

# Turf

# Uniformity



*A key to avoiding lawsuits*

by Greg Petry

**W**hile providing safe, playable athletic venues is the goal for sports field management, uniformity is key to avoiding liability lawsuits. From the athletes' standpoint, uniform playing surfaces decrease the amount of energy that's spent concentrating on the field. This allows them to focus their attention on the game.

From the facility owner's and manager's standpoint, uniform conditions demonstrate that a standard level of playability is being monitored and maintained. Liability issues are measured against this standard. Any potential lawsuit will take into consideration demonstrated actions to meet those standards.

#### **The maintenance program**

It's very important to establish a well-organized maintenance program. The program must include all of the typical practices required for individual fields and the sports played them.

For example, all turf areas require mowing, irrigation, fertilization, aeration, topdressing, seeding, sodding and/or sprigging. For baseball or softball

fields, add all aspects of mound, home plate, and skinned area maintenance. Maintenance should also be addressed for such amenities as fencing, lighting, dugouts, player's benches, stands, restrooms, concession stands, and press boxes.

Once the program is established, you'll need to repeat the maintenance practices regularly. You can't simply follow the program once and then put it away, only to bring it out again when someone complains.

If you aerify every few years or fertilize once a season, you're not going to establish uniformity in your turf. The maintenance program has to evolve over time to produce results. Factors specific to your facility, such as number of fields, amount of play, environmental factors, personnel levels, and budget, will have to be worked into the system.

Maintenance practices should be performed at regularly scheduled times to keep turf in shape. Turf managers must accept the responsibility of seeing that these schedules are followed. We have to be proactive to produce and maintain appropriate conditions.

#### **Details**

Pay attention to the details. For example, establish a height of cut that works for your program. You can produce a thicker stand of grass by lowering the cut, but it will require more maintenance to keep that grass in good condition.

Determine which height of cut produces uniform playability within the time, personnel, and budget constraints of your system. Then stick to it. You have to pay close attention to these types of details if you want your maintenance program to be successful within workable parameters for your overall system.

#### **Document**

Document your maintenance. Develop a log or reporting form so that you and your crew can keep track of expenses and labor hours. **Figure 1** is an example of an effective maintenance log. These logs provide documented evidence that you are following industry-acceptable maintenance programs, and are receiving results that you want to achieve.



## Inspect

Follow up on your documentation with safety inspections. Incorporate a safety log with your maintenance log. Show that personnel have physically gone to the field site to check every detail: turf, skinned areas, soccer goals, fencing, parking lot, etc.

Document that these things have been inspected and that they are in good condition. If crew members identify a problem, the crew leader must make sure it is handled properly. If the problem is not an immediate hazard, it can be reported to the supervisor. If the crew leader identifies the problem as an immediate hazard and the crews are not equipped to rectify it, the leader must radio the supervisor and request assistance.

Once the hazard is corrected, the maintenance crew should sign off on the work completed and note the date. The supervisor should also sign off on it.

## Technology

Keep up with technological advancements that allow you to improve conditions in your fields. Continually seek new methods that allow you to meet your goals more efficiently and effectively.

Always keep apprised of the new products that are on the market. For example, new advances in application equipment can ensure that chemical applications are administered properly, calibrated correctly, and applied exactly where they're needed and in the strength required to solve the problem. If you take advantage of this technology, you will improve your turf and enhance the program that you've created.

Also, pay attention to the people factor. Look for ways to make your job more efficient, more effective, and easier. For example, more efficient, less cumbersome equipment for lining out the fields will save time, and it will put less physical stress on your employees. This will reduce the risk of lost time and injuries, another potent source of liability and potential lawsuits.

## Communicate

Management's obligation to keep up with new technology and industry-related information goes beyond personal education. You must develop methods to channel that information to your employees. Too often, we keep ourselves up to date as managers, but fail to share that information with our people so they can incorporate it into the job.

Information is a tool, like any other tool. Keeping information to ourselves is

as useless as keeping a mower in the office. When the entire staff is informed, it's able to continually do the job effectively according to established procedures. That's the key to delivering good service.

It's unrealistic to expect people to increase performance levels without proper training. By keeping personnel up to date on technology, you equip them to identify, avoid, and correct hazards, and to produce uniform turf.

