

Future Sports Fields

by Jim Puhalla



The sports field management industry is reaching an adolescent stage of development. It's not fully mature, but it's beginning to apply some scientific management principles characteristic of a mature industry. The following lists some observations and predictions about the future direction of sports turf management.

Demographic and social trends

- The population of North America is steadily aging, and mature Americans are more active than ever before. Fields managers should expect increased demand for fields used by mature citizens for recreational sports such as softball.

- Perhaps the most important single development in sports over the last 25 years has been the rapid growth of participation by girls and women. The trend has contributed to overcrowding on existing fields, and has spurred much new construction to compensate.

- In many urban and suburban areas, land values have skyrocketed. Schools and parks must constantly find new ways to get more use out of their existing space.

- For years, city parks and sports facilities have been left to deteriorate, regarded as costly amenities. Today, studies are showing that athletic competition reduces crime in urban neighborhoods. This should lead to construction and improved maintenance of sports fields in cities and towns throughout North America.

- Organizing and sanctioning bodies have become more conscious than ever of potential liability for player injuries. Managers once saw uneven turf in terms of bad bounces, but now see it in terms of lawsuits waiting to happen. Fields of the future should be much safer.

- Growing sports, like lacrosse and soccer, are having an obvious effect on the work of sports fields managers. Soccer fields make up a substantial portion of the new fields under construction in North America today. The manager of the future may be required to build and maintain facilities for sports that scarcely exist today.

Scientific and technical trends

- Researchers continue to develop seed cultivars that require less maintenance, thrive in a wider variety of climatic conditions, and fight off

as a growing culture, they will deal more effectively with the stresses that weaken turfgrass and promote pest problems.

- In recent years, many high-profile facilities have turned to amended sand fields, especially in professional and collegiate programs. Continuing advancement is extending the technique's application, and allowing its consideration on lower-budget fields.

- Many managers in the transitional zone have had difficulty maintaining a healthy and vigorous turfgrass culture. Climatic conditions are not ideal for either southern or northern cultivars. New varieties will deal more successfully with specialized conditions in this region.

- European fields managers have spent decades developing management techniques for soccer fields. As the sport's popularity grows in North America, many managers will study European practices.

- For more than a century, the government has supported research in the golf industry, but support of other types of sports turf has not been forthcoming. Universities and private industry have begun to pick up the slack in recent years, and this trend should continue.

- Most equipment currently used by North American fields managers was originally designed to maintain lawns around schools, colleges and universities, large industrial facilities, etc. For the first time, equipment designed specifically to meet sports field managers' needs is hitting the market.

The same trend is occurring in materials. New processed clay products for pitcher's mounds and batter's boxes are now on the market. Also, diatomaceous earth turf and skinned-area conditioners offer an alternative to clay and organic materials that have been staples in



Soccer will continue to grow, and will greatly impact the evolving role of sports turf managers.

pests better. Any manager planting turfgrass today should ask about new developments before choosing a variety. This trend will only accelerate in the future.

- Integrated Pest Management (IPM) was a great step forward in the responsible use of chemicals. But the new generation of sports turf managers will shift the focus from pest management to general maintenance of turf health and durability. A more useful conceptual framework for the future would be Integrated Cultural Management (ICM). As fields managers come to understand turfgrass

the industry. Manufacturers will continue to develop these new products in the future.

Trends in management practices

- Synthetic surfaces have drawn increasing criticism from players and coaches. A recent survey of NFL players listed the ten best and five worst playing surfaces in the NFL. All of the ten best were natural turf; all of the five worst were synthetic.¹

As synthetic surfaces come up for regular replacement, school districts will continue to move back to natural turf.

- In the past decade, more and more professional stadiums have been committed to a single sport. Cities with multi-use professional facilities are constructing separate stadiums devoted to the unique needs of each sport. This trend is the subject of intense public debate and financing efforts in many cities.

Soccer and football programs have long been forced to coexist in many high school districts. But more and more schools are constructing separate fields to support competition in their fast-growing soccer programs.

- Taxpayer activism and government downsizing have forced facility managers in many school districts and parks and recreation departments to deal with smaller budgets. Many fields managers are forming innovative partnerships with local boosters and other community groups to help raise funds for construction and renovation projects.

- The new generation of fields managers recognizes that wise decisions require consideration of long-term costs. They will move away from construction shortcuts and cutbacks in materials and services expenditures which cost facilities more money in the long run.

- Academic programs in North American universities are beginning to offer students formal scientific and

management training. This trend will continue to promote a new generation of sports field managers who successfully practice Integrated Cultural Management to provide athletes safe, attractive fields.

Predicting the future is a chancy proposition — one that makes me as nervous as anyone. But tomorrow's developments grow out of today's trends. A wise manager makes plans for the future based on a hard look at what's happening each day. □

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¹ Dallas Morning News, August 3, 1997.

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