

Funding Fields for Fun, Profit – and Survival!

By Mike Schiller

Sports turf management isn't simply a nice "sideline," one of those warm, fuzzy "feel good" programs that facilities, educational entities and governmental agencies tack on to their budgets when funds are available. Sports turf management is vital to the preservation of athletic field resources and the well-being of the humans who use those fields. It deserves adequate funding, and here are just a few of the reasons.

Sports and Lifestyle

It's scientifically proven that physical activity is closely linked to health of body and mind. Exercise helps the human body function more efficiently, increases muscle mass and strength, and aids in weight control. It triggers reactions in the brain that reduce stress and elevate the spirit.



Adequately funded fields yield many benefits. Poorly funded fields can contribute to injuries of athletes and increase the risk of lawsuits.

Many adults are choosing participation in one or more sports as the preferred method of physical activity for themselves and their children. People begin their participation in such team sports as soccer, baseball and softball at ever younger ages and continue as active players for decades. Life-long involvement in a sport frequently is the goal, and often is the reality.

Sports participation by women and girls is increasing at all levels. Title IX of the Federal Education Amendments Act became law in 1972 with compliance required in 1978. A *Time* magazine article, "A Level Playing Field for

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Women," in the May 5, 1997, issue refers to Title IX as "one of the most important pieces of social legislation ever enacted." According to data in the article, the number of women participating in intercollegiate athletics has grown from 31,000 in 1972 to more

than 120,000. At the high school level, the number of female athletes has ballooned from 294,000 in 1971 to 2.4 million in 1995. While the current figure for male high school athletes remains close to 1971 figures, it's impressive at approximately 3.6 million.

Granted, not all those athletes play on turf fields, but not all those active-

ly engaged in turf-field sports are counted among a school's "competition" athletes. Intramural sports and league play through baseball, softball and soccer associations further swell the number of players.

And those numbers will continue to increase, spurred by the joy of the game, the potential for scholarships and the ever-expanding television coverage of sporting events, including the victories of U.S. men's and women's teams in international competition.

Participation in team sports helps children and adults alike improve cognitive and motor skills and such interpersonal interactions as cooperation and communication. It promotes personal responsibility and the ability to function effectively within a group. It helps individuals grow in self esteem. Team members make lasting friendships. Plus, team sports can be lots of fun.

It's no wonder that access to athletic fields has become a quality-of-life issue for much of the world's population.

Safety

If a goal of sports is to promote health, athletes deserve the opportunity to compete safely. While properly constructed and well-maintained turf fields can't guarantee protection from injury, they do lessen the probability.

Sports turf managers can't produce "perfect" fields 100 percent of the time; far too many variables exist. But trained sports turf managers can produce fields that reach the highest levels of playability given the construction parameters of the field; resources in materials, time and labor available; previous and current weather conditions; and level of field use.

To do so, sports turf managers need help. If weather and field-use levels combine to make a field temporarily unfit for play, the sports turf manager needs the authority to suspend play to avoid turf damage that requires extensive, expensive repairs and — more importantly — to save athletes the risk of injury. To revive an overworked field and keep it playable and safe, they need the time and funds for such maintenance procedures as aeration, topdressing, overseeding, fertilization and irrigation.

Ignoring these requirements for safe field conditions exposes a facility to liability. If an athlete is injured and sues, a court will require the facility to show that its care of the field has been



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“reasonable” and “prudent” — key legal standards in issues of liability.

Facilities that strive for the best possible maintenance standards given their specific circumstances, and that document their efforts completely, generally lessen their exposure to liability. A few dollars spent on maintenance can save many dollars spent in court.

Playability

Professional athletes compete on highly playable, highly maintained turf fields, and they deserve nothing less.

The issue is: What level of playability do amateur athletes deserve? Some athletes reach their highest competitive levels in youth association sports, others in high school or college games. Are these players any less deserving than the pros? Every athlete deserves the opportunity to play the game to the best of his or her ability.

Programs that recognize this and allocate adequate funding can — and do — produce superior fields, such as

the youth baseball fields at Disney's Wide World of Sports complex and STMA's municipal, high school and college Fields of the Year. Field construction details, budgets and staffing levels vary greatly among those facilities, but the commitment to excellence within the realities of the circumstances remains the same.

The Business of Sports

Sports are big business. Professional teams cost millions of dollars to manage, and generate millions of dollars in profits. Successful university-level teams generate funds to support themselves and many less-popular athletic programs at the school. On-site spectators increase the profits of area businesses. Televised games generate funds for the teams, the TV networks and the companies that advertise during games.

While most people acknowledge and understand these business aspects of high-profile sports, the positive impact of sports facilities at the community level is frequently overlooked. The dollar volume generated by local and

regional games and tournaments from youth through senior sports may be smaller, but it's certainly significant income for facility owners and area businesses. Companies that provide sports-related goods and services benefit from all levels of this activity.

Quality-of-life issues enter as well. The entire community benefits from the aesthetic appeal and positive environmental impact of high-quality athletic facilities ranging from a city's premium stadium to the well-maintained softball complexes in community parks and the soccer fields at elementary schools.

Because of all the issues involved, the term “adequate funding” must come under scrutiny. Facilities that recognize the importance of good field maintenance are more likely to define “adequate funding” as what it takes to do the job right, and they will find innovative ways to generate the resources needed. □

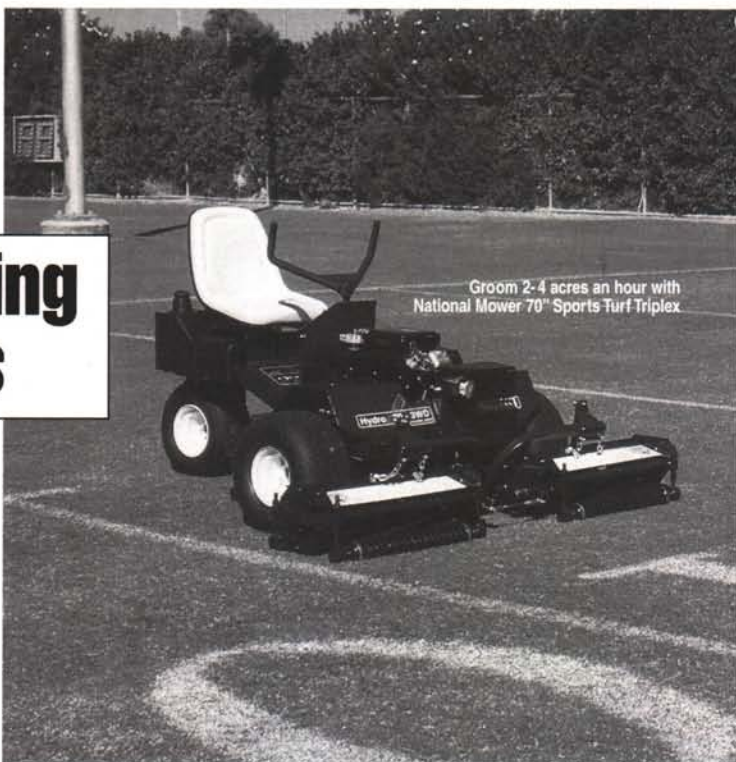
Mike Schiller is superintendent of parks for Rolling Meadows Park District, Rolling Meadows, Ill., and president of the national Sports Turf Managers Association.



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