Communication is a two-way street. Welcome feedback from employees, staff, players, coaches, schedulers, booster clubs, spectators, and anyone else who uses or spends time on any part of your facilities. Take this feedback to heart, respond to it, and react to it.

Your entire staff needs to be equipped to handle feedback appropriately.

Whenever you receive a complaint, feedback, or notice of inappropriate conditions, respond to it. A player may

**Q: What do all of these teams have in common?**

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Arizona Diamondbacks  
University of Texas Longhorns  
San Diego Chargers  
University of Southern California Trojans  
California Angels  
Arizona State University Sun Devils  
San Francisco 49'ers  
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**Figure 1. Baseball diamond prepping and safety checklist**

| SCHOOLS       | TYPE OF BALL FIELD | PREPARED (Y/N) AND | INFILLED (Y/N) AND | INFILLED WITH (MATERIAL) | INFILLED AT (DATE) | DRYING (Y/N) AND | DRYING (MATERIAL) | DRYING (DATE) | CHANGING (Y/N) AND | CHANGING (MATERIAL) | CHANGING (DATE) | MAINTENANCE (Y/N) AND | MAINTENANCE (MATERIAL) | MAINTENANCE (DATE) | MAINTENANCE (PERSONNEL) | MAINTENANCE (EQUIPMENT) | MAINTENANCE (COSTS) | MAINTENANCE (RECORDS) | MAINTENANCE (TRAINING) | MAINTENANCE (SAFETY) | MAINTENANCE (INSPECTION) | MAINTENANCE (REPORTS) | MAINTENANCE (OTHER) | MAINTENANCE (TOTAL) | MAINTENANCE (COMMENTS) |  |  |
|---------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|------------------|-------------------|---------------|--------------------|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|------------------------|--|--|
| Benny SE      |                    |                    |                    |                          |                    |                  |                   |               |                    |                     |                 |                       |                        |                    |                         |                         |                     |                       |                        |                      |                          |                       |                     |                     |                        |  |  |
| Benny SW      |                    |                    |                    |                          |                    |                  |                   |               |                    |                     |                 |                       |                        |                    |                         |                         |                     |                       |                        |                      |                          |                       |                     |                     |                        |  |  |
| Benny NE      |                    |                    |                    |                          |                    |                  |                   |               |                    |                     |                 |                       |                        |                    |                         |                         |                     |                       |                        |                      |                          |                       |                     |                     |                        |  |  |
| Benny NW      |                    |                    |                    |                          |                    |                  |                   |               |                    |                     |                 |                       |                        |                    |                         |                         |                     |                       |                        |                      |                          |                       |                     |                     |                        |  |  |
| Glen Flora S  |                    |                    |                    |                          |                    |                  |                   |               |                    |                     |                 |                       |                        |                    |                         |                         |                     |                       |                        |                      |                          |                       |                     |                     |                        |  |  |
| Glenwood E    |                    |                    |                    |                          |                    |                  |                   |               |                    |                     |                 |                       |                        |                    |                         |                         |                     |                       |                        |                      |                          |                       |                     |                     |                        |  |  |
| Glenwood W    |                    |                    |                    |                          |                    |                  |                   |               |                    |                     |                 |                       |                        |                    |                         |                         |                     |                       |                        |                      |                          |                       |                     |                     |                        |  |  |
| Jefferson NW  |                    |                    |                    |                          |                    |                  |                   |               |                    |                     |                 |                       |                        |                    |                         |                         |                     |                       |                        |                      |                          |                       |                     |                     |                        |  |  |
| Jefferson SW  |                    |                    |                    |                          |                    |                  |                   |               |                    |                     |                 |                       |                        |                    |                         |                         |                     |                       |                        |                      |                          |                       |                     |                     |                        |  |  |
| Lyon          |                    |                    |                    |                          |                    |                  |                   |               |                    |                     |                 |                       |                        |                    |                         |                         |                     |                       |                        |                      |                          |                       |                     |                     |                        |  |  |
| McAree SW     |                    |                    |                    |                          |                    |                  |                   |               |                    |                     |                 |                       |                        |                    |                         |                         |                     |                       |                        |                      |                          |                       |                     |                     |                        |  |  |
| McAree NE     |                    |                    |                    |                          |                    |                  |                   |               |                    |                     |                 |                       |                        |                    |                         |                         |                     |                       |                        |                      |                          |                       |                     |                     |                        |  |  |
| McCall NE     |                    |                    |                    |                          |                    |                  |                   |               |                    |                     |                 |                       |                        |                    |                         |                         |                     |                       |                        |                      |                          |                       |                     |                     |                        |  |  |
| McCall NW     |                    |                    |                    |                          |                    |                  |                   |               |                    |                     |                 |                       |                        |                    |                         |                         |                     |                       |                        |                      |                          |                       |                     |                     |                        |  |  |
| Webster NE    |                    |                    |                    |                          |                    |                  |                   |               |                    |                     |                 |                       |                        |                    |                         |                         |                     |                       |                        |                      |                          |                       |                     |                     |                        |  |  |
| Webster SE    |                    |                    |                    |                          |                    |                  |                   |               |                    |                     |                 |                       |                        |                    |                         |                         |                     |                       |                        |                      |                          |                       |                     |                     |                        |  |  |
| Webster SW    |                    |                    |                    |                          |                    |                  |                   |               |                    |                     |                 |                       |                        |                    |                         |                         |                     |                       |                        |                      |                          |                       |                     |                     |                        |  |  |
| Weiss         |                    |                    |                    |                          |                    |                  |                   |               |                    |                     |                 |                       |                        |                    |                         |                         |                     |                       |                        |                      |                          |                       |                     |                     |                        |  |  |
| Waukegan East |                    |                    |                    |                          |                    |                  |                   |               |                    |                     |                 |                       |                        |                    |                         |                         |                     |                       |                        |                      |                          |                       |                     |                     |                        |  |  |
| Waukegan West |                    |                    |                    |                          |                    |                  |                   |               |                    |                     |                 |                       |                        |                    |                         |                         |                     |                       |                        |                      |                          |                       |                     |                     |                        |  |  |

