Q&A

How Much is Too Much?

Have questions? Send them to Dave at: ISU, Hort. Dept., Ames, IA 50011.

by Dr. Dave Minner

How many games can our field take before there is too much damage?

—Earl McCullock
Concordia University
Steward, NE

Many factors must be considered when developing field use schedules: type of sport(s) and traffic, type of grass and field construction, moisture conditions during events, recovery time, and intensity of field maintenance practices.

It's likely that your field experiences more traffic than you realize. Instead of counting games, you should keep a record of all field activity. Classify activity in terms of events that add traffic to the field: games, practices, ceremonies, concerts, band, and whatever else field users throw your way.

Cooperation

As turf experts, we're expected to provide the magic number of games that can be safely played on our fields. However, it's very important that coaches, administrators, and field managers cooperate in scheduling field use. When there's a lawsuit over an injury sustained as a result of poor field conditions, all three decision makers are usually listed.

Administrators need to remember that proper traffic control costs nothing in terms of dollars, and it offers the most effective means of reducing dangerously worn areas on the field. Clearly defined conditions for field use must be in place.

Coaches must help prevent excessive turf wear through wise scheduling of practice activities. As much as possible, the field should be reserved for games only. Coaches can work with grounds managers to develop improved grass areas specifically for drills that take place off the game and practice fields.

A wise administrator will facilitate a friendship between the coach and the sports turf manager, so that there is give and take when scheduling field use. The field manager should communicate with the coach as frequently as once or twice a week.

Grounds managers must realize that they are caring for multi-use facilities. Every effort should be made to accommodate all groups that participate in field activities. On the flip side, each user group must share responsibility for the condition of the field.

Words of wisdom

The following observations may help you effectively schedule field events:

- Football causes more turf injury than soccer, and both sports injure turf more severely than baseball.
- Using the same field for multiple sports usually leads to very poor conditions for at least one of the sports. Baseball outfields used for football and soccer usually experience poor spring conditions for baseball. Fields scheduled for fall football and spring soccer must be renovated, cored, and seeded in early summer. Summer renovation of cool-season grasses almost always fails.
- A single football game played during excessively wet conditions can completely destroy the center of the field.

The numbers

At the start of each sporting season, you should hope to have 100-percent turf coverage on the entire field. All grass plants should be at least four months old. Areas of intense traffic should have approximately 0.5 inches of thatch or mat to cushion the surface. Under these conditions, and when excessive moisture is not a problem, you should have the following expectations for a football field:

- Distinct wear patterns will appear after about 10 events, but playing quality should remain high.
- Expect your field to tolerate 25 events before the turf becomes so thin that the underlying soil or sand is exposed.
- Field appearance will be significantly reduced before 25 games have been played, but I expect most of my fields to tolerate a 25-event schedule without compromising playing conditions.
- The protective mat of vegetation will usually wear off between 25 and 50 events. Exposed sand will be very unstable and exposed soil will turn to mud in the rain.
- Beyond 50 activities, you should anticipate severe loss of turf on at least 20,000 square feet of the field. This damage may require in-season repair with two-inch thick-cut sod, or post-season repair with 0.5-inch conventional sod. ❑

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