Gary Peterson Reaches Out With STMA's Mission

By Bob Tracinski

Every sports field could be a quality field, with enough outreach in education, training and creative funding ideas.

The mission statement of the national Sports Turf Managers Association is “To be a leader in the sports turf industry, to enhance, promote and improve professionalism through excellence in communication, training, research, education and services.”

Gary Peterson, Iowa State University Cooperative Extension commercial horticulture specialist, began an outreach program in the summer of 1992 that focuses on this mission statement. He uses a direct offer of a free service to sports field managers to help improve field quality. The program was initially keyed to high school facilities.

Peterson says, “Many of the calls for help with sports fields came from small schools, often in rural areas. Generally, the person responsible for field care also was in charge of all the grounds, including the walkways and parking, and maybe the exterior and interior of the buildings as well. Many of these people tackle the whole job themselves, with limited, part-time assistance, sometimes from students or volunteers.

‘I’ve been in extension for 30 years, and developed a special interest in sports turf. When my kids were in sports programs played on an outdoor field, I wanted to make sure it was a well-maintained field with no visible or hidden hazards. I’m sure every parent wants that same degree of safety for their kids. And every young athlete deserves the same opportunity to play to the best of their ability on a ‘level playing field.’ The program combines that need with the realities of today’s tight budgets, limited staffing and constant time demands.”

While the program is keyed to schools, it’s also offered to parks and organizations, and Peterson will focus more attention on the smaller town parks and recreation programs in 1997.

For People Who Care

A cover letter from Peterson is sent to targeted schools, addressed to “Dear Sports Turf Manager.” The letter reads: “Enclosed you will find a brochure that explains a free service that is available to your school. Many schools have taken advantage of this opportunity over the past five years. If you are interested, please fill out the form and return it to me. I look forward to working with you.” The letter adds, “If you are not the individual who needs to see this information, please pass it on to the appropriate person.”

The outer cover of the single-sheet, tri-fold brochure shows a line drawing of a football field under the heading, “Sports Turf Management — important to the future of your facilities.” The interior of the brochure starts off with a question, “Concerned about turfgrass problems on athletic and recreational turf?” Then states the offer, “Let Iowa State University Extension help. ISU Extension offers a free turfgrass consultation service to schools, parks and organizations by a commercial horticulture specialist. The specialist will visit your site and develop a management program for your facility.”

To make contact as easy as possible, Peterson’s direct phone number is listed. Also part of the brochure is a tear-off return form for supplying pertinent information, including check-off boxes to note the turf areas to be evaluated.

Peterson says, “There are lots of materials available on sports turf management and multiple resources provided by the national STMA and regional chapters. Iowa has a strong chapter that continues to grow even stronger. The main problems with reaching all those we need to reach with sports turf training and education are time and money. It’s tough for the individuals at smaller facilities with multiple responsibilities to fit in time for reading the literature and attending the meetings.”

Peterson notes that the individual in charge of fields may be pulled in many directions, with the squeaky wheel often getting the most attention. Also, at many schools, the playing fields are at the back of the property or across town on a separate property and not as visible to those in charge, or to the general public, as the main buildings. In some communities, especially those feeling a financial pinch, that old perception to overcome — that anything green, including weeds, covering the field is an okay playing surface.

“Our aim with the program is three-fold,” says Peterson. “First, to analyze the situation and get them started on a complete maintenance program as they can manage, given their specific circumstances. Second, to establish contacts they can tap for further assistance. And third, to give them the information they need and the help, if necessary, to convince the appropriate entities of the importance of adequate field maintenance from the players’ standpoint and from the facility’s liability standpoint.”

Three commercial horticulture specialists serve Iowa, basically dividing the state in thirds geographically. Peterson covers central Iowa, with Eldon Everhart
taking the west third, and Pat O’Malley
the east. Though all three are equipped
to handle all aspects of commercial horti-
ticulture in their geographic areas,
including the sports turf outreach program,
for further efficiency, each has concentrated
extra efforts in specific segments of the
industry. Peterson keys on turf, including
sports turf; Everhart on greenhouse and
ornamental producers and retailers; and
O’Malley on fruit and vegetable growers.

Peterson notes that the need for ade-
quate field care is getting easier to “sell.”
As the sports turf industry becomes more
visible, the extension service is getting more
calls from the people who care for these
surfaces. Coaches, athletic directors and
school administrators are noticing schools
with good field-care programs and are
becoming more concerned with estab-
lishing similar programs at their own
facilities. Administrators are growing
ever more aware of the liability factor and
possible litigation if a field does not meet
safety requirements. Increased recogni-
tion of the sports turf industry is helping
shape the public’s perception of
what differentiates a “good” field from a
“bad” field.