CREW LEADER: \_\_\_\_\_ EMPLOYEE: \_\_\_\_\_  
SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_ SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_ SUPERVISOR: \_\_\_\_\_

blame a loss on the length of the grass when the height of cut hasn't changed in 15 years and the field is mowed twice a week. In this case, acknowledging the complaint and explaining the established practices may be sufficient. If unusual weather conditions have delayed regular mowing schedules, you may need to find a way to assign a higher priority to field mowing.

There must be a mechanism to document formal complaints, whether they are received in person, by phone, or in written form. It's also necessary to follow up with a formal, documented response to the one making the complaint, and to document any action taken.

Sports turf management is a service industry. Our job is to provide fields that meet the standards we set, but we must also respond to what the people want.

**Case study: Uniformity works**

Our park district was involved in a lawsuit pertaining to an injury received by a baseball player at one of our community parks. All of our district ball diamonds are regularly scheduled for games. Permits are issued for field use throughout the week, but not on holiday weekends.

An industrial league had used the field on a Memorial Day weekend. A player claimed to have fallen in a hole at the first-base peg during play. He claimed to have broken his ankle as a result of that fall.

When our staff was called to testify, we brought three file boxes of maintenance records. We had been using standard forms to document our practices

for several years. That had a definite impact.

We were able to show the judge that we have an ongoing program, and when problems are identified, we take care of them. Play without a permit was not a factor. As a public facility, our resources are considered available to the public unless specific notice restricts use. The field had not been prepped for play on that particular holiday, but this was consistent with our long-standing maintenance program.

After our staff's morning testimony, the judge reviewed our records. When the court reconvened after lunch, the judge threw out the lawsuit. He cited our documented maintenance program as the basis for his decision.

This clearly demonstrates the benefits of a well-established maintenance program. Our uniformity of field conditions, and our documented system for identifying hazards and rectifying those conditions saved us lots of grief. Even though the field had not been prepped for a game that day, conditions were uniform and consistent with a reasonable level of maintenance.

Providing safe and uniform fields takes business management and people management, as well as turf management. Doing it effectively helps avoid lawsuits, and it positively affects the position of your facility if legal action is taken. □

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