

Painting Like the Pros

by Steve Wightman

Whether you manage high school, college, professional, or recreational football fields, field painting is an important aspect of your job. Standard lines and markings ensure playing field uniformity. They provide dimension, direction, and information to the officials, players, coaches, media, and fans.

Set-up

If a field is going to really stand out, it helps to start with healthy turfgrass that has a dense canopy. The turf should be cleanly and freshly mowed to the proper height before painting. After all, this is your canvas.

You must then organize all of the tools, materials, and equipment necessary to do the job. You'll need the proper paint, an airless or striping machine, templates, stencils, and stringline.

You should also set up a specific area for mixing and clean-up. Check with your local state and county Hazardous Waste Departments for regulations and restrictions regarding protection of your site's storm drain system and disposal of empty paint containers. Follow the regulations from the start, and you won't run into problems down the line.

Paint type

All paints are not the same. For natural turfgrass, only use paints that will not harm the grass chemically. Use water-based paint specifically formulated for natural grass. This type of paint has minimal amounts of biocides and other chemicals that give paint a longer shelf life.

Also, use only paint that has a flat finish. Don't choose gloss or semi-gloss varieties.

For the lines, the color is specific too. They must

be white unless snow is a problem, in which case a contrasting color is acceptable on game day. One year in Denver, the lines were painted Bronco orange for game day to contrast with the falling snow.

Check with paint manufacturers that support the STMA. They know our business, and they know that we have specific needs.

How much paint

Even when you use the proper paint, painting over and over again in the same area harms grass. Too much paint will simply suffocate the plant.

It's very important to cover only the leafy tissue to avoid building up paint on the soil surface. Your equipment must apply paint with the proper amount of pressure and speed to allow you this degree of control.

I realize that some of us are painting soil instead of grass late in the season on our heavily used fields. However, the same general principle applies. Apply only enough paint to cover the surface to avoid running and unnecessary build-up.

Most athletic field

paints need to be diluted with water prior to application. The amount of water added can vary greatly. Some paints call for a ratio of one part water to one part paint (1:1). Others require as much as five parts water for every one part paint (5:1).

Typically, the first field painting of the season requires a dilution ratio of 1:1 or 2:1 to create bright lines and numbers with full coverage. If the lines from the previous painting are still visible when you paint again, more water can be added to the mix. In addition to saving paint, this minimizes plant damage.



Number template. Courtesy: Steve Wightman



Homemade line rail template.

Courtesy: Steve Wightman

When to paint

Grass that's growing well will require frequent mowing. This usually translates to more painting.

Sometimes it's difficult to strategically coordinate your painting and mowing schedules

before games, but it's very important if you want to provide a professional-looking playing surface with full, bright lines, numbers, and designs.

It may be necessary to mow after the painting has been completed to give the field a more aesthetic appeal. In this situation, raise the mowing height 1/4 inch or so, and you'll get the look you want without removing excessive paint. You can also use a reel-type mower with the cutting units disengaged to roll the grass for a more aesthetic appeal.

Climatic conditions add an even more difficult variable to the scheduling formula. It's not unusual to have to wait until midday before painting can begin when your field is experiencing frost conditions. This type of delay should be figured into your painting schedule, especially during the latter part of the football season in both the southern and northern states.

Your painting schedule should be flexible enough to be moved up in response to rain, snow, or frost. Allow for a delay at the beginning of the day, and also allow time to tarp the field at the end of the day. A field that can be painted in a single day in September may require three or four days to paint in November or December.

Equipment

There are three basic types of athletic field spray painting equipment: airless sprayers; striping machines (pump type and pressure pot type); and small, manual pump-up sprayers.

- **Airless sprayers** use a piston pump that pulls paint from a

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Hash mark template.

Courtesy: Steve Wightman

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Stencil example.

Courtesy: Steve Wightman

container (usually a five-gallon bucket), and sends it through a special hose to a triggered gun for application. Air pressure can be regulated for large, fast applications or small, intricate applications. The gun's spray tip can also be adjusted to suit the size and speed of the job. For small areas, such as lines and numbers, a template should be used to prevent any overspray.

- **Striping machines** can create lines without templates. They are fairly fast and convenient for basic line painting. However, the quality is generally less than that of a line created with a template.

Some striping machines supply paint through a pumping system, and others use a pure pressure generated by a pressure pot system. Both allow users to adjust pressure.

The machines can be either self-propelled or push-type. Some come with a spray gun attachment for painting numbers and logos.

- **Small-capacity hand-pump sprayers** are effective for small jobs, such as logos and touch-ups. They require very little pressure.

Each type of machine should be thoroughly cleaned and flushed after each use. It's important to clean all components, including the pumps, filters, hoses, guns, and spray tips.

At the end of an entire paint job, protect the inside housing of your pump and hose by running a special oil through the machine. Contact your local paint equipment supplier to obtain the proper oil.

