

Baseball Field Renovation

by Tim Moore

"If you build it, they will come." Every sports turf manager deals with increased demand on newly renovated fields. If you make a field better, expectations increase and you have to do an even better job of field maintenance to accommodate the increased play. This may seem like a double-edged sword, but I'm sure it's one we all wish to wield.

When does a baseball field need renovation?

Periodic assessment of existing field conditions will alert you to persistent or recurring problems that are too severe to be solved by intensified general maintenance.

In most cases, especially at levels below professional play, renovation wins out over rebuilding. Limited budgets, limited space, and heavy field-use demands all contribute to this decision.

One of the most common reasons to renovate is wrong field grade. That's what prompted me to renovate one of my high-caliber baseball fields. This particular field's bases were off by as much as six inches.

The following is intended to be a guide for successful renovations. It's based on my experiences doing some things right and doing some things wrong.



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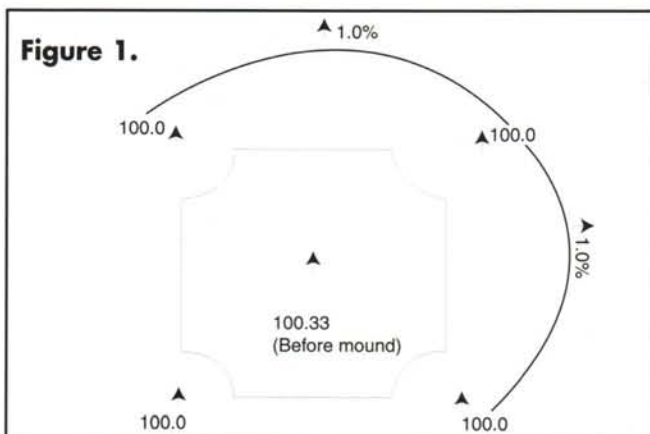
Plan for success

Steven Covey said, "Begin with the end in mind." Every one of us would like to have fields that look like the one at Oriole Park in Baltimore or the one at The Ballpark in Arlington. Start your planning with that picture in mind. Every step in the process will have an effect on the end product.

You can use the same type of specifications they use at the professional level to renovate your own field. The principles used in the field surface can be the same.

The major difference lies under the surface at the root zone. Most of us don't have the funds to have eight to 12 inches of highly modified, precisely graded soil profile. Do the best renovation possible within the limitations of your own program.

One of the most important specifications, and one that shouldn't be compromised, is grade. Maintain a precision grade (see **Figure 1**). The elevation of the four bases should be exactly the same. The center of the infield should be four inches higher, and it should radiate out to the bases. The outfield should slope from the arc at a grade of approximately one percent.



You can achieve this precision with the right equipment: graders equipped with lasers. Laser technology has revolutionized grading. You can now expect results to within 1/8 inch of perfection. Try to get that with a transit and stick!

If you're contracting out your field renovation, accept nothing less than precision laser equipment.

Construction steps

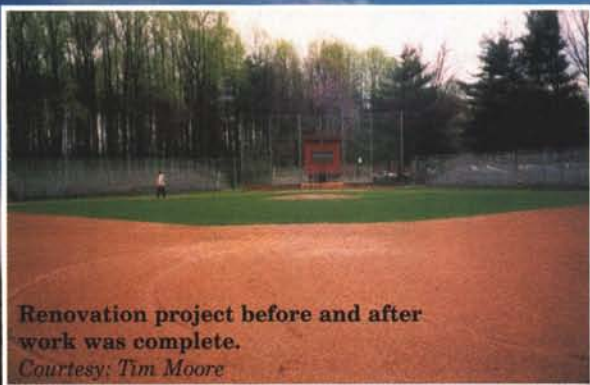
Time your renovation to fit your program. Complete all pre-construction planning earlier, so work can begin right away. I try to do my renovations in the winter off-season, so as not to interfere with scheduled play.

- First, remove the existing turf. Use a sod cutter to cut out the areas to be removed. If the turf can be used in other areas outside of the field that are under your maintenance, it can be moved to the desired site and installed. If the turf isn't of useable quality, it can be back-dragged into a pile with a front-end loader or grader and then loaded up for disposal.

