

Your Fields as the Public Sees Them: Is Perception Reality?

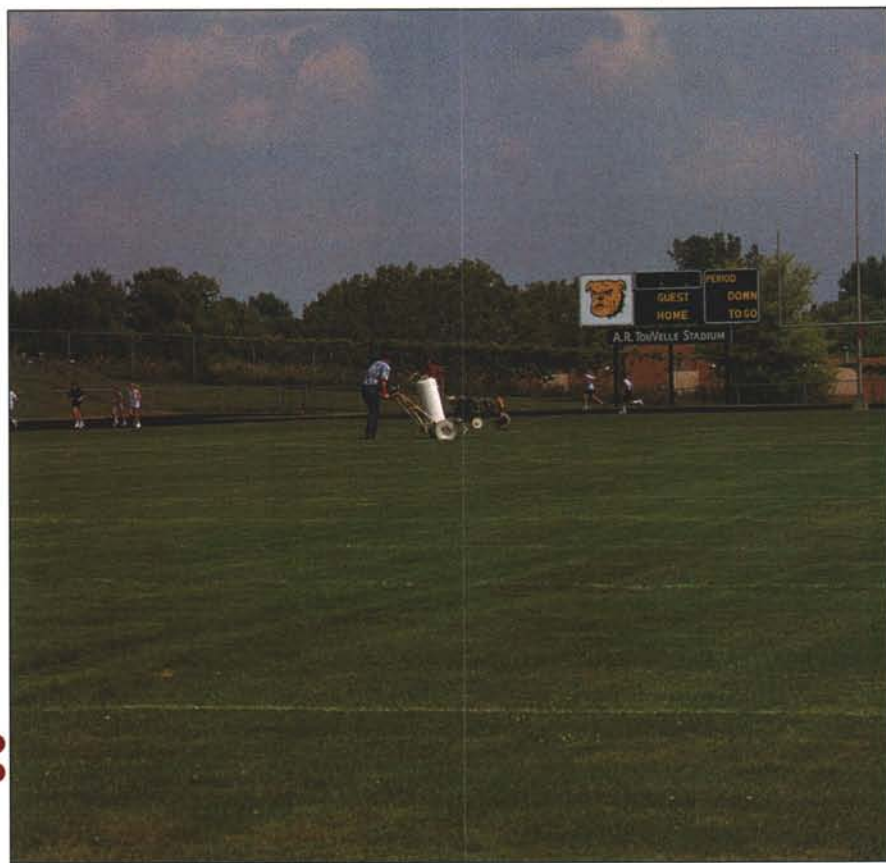
By Steve and Suz Trusty

Okay, you've accepted the fact that, once more, your field *won't* be in the world spotlight during late December and early January.

Your major "bowl" game comes earlier in the year. It may be the big intracity championship or state football finals. It may be the annual homecoming game or the last game in which your team has a chance to make the local or regional playoffs.

Tip of the Iceberg

The point is — for every facility and



Others see you cutting the grass or lining the field, but do they understand how complex your job really is? Photo courtesy: Trusty & Associates.

every sports turf manager — there is one defining moment each year when your field and the results of your maintenance program are on display big time. While players swarm the field and the stands are filled with spectators, your entire program is under scrutiny by the usual contingent of coaches and staff members, parents and team supporters *and* your principal or school president, athletic director, school board members and alumni — or your superintendent of parks, city council and mayor — or your state legislators and governor — *and* key reporters from the newspapers and radio and television stations.

For these important spectators, the perception of your maintenance program's success or failure is based on this game. And face it, perception is reality. Your future and the future of your program are both on the line.

This is your highest stress point of the season.

The Rest of the Iceberg

It doesn't matter that your budget is in its third year of a belt-tightening program, that half your staff is out with the flu, that it's rained for 40 days and at least three inches every day for a week, that your paint machine is in the shop, the new baby kept you up half the night, and your mother-in-law arrived yesterday for an extended visit.

Nor do most people know that, as a sports turf manager, you are most likely *very* good at what you do. You've learned the basics "and then some" of soils, plant physiology, irrigation, and disease, insect and weed control. You're keeping up to date on new turf-grass cultivars, equipment, control products and all the related aspects of turf maintenance. You've developed an extensive and highly workable system to monitor all aspects of your program: budgets and purchases, equipment maintenance and repairs, turf mainte-

nance procedures, irrigation schedules, IPM tracking and response, weather conditions, personnel job skills and training, safety programs, and all record systems necessary for governmental compliance at the local, state and national levels.

You've learned the fine art of communicating with coaches and field-user groups to protect both players and fields by shifting practice and play schedules to work around weather-related unplayable conditions.

You've repaired the irrigation system in the middle of the night when it took a little flashlight and a big prayer to track down a major leak prior to the season opener. You thoroughly enjoy the annual state-wide battle of the marching-bands competition that takes place on your stadium field, even though you must double the aeration, topdressing and overseeding program for a month to balance the extra wear.

In addition, you're active in both the chapter and national STMA and in other state and regional turfgrass organizations. You share information with your peers. You give back to your community. You love your spouse, are great with the kids, kind to dogs, help old ladies across the street and all that cool stuff.

Come Blow Your Horn

So, you should be getting recognition on the great job you're doing from your boss, your boss' boss and everyone who works with or around you; big thank-yous from your field-user groups; and phone calls from parents, team booster groups and local businesses offering financial and volunteer support.

What? You say that's *not* happening? Even though everything we've

before you rent that skywriter plane, take out a billboard at the busiest intersection in town, and go on your favorite TV station's nightly news with a personal pronouncement, let's establish a more discreet, but still proactive, approach.

