

# Considering a New Field? Ask Yourself These Questions.

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



*by Dr. Dave Minner*

1. What is wrong with the field you have? This sounds like a stupid question but actually you are trying to find out what has gone wrong with the current situation and what are the clients expectations. If you don't know what's broken then it is difficult to know how to fix it. Perhaps a new field is not the answer. Does the existing field simply receive too much traffic or is there inadequate personnel and resources to manage a grass field. If you are switching from a synthetic surface to a grass field, be sure that the grass system is suitable for the specific sport and total number of events. See the Q & A's for October 98 and January 99 concerning "how much is too much traffic."

2. How many events are scheduled for the field? If you ask how many games are played on the field then you may grossly underestimate the true level of activity on the field. Instead, ask for the number of events and consider an event to be any game or activity that contributes to the decline of the field. An "event" should include all games and practices, band, physical education classes, concerts, ceremonies, etc. The goal in asking this question is to help the client think about the type and amount of activities proposed for the field. Prioritizing activities on the new field may serve to reduce the total amount of traffic that the field receives. Are there any special events like rock concerts, motor cross, or tractor pull?

3. What are the expectations? Athletic directors, coaches, players, grounds managers, sports commentators and fans all want the same thing—a safe and attractive field that maximizes player performance and fan enjoyment. Let's face it, we're in the entertainment business and the field is the stage. What you need to find out is what are they willing to tolerate when the field begins to decline. Here are two undeniable truths that clients need to know when building fields. Most native soil fields provide a very acceptable surface except when excessively dry or wet. Irrigation can take care of the dry conditions but native soil fields, even those with drains installed, will experience muddy games during heavy rain. Sand-based systems reduce muddy conditions but they usual-

ly have periods of instability when heavily worn or during the first year after construction. Increasing the amount of clay in the root zone mix can increase the stability and growing potential for sand-based fields. This will certainly require soil testing and a rootzone quality control program to achieve the proper soil mixture that maximizes stability yet still allows for adequate drainage. The client should be informed of all the advantages and disadvantages for a particular type of field construction. Materials and workmanship are usually under warranty; however, the performance of the playing surface is usually not an item that can be guaranteed by the contractor.

4. Are there mandatory donations? Find out if there are any donations that are expected to be used in the project to reduce cost. Some examples include sand, topsoil, and gravel; irrigation and drainage equipment; earth moving and grading; and labor of all sorts. Don't compromise on tight specifications with donated items. There should still be a written contract for donated items. Often times when things are donated there is no accountability on materials or scheduling of construction. Cash is the best donation; it always works and is never late.

5. Are there acceptable local materials? Field materials that can vary by geographical location are sand, gravel, topsoil, and sod. To accurately estimate field cost these items must be specified, located, tested, and approved.

6. Funding? Is the funding secure for the project and if so, how much is allocated for field construction. The fund raising strategy may combine several separate parts of a facility; that is, maintenance area, service track, security system, stadium, landscaping, etc., in order to attract large donations. This is a good strategy for fund raising, however, the budget and bid process for the field should be separate from all other facility improvements. You don't want the athletic director forced into making a decision between better soil for the field or remodeling in the press box—the field usually loses.

7. Putting together the team. In most cases the owner will not have the necessary expertise to design and build an athletic field. Consultants, design firms, and construction companies specializing

in sports fields are readily available. Check references to make sure that they actually have experience building fields. Even though the field was built properly, a simple phone call to the current sports field manager can provide a great deal of insight on necessary care and field performance. Do your homework. As the owner be sure that you have an agent looking out specifically for your interests in the field design, construction, and grow-in process.

8. Develop a schedule of events that includes design, bid, construction, grow-in, and all other activities on the field for the first year. Failure to plan is planning to fail. The design phase could take from one to four months to complete. Taking bids and awarding the job can proceed rather quickly, from 15 to 30 days. Thorough development of the field specification will greatly facilitate the bid process. For example, the specifications for rootzone materials and gravel are usually stated in the design document. Different contractors may use different rootzone materials to satisfy the same specification. Because of the competitive bid process an inferior rootzone material may be used even though it meets a specification. It would be better if the owner designates the supplier for the rootzone materials prior to the bid process so that all contractors can bid on the same material rather than just the same specification. A consultant, design company, or design/build construction company can help with this process.

These are some of the considerations when developing a new field. Be sure to assess what you already have and how you want it to be improved. When substantial funds are used to build something new, you certainly expect to see an improvement in the facility. It is an easy process to develop a field that looks nice for the first game, but it is a real accomplishment to build one that plays good through out the season. With proper planning and allocation of resources you can have both.



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