

From a Player's Perspective

By Bob Tracinski

The term “a level playing field” didn’t become a world-wide cliché for nothing. Though this term now describes equal circumstances for anyone involved in a competition, it grew from the realization that field conditions do impact the outcome of a game — and that unequal field conditions can help one team and hamper another. Ideally, field conditions consistently are so close to perfect that athletes can ignore them and concentrate totally on playing the game.

Baseball player Chip Rhea (pronounced Ray), the former University of Kentucky (UK) standout, signed with Arizona in this summer’s draft and is now playing with Arizona’s Leithbridge, Canada, Black Diamonds in the short-season league. Rhea “views” baseball fields more critically than most players. He’s an agronomy major, with 12 credit hours to wrap up before earning his BS degree. Rhea has spent one summer internship working on multiple sports fields under Bucky Trotter, UK sports turf manager. He’s also spent one summer’s internship working on a golf course. Rhea was one of three UK baseball players majoring in turf.

Trotter notes that the first thing Rhea did at a college away game, and now does in the pros, is seek out the sports turf manager and “talk turf.” Not only do these informal sessions give Rhea a broader picture of overall field management practices, they also provide insight on any potential problem areas that might affect play.

Rhea says, “As soon as we get to the site, I like to walk the field to see for myself how it looks and feels. This step alone reveals a lot about the maintenance program and how the field will play.

He’ll note which grasses are used and what condition they’re in for the time of year and weather conditions, including density, color and “lushness.” He may reach down, grab a handful of turf and give a tug to gauge whether root development and depth will keep the plants firmly anchored

during play. He’ll note the moisture level of the soil and height of cut not only relative to turf type and the season, but also as it relates to coaching reports of the speed and agility of the home team. Drier, shorter grass plays “faster,” giving an advantage to quick, highly mobile players.

“The skinned area is critical,” says Rhea. “When you’re the batter or runner, you’re always on the dirt. You feel more confident working from a skinned surface with a certain stage of hardness to the sub-surface layer and a light, fluffy coating about cleat-deep on top and just the right degree of moisture. The sub-surface hardness gives you a solid base to push off from, whether you’re putting everything into a swing as a batter, or trying to beat the ball to the base as a runner.

“If the skinned area is too hard, it puts more stress on your feet and legs. If it’s too soft, you sink in a little, which robs a bit of your confidence as a batter and slows your speed as a runner. With too little top layer, your cleats dig into the sub-surface base too much, which tears up the base path during the course of the game. If the top layer is too deep, you tend to slide a bit before your cleats touch solid ground.

“There’s a ‘just right point’ for the moisture level, too, not wet, soggy or dry, but moist to a degree that will hold up throughout the game. It shouldn’t be so dry and powdery that you slip on a sudden cut, or so wet it’s slick or sticks to your cleats.

“The ‘feel’ of the field, and especially of the skinned area, changes gradually during a game. If the surface is too dry to start with, it changes a lot. Heat and the sun dry out the field, making it play faster and, because some areas tend to dry out faster than others, making the field more likely to produce bad hops.”

Rhea emphasizes that getting the skinned area properly prepared is one of the hardest things to learn from the groundskeeping side. He says, “It’s not a static process because temperature, humidity, wind speed and direction all



An agronomy major who will soon earn his BS degree, Chip Rhea knows baseball fields from the ground up. Photos courtesy: Bucky Trotter.

affect the amount of moisture you apply. The surface will even react a little differently on an overcast, cloudy or sunny day.

“I got the feel of doing it right by watching exactly what Bucky was doing in the pre-game skinned area preparation and then paying attention to how it played at certain moisture levels in different conditions. Next came the opportunity to watch someone do it, then do part of it yourself under that person’s supervision. You need that hands-on experience to get the ‘feel’ of the dragging techniques, how much moisture to apply, and how to put the water down properly. Even with lots of hands-on practice, I was really nervous the first time I was one of the two-person, pre-game dragging and wetting crew.”

The University of Kentucky is in Lexington, part of the transition zone that gives turf the best and worst of all seasons. Rhea’s had the opportunity to work with both warm-season bermudagrass and cool-season perennial ryegrass and bluegrass among the multiple fields on the school’s campus.

The bermudagrass fields are overseeded with perennial ryegrass to provide consistent color and active growth during the cool spring and fall. Sections beyond the playing surface of the football practice fields are Kentucky bluegrass. There’s even a strip of zoysiagrass between two of the football practice fields.

Rhea says, “I prefer playing on bermudagrass. It forms a dense, well-rooted cushion that takes lots of traffic and still holds up. It takes mowing at an inch or less, which plays at a good speed, yet still has a ‘soft’ feel to it. Bluegrass and perennial ryegrass are more ‘clumpy,’ lower in density, more lush and slick when wet, and need a higher mowing height, which slows play a bit. I’ve seen more ‘true’ rolls and fewer bad hops in bermudagrass. Besides that, bermudagrass thrives during summer heat, while the cool-season grasses slow down, thin out and become prey to insects and diseases.”



"The skinned area is critical," says Rhea. "When you're the batter or runner, you're always on the dirt."

Much of the baseball season is played on overseeded bermudagrass, which Rhea feels plays better than cool-season grasses alone. The transition period into and out of bermudagrass dominance isn't as tricky to handle from the player's perspective as it is from that of the turfgrass manager.

"You're still playing on a dense turf surface during the transition," says Rhea. "If the transition is handled well, players notice the difference in the height of cut as much as the difference in grasses, and neither takes away from the focus of the game."

A level outfield with consistent turf density and moisture content gives the player confidence to run for the ball at full speed. Even a few ruts, depressions, mounds, rocks, exposed roots or wet or dry patches can cause a player to be tentative in the game, or to twist an ankle or knee.

Rhea says, "The warning track lets the player know where the fence is when he can't take his eye off the ball. The sound and feel of your feet hitting a different surface is a signal to cut off the jets. But, because you're moving fast and can't look down, the transition from turf to track must be smooth."

Rhea points out that the difference in cut outs for the skinned surface at the first and third base areas will affect how the ball plays. When he plays third base, he'll try to observe the ball movement patterns during warm-ups and the first few innings to



For turf, Rhea prefers bermudagrass, which provides more "true" rolls and fewer bad hops.

gauge his moves accordingly. Rhea also notes that he'll adjust his position to fit turf height and moisture levels, playing closer to the ball in damp, tall turf and further from it in dry, short turf.

Field conditions vary within categories as well as playing levels. Rhea has played on some good and some not-so-good fields in high school and college and now in baseball's minor leagues. A poor or mediocre field lowers the level of the game.

Rhea says, "Bad fields eat infielders. Lip formation, an uneven surface, or a field that

starts off too dry and bakes out in the sun is sure to cause bad hops during the game. The player can't tell if the ball is going to come up or drop down after it connects with the ground. When the field's in good shape, the athletes can play their game and focus on performing to the best of their potential." □

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