Peterson knew the program was a
good idea, but had no handle on what type
of participation to expect. The first year,
he sent the letter to a targeted 15 school
systems within five counties and got
responses from seven of them. He
broadened the outreach each year, adding
25 schools in 1993, 30 schools in both
1994 and 1995, and 20 schools this year.
The program now reaches all 34 counties
in central Iowa.

Getting Physical

Once Peterson receives a response
form or phone call, he explains
the program in greater detail, again assures
the contact person that there is no charge,
and sets an appointment for an on-site
visit. Ideally, the person in charge of
field care and the school’s athletic director
or administrator (or both) participate in
the on-site meeting.

Peterson says, “We walk the fields
together, discussing the current status,
the goals and a rough idea of what it’s going
to take to get there. I always take a soil
probe so we can draw samples for testing.
We also use the cores to examine and
explain the soil profile and turf root
development. The probe is a great tool to
get across the extent of a compaction
problem. If the administrator or athletic
director physically pulls a core from a little-
used area and one from between the
hash marks on the football field, or at
the soccer goal mouth, they can’t miss
the difference.

“I use the Evaluation of Athletic Field
form for each field, noting the type of
play, and the fertility, cultivation, herbicide,
mowing, seeding and irrigation programs
currently in place. I also note the number
of games and practices held on the field,
band use of the field, and specific problem
areas. Current suppliers are also listed.”

He uses the on-site visit to answer
questions, determine budgeting para-
eters and reinforce the multiple reasons
a quality field is needed. Because every-
thing tends to translate to dollars,
and the administrator, athletic director
and field manager each has his own per-
spective, it helps to have an “innocent
bystander” on hand to supply key details
and approximate cost estimates, while
emphasizing the need factor.

Once all the information is gathered,
Peterson prepares a list of key problems
to address and how to do so and a sug-
gested maintenance plan, then sends it
back to the field manager. He’ll follow
up with a phone call a few days later to
make sure the information has been
received by the right person and to answer
any additional questions that individual,
or anyone else involved with the pro-
gram, may have.

Each program is different, tailored to
the needs of the facility, its budget and
staffing levels, and its goals. For example,
some schools can only tackle improving
the game field the first year, while others
shoot for a total field upgrade. Some
schools prefer to use the services of a
lawn care company to handle materials
that require certification or licensing,
rather than having a staff person qualify
to do so. Some schools may contract for spe-
cific services, such as aeration or drill
seeding, that require equipment they’d
rather not purchase, lease, rent or borrow.

Peterson continues to work with all the
schools that have participated in the
program. He says, “After the initial main-
tenance program is in place, the first
two years are the most critical for the
school. As results become more apparent
and the person caring for the field
becomes more comfortable with the
program, the calls to my office become
less frequent. By this point, we’ve helped
the field manager establish a set of
contacts with similar programs.”

A Dream Coming True

Peterson’s dream is to reach every
field caretaker in the state. Obviously,
given the limited staffing and budget levels of
state extension programs, Peterson, Ever-
hart and O’Malley can’t do it all. But
help is available.

“Iowa STMA members do a great job
of welcoming newcomers and bringing
them into the informal networking
system,” says Peterson. Meetings are
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As in several other states, the various segments of the Iowa turfgrass industry work together to achieve common goals. The annual Turfgrass Conference held in January has comprehensive general sessions as well as separate "tracks" for the golf course superintendents, sports turf managers, sod producers, and lawn care providers.

Peterson says, "When those just establishing a field maintenance program realize they have a whole set of resource people just a phone call away, they’re much more confident about raising the level of maintenance."

Quality sports fields take the cooperation of everyone — the sports turf manager, coaches, players, athletic director, trainer, parents, superintendent of schools, the school board and the general public. Once the program gets underway, the positive results draw in these people as willing participants.

Still, funding is tight and every program has it needs. Once a field management program is in place, the sports turf manager needs to set up an annual and a long-range budget, showing general maintenance needs and major purchases. The bigger purchases — such as equipment, irrigation systems, tarps, fencing, lights, maybe even fertilizer, weed control, pesticides and seed — could require "off-budget" assistance.

Peterson urges sports turf managers, "Tap all resources. Look at the school’s booster clubs or parent organizations. These entities traditionally have helped to supply player equipment. It’s not too great a stretch for them to provide assistance with field care through funding and volunteer task forces to tackle special projects.

"You’ll create more excitement and cooperation by asking these groups to focus on a specific goal, such as the purchase and installation of an automatic irrigation system; a year’s fertilization, turf seed or aeration funding; or financing a needed piece of equipment. Obviously, the more you acknowledge their support and help them see the results it is producing, the better the ongoing relationship."

Small schools, parks and recreation systems will never be able to afford the premium college- and professional-level sports fields seen on television, but with the cooperation of the turfgrass industry in outreach programs such as the one in Iowa, every field can one day become a quality field.

For more information on this program, you may write to Gary Peterson at 619 South 6th Avenue West, Newton, IA 50208, or phone him at (515) 791-0765.

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