

Growing Pains

by Scott Gaunky

As if dealing with budget limitations isn't enough, finding space to accommodate all of your facility's athletic activities can be a persistent headache.

At the high school level, community growth can compound the problem. As schools grow, playing fields often have to yield space to make way for building and parking area expansion.

Athletic facilities shrink, while athletic programs grow and become more diverse, and the sports turf manager must come up with new solutions to a growing problem. Sometimes, the only choice is to turn fields into multi-use sites.

Mundelein

Situated 40 miles north of Chicago in Lake County, IL, Mundelein High School is one of several schools in the area that faces this problem. The area is among the fastest-growing communities in the country.

At Mundelein, the football stadium doubles as a soccer facility. Baseball and softball outfields handle football practice, lower-level games, and track and field events.

The high school even negotiated with a local grade school to use its grounds to support two more soccer areas and two softball fields. This added 14 acres to the area already maintained by a staff of only two people.



Mundelein High School, Lake County, IL.

Courtesy: Images Laboratories, Inc.

Common ground

One of the first issues that needs to be addressed is communication. It's extremely important to maintain a regular dialogue with your athletic director and the coaching staff. You'll need their cooperation when you want to repair or renovate a field.

All coaches will support improvements on *their* fields, but they are generally not as quick to support

work at other locations. These people may have so-called higher education behind them, but they don't always use common sense — and unfortunately, they're the ones you have to convince to move practices and drills to other locations.

The football coach is a good example. He runs the same drills on the same yard lines every day — sometimes twice a day — for 10

weeks. This creates trenches on every five-yard line from the end-zone to the 50-yard line, from sideline to sideline.

Of course, the football practice field is also a baseball outfield. The baseball coach sees the damaged field, and wonders how the outfielders will avoid these trenches.

At Mundelein, the trenches are repaired late every fall. We've always called them the garden plots because of the resemblance.

Now, when the football team isn't using this practice field, it's used for physical education classes. To create their own foul lines for softball, the phys-ed teachers use any 90-degree angle formed by football or soccer markings, or even the baseball foul lines.

You can guess what happens next. Every base, pitching area, and batter's box turns into a hole or a bare spot.

The teachers, many of whom are coaches, tend not to rotate the fields, despite the obvious damage. This creates more holes in the outfield, and more areas to be repaired before fall is over.

These same fields are used by the community. Weekend warriors will play rain or shine, and they can do significant damage to the turf. The junior football league also uses the stadium, and they play as many as three or four games a day, rain or shine. With the combined schedules of football, soccer, and junior football, the field averages 80 events in the fall.

I am not against community field use; after all, they're the ones paying the taxes that support the fields. But their activities add further stress to the fields, and they shorten a field repair window that isn't open long in the first place.

The high school season ends by mid-October, but junior football stretches into mid-November. In this temperate zone, that's too late to properly overseed and repair a heavily used field.

Communication

You can see that effective communication with all of the groups that use your fields would make all of your lives a lot easier. I can't claim to have solved all of these problems through communication alone, but it's very important to make your case heard. If you sit

back and let problems continue, you are just as guilty as the ones who are damaging your fields.

Wouldn't it be great if you could get the coaches and others who use your fields into a classroom to educate them in turf survival? You could show them what you go through year in and year out to provide safe playing surfaces. You could convince the people who

make the money and development decisions to invest in your fields.

Sounds like a dream, right? I still like to think it's possible, but you've got to get the right people to listen.

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If you don't have the equipment you need, call around and see if you can borrow it. So many of us share the same over-usage problems, and most of us are willing to also share not only equipment, but expertise to help solve problems.

If you can't afford a piece of equipment, consider a co-op purchase with another facility. I've borrowed equipment from several people over the years. I've also solicited advice from people like Ken Mrock of the Chicago Bears; he has always made himself available to those who need help.

I've also often looked to my commercial suppliers for advice on any turf problems I couldn't solve. Don Michaels from Conserv FS supplies my seed and fertilizers, and he and his staff have always been happy to provide advice. Jim Tanner from AIMCOR supplies Turface for my fields. He has always been very generous with his time and material.

These are just examples of posi-

tive relationships I've had. I would bet that you have the same type of connections in your area.

The resource pool can also put experts across the country at your fingertips. If you're a member of STMA, you receive a directory that you can turn to to find just about anything or anybody. If you pick up the phone and call, I'm sure you'll find that help is closer than you think.

Budgeting

If you don't have the funds to get things done, be creative.

When I wanted to rebuild the infield on the varsity baseball field, I was told there was no money available. This didn't stop me.