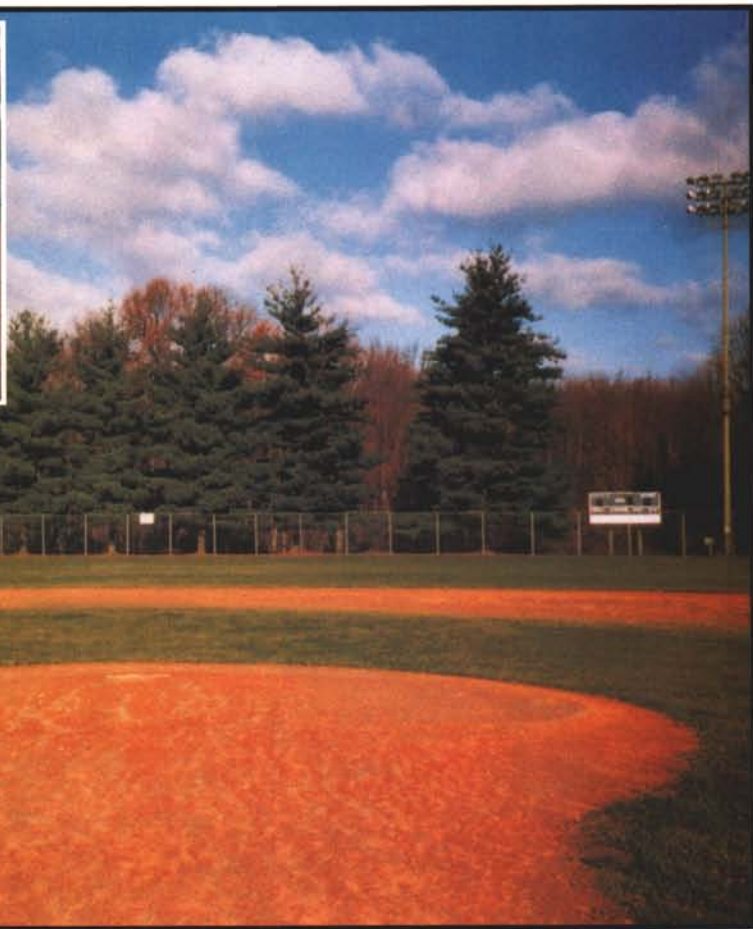
- Now that you're ready to grade, grade for precision. Get the infield to the relative elevations noted above. This is the time to make any drainage improvements.

Plan for drainage problems up-front. If you don't plan for drainage, you'll inevitably have a water problem when the renovation is completed.

I opted not to install a four-inch drain line between the baselines and the fencing and backstop when the field was opened in December; there had been no previous drainage problems in that area. In May, after several complaints about standing water, I



Renovation project before and after work was complete.
 Courtesy: Tim Moore



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put that line in anyway. It cost me probably twice as much as it would have in December.

• Now it's time to incorporate any soil amendments. The spreading of amendments should also be done by laser.

I've had success using calcined clay under my turf. The properties of the calcined clay help with the overall soil composition, and it provides absorption capacity that buys me time in the moist months.

After the amendments are incorporated, regrade and roll the field.

• Prepare your skinned area next. Lay out the area with strings, and remove material to the desired depth. Install your new infield mix. There are almost as many mixes as there are groundskeepers, so use what works best for you.

• After your baselines are complete, you can get ready for sod. This operation should also be precise. You must not compromise your grade.

If you're using pallet sod, make sure you have protected access for the spyder. If using big-roll sod, insist on high flotation tires or a track system that greatly reduces the machine's psi.

Once the sod is laid, fertilized, watered,

rolled, and edged, you can finish the skinned portion of the field.

• Bring the skinned area to the desired grade and incorporate any amendments. Prepare your home plate area for clay and build your mound.

The height of your mound rubber should be 10 inches above home plate. Give your new sod a chance to knit, install your base anchors and plates, and you're ready to play ball.

Should a project be divided?

I've always tried to make the best use of my budget dollars. To do this, I felt I should separate every stage of the renovation.

I would have a contractor do the grading, but I would purchase the soil and amendments. I would have a different contractor lay the sod, but I would purchase the sod. I believed, and in some cases I still believe, that I got more for my money, because I saved the mark-up and overhead charges of the general contractor.

My purchasing guidelines also make it easier to get the job done in small bites rather than as a one-time continuous process. In the case of my baseball infield

renovation, the time I spent coordinating and purchasing was probably equal to what a general contractor would have charged to run the job. I did have an awfully good time though!

Each step of the process met my specifications. The result was a field that matched the one I'd planned, and there were no post-construction surprises.

The blizzard

Always strive to have the best field possible. One at a time, we can improve our facilities and provide better and safer sports turf areas. We can gain the professional recognition we as sports turf managers deserve.

A blizzard starts with one snowflake. If we each start with one field, together we can become that blizzard. □

Tim Moore is park & sports turf manager for Maryland National Capital Park & Planning Commission based at the Wheaton Maintenance Facility. He's president of the MAFMO Chapter of STMA, a National STMA board member, and chair of STMA's Awards and Scholarship Committee.



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