



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.



The goal of Gary Peterson (left, in a maroon cap) is to help every sports turf manager in Iowa produce a safe, quality field for every athlete. Photo courtesy: Steve and Suz Trusty.

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, there's 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 as complete a 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 horticulture 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 adequate 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 establishing 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 recognition 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

| Evaluation of Athletic Field | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Baseball _____ | School _____ |
| Football _____ | Individuals in charge _____ |
| Softball _____ | _____ |
| Soccer _____ | _____ |
| Fertility Program | Herbicide Program |
| lbs. Nitrogen _____ | Broadleaf _____ |
| Times of year _____ | When Applied _____ |
| WS _____ | Annual Grass _____ |
| WIN _____ | When Applied _____ |
| Cultivation Program | Mowing Program |
| Time of year _____ | Height of cut _____ |
| # of times _____ | Playing time _____ |
| _____ | Summer _____ |
| Seeding Program | Irrigation Program |
| Time of year _____ | How often _____ |
| Amount _____ | Amount _____ |
| Type of grass _____ | _____ |
| Number of games _____ | _____ |
| Practice on field _____ | _____ |
| Band Use _____ | _____ |
| Problem Areas _____ | _____ |
| Suppliers _____ | _____ |

A concise form for evaluating a field's program enables Peterson to identify key problems and tailor solutions that will fit within a school's budget.

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 parameters and reinforce the multiple reasons a quality field is needed. Because everything tends to translate to dollars, and the administrator, athletic director and field manager each has his own perspective, 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 suggested 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 program, 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 specific 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 maintenance 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, Everhart 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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held at different locations across the state to allow more people to take part in the educational sessions and hands-on training. The chapter has some very capable, very active individuals — like Mike Andresen, Dale Roe, Bill Anton, Mike McCaffrey and Kevin Vos — who also provide outreach themselves.”

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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