



The El Niño Factor

El Niño has had a tremendous impact on the work load of many sports turf managers. While weather conditions always influence this industry, an extended period of storms, excesses, and unpredictable temperatures has put management skills to the test.

El Niño brought the southern section of the U.S. weeks of clouds and more rain than we could handle; athletic fields ranged from wet to saturated. In the north, ice smothered some fields; snow piled high on others. The country's mid-section rode a roller coaster of changing weather; a blast of winter was followed by a few spring-like days, and then winter returned with another deep freeze.

Many sports turf managers spent the majority of the winter months moving snow, clearing mud, or finding innovative methods to remove excess water. Winter kill attacked both newly established turfgrasses and well established fields. Trees and shrubs broke under the weight of snow and ice or snapped in blasting winds, and required extensive trimming and removal.

Early season field renovation projects and normal spring maintenance could only be done in spurts, or were delayed or simply postponed. Planned new construction faced frustrating delays.

Games were scheduled, rescheduled, and rescheduled again. Skinned area material of baseball and softball fields washed into the turf, and some fields were better suited for hockey play than spring soccer.

Fields that withstood the winter faced the spring stress of heavy wear, as games were shifted to any playable surface. The ski events canceled in Nagano were nothing compared to the cancellations of spring ball and parks and recreation games in the U.S.

But as with all storms in life, El Niño also brought out the best in many of us. Yes, there were complainers. Some were overwhelmed and fell hopelessly behind. But more often, this was a time of sharpening management skills and rallying forces, of increased commitment and dedication throughout the staff, and of good humor and camaraderie despite ever-extending work hours. In some cases, El Niño even channeled attention and funding to repairs for long-term field problems.

Sports turf managers whose facilities escaped heavy damage offered to share their resources with those hardest hit. Often help came as suggestions and advice freely given, simple sharing of information from people who had been there, done that, and could help solve a problem.

Suppliers made emergency shipments, brought in needed materials in their own vehicles, or arranged for loaner equipment to help finish jobs during short breaks in the weather. Help came in the form of equipment sharing between sports turf managers, or in offers of field time to fit in important games. In some cases, a coalition of local sports turf managers brought their crews and equipment to a damaged community field and pitched in to bring it back to playable condition.

To all of you who weathered the storms with flying colors, and to all of you who lent a helping hand, thank you. Once again you came through as true professionals.

Stephen Guise has recently accepted the position of director of business development for Marina Landscape, Inc. of Anaheim, Calif.

Stephen Guise, STMA President

TIP O' THE MONTH

Wet Weather Blues

With the rains and floods El Niño has brought to some parts of the country, homeowners and professional turf managers alike are faced with the task of repairing flooded turf areas.

To improve recovery of flooded turf, immediately remove deposited debris, silt and sand after the water recedes. A combination of shovels, rakes and water hoses works best for this job. Consider regular raking to keep any remaining crust broken up throughout the season.

If the grass is not green after the water recedes and does not "green-up" with adjacent non-flooded areas, consider vigorous aeration followed by reseeding this spring. Action should be taken as soon as possible.

Other wet weather tips:

- **Mowing:** Avoid scalping tall grass by setting the mower up a notch or two, and try to mow when the turf is dry. Mow more frequently than usual, and gradually lower the height-of-cut back to the original setting.

- **Red Thread:** Red thread is very active in wet weather. It appears as small purplish-blue and eventually tan colored spots, and is characterized by a distinctive red colored "thread" growing from the tips of infected leaves. If you have not fertilized in a month or two, an application of slow-release fertilizer at a rate of 0.75 to 1.0 lb. N per 1000 sq.ft. should help control the disease. □

The above tip comes from Zac Reicher, assistant professor/turfgrass extension specialist for the Turfgrass Science Program at Purdue University. His tips can be found on the program's web site: <http://www.agry.purdue.edu>.

If you have a tip you'd like to share, send it to sportsTURF 2101 S. Arlington Heights Rd., Arlington Heights, IL 60005, or send an e-mail message to sberens@aip.com.