On my days off, I got on the phone and drove to different places asking for donations. My effort paid off in soil, sod, calcined clay, and even money to complete the project.

One day, I stopped at a construction site where a big subdivision was being built near the school. I asked if I could take some of the fill

dirt they were hauling away. The response was tremendous.

The foreman said, "Tell me where you want it, and when you want the trucks to stop coming." He wound up sending 14 truckloads of good, clean fill dirt free of charge.

Another local subdivision contractor gave me topsoil. He even blended it with sand, screened it, and delivered it to my site.

If you think you're up for the old "beg, borrow, or steal" end of sports field maintenance, I say go for it! Sometimes it's the only way to get what you need to get the job done.

Maintenance

• **Aeration:** One of the most important maintenance practices on multi-use fields is core aeration. I aerate as often as possible, and I make sure to go over the severely worn areas more than once.

If you think the turf will bare it, aerate after each event. Just remember, if you don't have irrigation, put this aggressive program on hold during periods of drought, high heat, or wind.

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• **Calcined clay:** After aeration, try using calcined clay if you can afford it. I've always had good results using Turface, and the manufacturer backs its product with hard data.

If you can't afford calcined clay, try adding some blending sand. It's less expensive per ton, and it can reduce your compaction rate.

If neither of these options is viable, break up your existing cores with a drag mat or a piece of chain link fence, and use this material as growing medium.

• **Seed:** Remember, you need good seed to soil contact for seed to germinate. Otherwise, a large percentage of your seed will rot where it sits.

During the playing season, I use a good blend of perennial ryegrass to fill in the turf quickly. If you soak or pregerminate your seed, the process will proceed even faster.

I soak seed in a barrel for three days, changing the water daily. I then dump it onto concrete or plywood to dry. When dry, I mix the seed with organic fertilizer, which acts as a carrying agent.

I spread my seed with a cyclone spreader. If you do this before an event, the athletes' cleats will help improve seed to soil contact.

At the end of the season, I repeat the procedure, but this time I use a high-quality Kentucky bluegrass mix. If possible, I keep the irrigation system going to help establish the seed.

• **Fertilization:** A good fertilization program is also a must. You'll get the best results if you have your soil analyzed when setting up your applications. This will allow you to choose the most beneficial fertilizer for your fields.

One application I use contains a 0-0-50 mix. It increases the strength of the plant by thickening the cell walls. It also allows turf to bounce back from foot prints and tire tracks, and to stand up when cutting. I use as much as 14 pounds per 1000 square feet every growing season. The product takes time to show improvement, but the results are worth it.

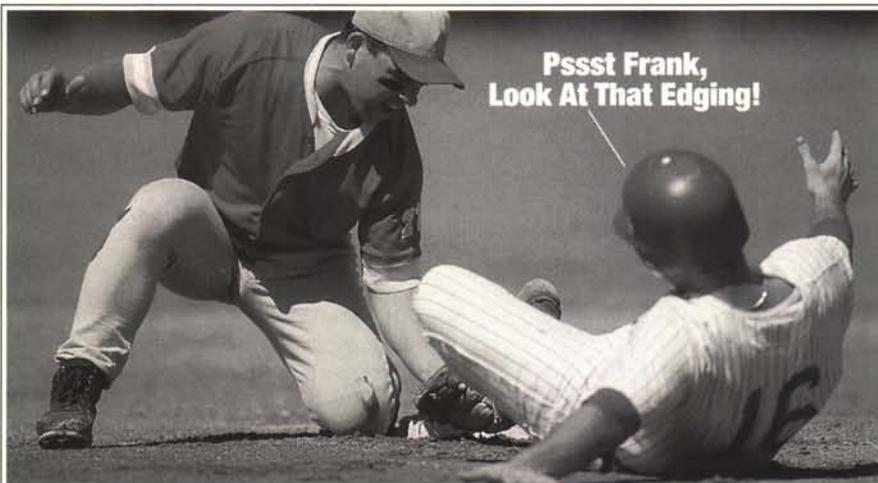
If you have multi-use fields, there is no one answer to your problems. Each site is unique, and provides different challenges.

The fields I maintain are far from perfect, but I try to improve them piece by piece each year. I'm confident that they will soon be as good as any in our area.

Don't give up on your facility just because you don't have the finances or proper equipment. There are always ways around these problems.



Scott Gaunky maintained the athletic facilities at Mundelein High School in Lake County, IL, for 15 years. He is now grounds/fleet superintendent for College of Lake County, and manages 110 acres of turf and 80 acres of parking.



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