Tools

You can paint a field without having access to all of the tools mentioned here, but they make the job a lot easier:

- **Stringline:** Your stringline should be strong enough to stretch tight to make a straight line. #18 mason-line works well. Two to four 400-foot lengths for the long lines and three to five 200-foot lengths for the cross lines will allow you to always have a stringline in position while another is being moved to the next location.

- **Roll-up reels:** Each string should have a roll-up reel that is marked with length. These will save you hours of untangling and cutting knotted-up line. You can find them at your local hardware store.

- **Six-inch nails:** These hold the stings in place tem-

Product Showcase

Green Lawnger™ green turf paint



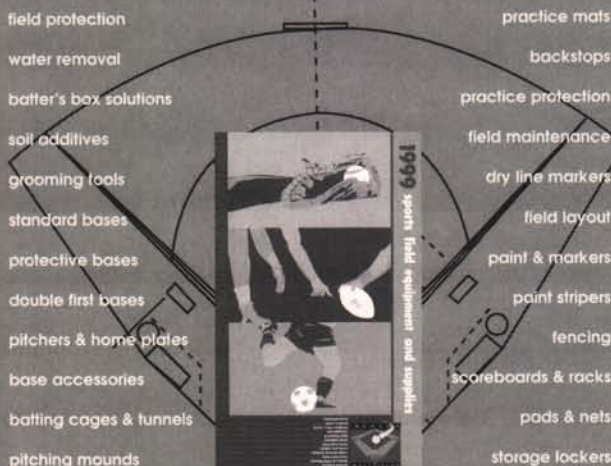
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Splashboards help create endzone decorations.

Courtesy: Steve Wightman

porarily when you're marking various locations. You'll need 25 to 50 nails to complete a full painting task.

- **Hammers:** Have one or two hammers handy for hammering the nails into the ground. Have one at either end of the field and you'll avoid a lot of running back and forth.

- **Templates:** These are manufactured replicas of objects to be created on the field. Templates with both four- and eight-inch

widths will help you paint lines, numbers, arrows, and hash marks.

- **Splashboards:** Splashboards prevent overspray between colors to create a sharp boarder. Large, rigid splashboards help create straight lines; while thinner, more flexible boards (bender boards) help you paint curves.

- **Stencils:** Usually made from polyethylene plastic sheeting or visqueen, stencils help create logos and decorations that give any field a professional look.

- **Rags:** You'll need rags to wipe off the templates and equipment, and to fix any mistakes on the spot. Keep plenty of rags available, and have a bucket of warm water on hand for those inadvertent errors.

- **Water hose:** You'll need water to mix the paint.

- **Electric drill:** With a paint-mixing bit and an extension cord, these make life a lot easier.

- **Five-gallon buckets:** Keep two or three clean spare buckets on hand for diluting and transporting paint. Additional buckets will become available as painting progresses.



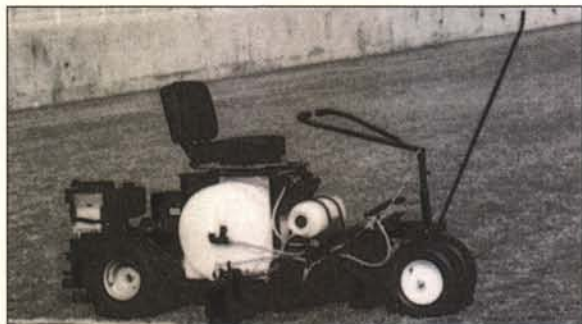
Pressure pot striping machine.

Courtesy: Steve Wightman

A well-painted field enhances the overall appeal of your facility. It shows that you care enough to go the extra mile. Good luck with your next masterpiece!

Steve Wightman is turf manager for Qualcomm Stadium in San Diego, CA.

Jaydee Drive Liner

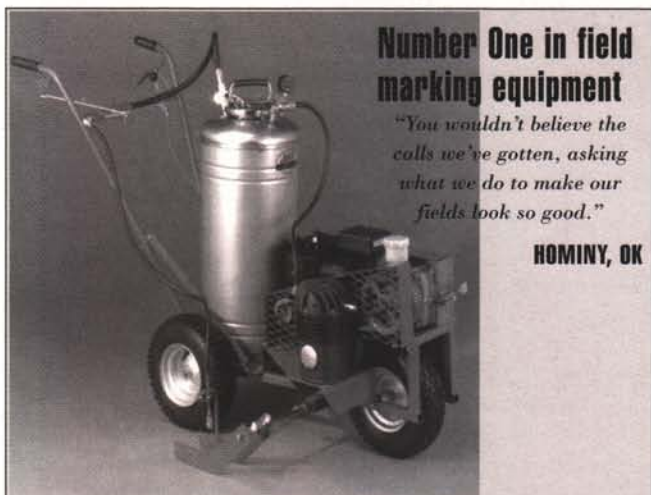


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