If all anyone sees you doing is cutting the grass, lining the field, or staring at a computer screen, and you're not letting them know why those things are important to your overall program and letting them in on all the

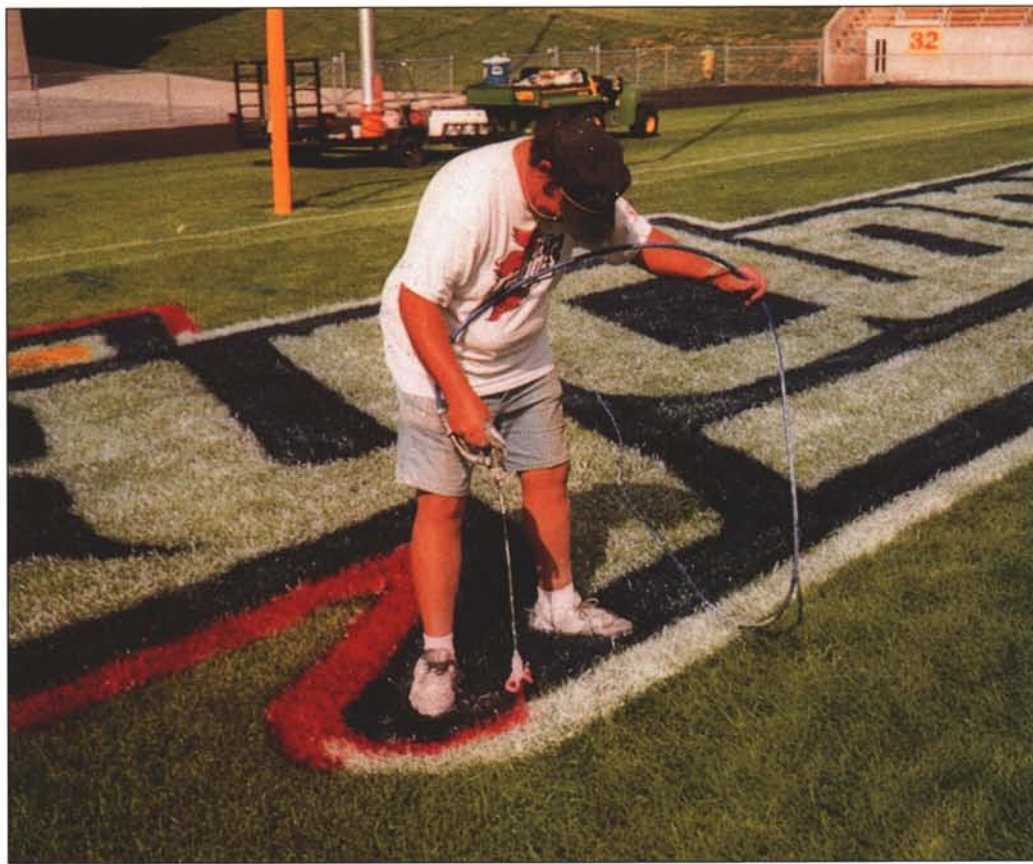
other important things that you do, how would they be expected to understand how incredibly complex your job really is?

Tell Your Boss

For starters, put together a one- or two-page report for your boss (and maybe even a copy for your boss' boss) on the major elements and accomplishments of your program during

the past week. Use this report to provide an overview of what you're doing to the fields, why you're doing it, and why it matters.

Insert an information block to show total use of all fields for the past week, including practices as well as games. Develop a chart to compare employee labor hours to hours of field use. Lay out a comparison graph of actual expenditures to the projected budget. Explain the reasons for any



A weekly letter or newsletter is a good tool for communicating details about the art and science of field preparation. Photo courtesy: Mike Andresen.

said about you so far is absolutely true?

Could it be that, somewhere along the line, you neglected to communicate the importance of what you do as it relates to field quality and player safety?

Yep, that's it all right. You've done a great job of taking care of everyone and everything else, but "forgot" to toot the horn of little ol' you. Now,

variance, good or bad.

Include such data as how many hours crews devoted to aeration of the soccer fields and the time saved because of the new techniques they developed for dragging in the cores. Note how your service technician saved major repairs by catching a small mechanical problem with the aerator during regular preventive maintenance. You *do* want to spread the good news about your staff. Hiring good people and helping them become even better is part of effective management.

Tell the Public

Work with the contact people who coordinate practice and game schedules for your various user groups to develop a weekly letter or newsletter. This can become an information exchange tool for the groups, their booster clubs and sponsors and allow you to communicate key details of what you're working to accomplish with the maintenance program. You also can use it to notify user groups in advance when certain procedures



If you've got a field to be proud of, you do want to spread the good news about the work you and your staff are doing. Photo courtesy: Trusty & Associates.

will take a field or fields out of play. You can explain what combination of circumstances would prompt you to cancel games and why it's important to do so.

Arrange to supply similar information to your local newspapers and radio and television stations. Introduce yourself to the various sports reporters if you haven't already done so. Offer to answer any questions they have about the fields or field conditions at any time.

When problems do occur (and they will, no matter how great you, your crews and your program are and how hard you all work), explain to all these people what has happened, what you're doing to rectify it, and the anticipated timetable.

If you're comfortable doing so, offer your services during the off-season as a speaker to community service organizations. It's an excellent way to inform the wider community about your programs, and if you're looking for volunteers, these people are prime candidates.

Good sports turf managers love the job and take pride in doing it well. If that describes you and every one of your crew members, put a smile on your face, keep fine-tuning your program and give others enough information so they can appreciate and support your efforts. It's a win-win situation. You may even get a few cheers of your own from the fans in the stands at your next major bowl game. □

Steve and Suz Trusty are partners in Trusty & Associates, an industry consulting firm located in Council Bluffs, Iowa. Steve is executive director of the Sports Turf Managers Association.

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