



Fall is for Soccer?

By STMA members across the U.S.

While many dedicated sports fans across the country think fall is for football, the steadily growing numbers of soccer players may tip the scales of balance.

Soccer is a "when the grass is green" sport in most sections of the U.S. In cold weather climates, soccer play begins as soon as spring turf pops through the melting snow and continues into November, when frigid temperatures and snow shut it down. In warm-weather climates, with year-round schools and competitive soccer leagues for all ages, only the worst periods of the rainy season temporarily stop play.

Sports turf managers in charge of soccer fields, even those with multiple game and practice fields on their facilities, face escalating demands for field use. Keeping playing surfaces in good condition when maintenance practices must be squeezed into such tight schedules is a feat in itself. Sports turf managers from across the country have contributed the following tips on getting that job done right.

Work Smart with Maintenance Practices

Aerate fields as frequently as possible to reduce compaction. If time and funds are limited, concentrate aeration on game fields and the heavy-use areas of practice fields. Reduce crew time by leaving cores on the field and allowing mower traffic to pulverize them.

Overseed frequently. Seed that is placed for germination will take hold when there are openings in the existing turf cover and conditions are right. Often, the times when you need to get seed down are the times you're least able to get it done. Keep pre-germinated seed ready for application in key locations when quick response is required.

Set up your own sod farm. Borrow a bit of space along the edge of fencing, beside a building, or in the outer area of the property to grow sod for emergency replacement of worn areas. Use the same grass

varieties growing in the soccer fields and follow your standard maintenance procedures so the sod will match the field's existing turf.

Gradually move mowing heights up or down to accommodate field use and weather conditions, rather than making sudden height adjustments that stress the turf. Plan to mow prior to games to create the best possible playing conditions.

Use soil testing at least annually to tailor fertilization programs to exact needs. Time fertilizer applications to turf growth patterns and "typical" weather cycles and, of course, field use schedules.

If funding is less than adequate, work with booster clubs, field-user groups, or community businesses to secure access to the equipment and supplies necessary for a complete maintenance program. Fund-raising projects focused on specific goals generally get the best cooperation and support, but each community differs. Don't give up if your first attempt for funding support fails. Just move on to other alternatives. Remember to acknowledge the assistance and say thank you — publicly and personally.

Field Preservation Techniques

Establish a system to guard against field use in circumstances that could pose a safety hazard for players. Discuss specifics with school administrators or facility owners or managers to set parameters and determine who has the "final say" and who is responsible for getting the message to officials and coaches. Bring all user groups together to explain the policy — and the reasons behind it — and enlist their cooperation.

When possible, set up fields with enough bordering space to shift total field placement periodically. For example, if the normal field runs in a north-south direction, allow enough space to create temporarily two parallel fields across the regular field running side by side in an east-west direction. This alternates placement of the heavy wear areas in the center of the field, at the goal mouths and



Booster clubs, field-user groups and community businesses can often help a turf manager secure access to equipment and supplies. Photos courtesy: Steve and Suz Trusty.

along the sidelines. With multiple field facilities, plan to keep the total number of active fields the same during these direction and placement shifts.

Players gathering along the sidelines cause excess wear. Alleviate concentrated wear by moving players' benches two or three times during each week. During multiple-game tournaments, move the benches once or twice each day. Periodically place both sets of benches on one side of the field, freeing the other side for aeration, overseeding and topdressing — and a brief rest.

Limit the use of properly placed, on-field goals to games. Coaches and players may insist that they must practice with the goals in their proper place on the field, but soon discover, through multiple-goal placement on the practice fields, that players get even more practice.

The greatest wear in the goal area usually occurs during the concentrated action of pre-game warm-up. Marshal the support of the facility's management and leaders of field-user groups in banning pre-game warm-up in the goal area. Then post signs on the goals prior to the game stating that fact. Be prepared to reinforce the restriction when it is first instituted. Once the reduced wear becomes apparent, you'll have more willing cooperation and less need to remind coaches and players of the policy.

With a three referee system, the two linesmen continually travel back and forth across the same general area during the entire game. That wear intensifies with multiple games during tournaments. Added compaction occurs during wet conditions. Since the sports turf manager can't move the linesmen, the alternative is to move the field. In some cases, space is great enough to shift the entire field several feet in one direction, moving that area of wear periodically to allow maintenance and a resting period for

the previously worn area. It also may be possible to vary the sideline measurements in stages from the widest to the narrowest regulation dimensions allowed for the specific levels of play held on a field. This accomplishes the same purpose as the "field shift."

Tips for Cold Climates

Control of perennial broadleaf weeds is most effective in the fall. Time control applications to coincide with the weeds' natural cycle of concentrating nutrients in the roots in preparation for winter.

Plan the last core aeration of the season for approximately one month prior to the onset of winter weather. Core aeration too late in the season exposes the turf surrounding the core holes to excessive desiccation.

Drill seed if possible for late season overseeding. Temperatures within the soil will be higher than those at the soil surface, stimulating more rapid germination. Seeds also will be more protected from dry conditions and gusty fall winds.

A late season application of slow-release fertilizer provides some immediate nutrients if weather conditions remain warm later than usual and an early

season feeding if crews are unable to get on the fields the following spring.

Apply a light topdressing to all fields after play has ended for the season. It provides a bit of extra protection from winter desiccation for turf crowns.

If turf is thin at the end of the playing season and no spring pre-emergent application is planned, make a dormant application of seed. The freeze and thaw cycles of winter will allow the seed to work its way to the soil surface where it will be ready to germinate as soon as the soil warms to appropriate levels in the spring.

Tips for Warm Climates

"Fall" soccer in warm climates may begin in early August and run into February. Temperatures in some regions may keep bermudagrass fields going strong. In other areas, overseeding with perennial ryegrass provides an actively growing turf within the added cushioning of the dormant bermudagrass. Timing the phase-in of the ryegrass is critical. Keep detailed records of timing, temperatures, rainfall, irrigation schedules, fertilization and any other conditions that affect turf growth. The more complete the history of success — and failure — the

more likely a successful transition program can be developed.

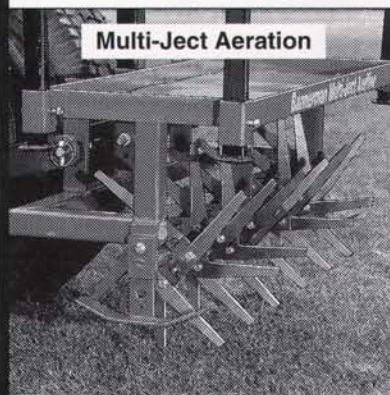
Weather patterns can change day to day during the active play period. Adjust irrigation programs daily to fit soil conditions, turf growth and weather conditions.

Plan a period of downtime for each field each year. Spread one field's normal practice and game use among several other fields whenever possible to avoid undue stress on the fields in use. Take advantage of the downtime for damage repair and such maintenance practices as dethatching; core or deep aeration; topdressing; seeding, sodding or sprigging; fertilization; and weed, insect or disease control.

Share Your Secrets

Finally, pass it on. If you come across or invent a maintenance practice or management technique that saves you time, money or effort or that improves field conditions, let other sports turf managers know about it. Though it may seem like a "little thing" to you, overall quality improvement usually comes through a combination of small steps forward. □

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