field conditions are different at each of the high schools. One school is at a 200-foot elevation, has a decomposed granite field base and receives approximately 20 inches of precipitation annually. The second school is at a 1,200-foot elevation, has a field of topsoil over a shale base and receives between 40 and 60 inches of precipitation annually. The third school

is at a 2,500-foot elevation, has a clay soil field and receives between 60 and 80 inches of precipitation annually.

Roberts says, "We aerate the fields three to four times a year. We topdress twice with a 70-percent sand, 30-percent topsoil mix; break-up and drag in the cores the other time or times. The fields are fertilized four times a year, generally in early March for baseball, right before spring soccer, in August and at the end of fall play.

"Starting with the second growing season, the bermudagrass fields are overseeded with perennial ryegrass in November, just before colder weather begins. Boys' football and soccer run through November, leaving only December and January as 'downtimes' for the fields."

"The switch to bermudagrass has required more maintenance effort and an investment in the right equipment to mow, topdress and aerate, but we've gained superior playing surfaces with long-term resiliency," says Roberts. "If you make a commitment to an improved



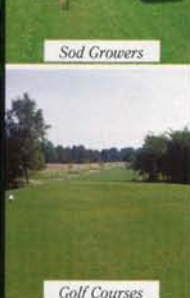
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field, you also need to commit to doing everything to keep it in top shape."

An Arizona Upgrade

Dan Sabol, Canyon Del Oro High School in Tucson, AZ, oversees 75 acres of grounds that serve a student population of nearly 2,700. The high school has one game field for football and soccer and three practice fields. School is out in mid-May. Football practice begins in early August.

Sabol says, "We have freshman, junior varsity and varsity teams and a marching band. Pop Warner football uses the facilities during September and October, and local soccer clubs practice and play here on weekends.

"Our fields are a sandy, native soil. We've gradually upgraded the game field soil profile over the last seven or eight years by topdressing with washed mortar sand. The playing fields are seeded with Sun Devil bermudagrass. It's very hardy and holds up well to the wear and tear.

"Our combination of high temperatures and low humidity force us to keep newly seeded areas moist for the one to

four weeks it takes for germination. The seeded bermudagrass takes from six to ten weeks to get established. We keep the mowing height a bit high — 1 1/2 inches — and have had no complaints. The extra top growth gives more protection to the plant's crown."

Sabol will aerify, fertilize and topdress at least two fields at the beginning of the summer vacation in mid- to late-May and do the competition field and remaining practice field a week or two later, following a PeeWee mini-camp. A football "passing" camp comes in for a week in July, and two-a-day practices start the first week in August.

Sabol says, "We apply one pound of actual nitrogen to all the sports fields every three weeks. We're in the process of setting up a fertigation system to make that task easier. To combat our alkalinity, we apply gypsum to the fields every three months. We make an initial preemergence weed control application in March, and follow up with half-rate applications in June and September.

"Fields are core aerated every two to three weeks and the cores dragged back

in. This has developed a good soil profile on the practice fields without topdressing. Fields are overseeded with winter ryegrass. The heat takes it out quickly in the spring. During practice and play seasons, we overseed bermudagrass as needed in any worn areas using a mix of equal parts seed, sand and ammonium phosphate."

Though credit is often slow in coming, sports turf managers at the high school level do more than a "pretty good" job. For example, Sabol's competition field has been the host field for one of the Copper Bowl football teams ever since that bowl started. And the Minnesota Vikings spent a week on the field one year to get in some warm weather practice.

Hey, Hank, are you ready to start singing? □

Steve and Suz Trusty are partners in Trusty & Associates, a consulting firm located in Council Bluffs, Iowa. Steve is Executive Director of the national Sports Turf Managers Association.

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