

# Pro quality at the high school level



I am looking for information on renovating baseball and softball fields, specifically the grass areas in the infield and outfield. This is an existing field, which has not had much maintenance over the last few years. My biggest concern is that the ground is very lumpy and uneven and could be a stumbling or bad hop hazard. It presently has a very good stand of grass. I guess I'm wondering if topdressing would be an alternative?

*Neil Olson  
Sports Turf Manager  
Community Schools, Boone, Iowa*

I'm looking to buy a walking reel mower for my baseball infield, but all I can find are putting green mowers that won't mow taller than 1/2 inch. Got any suggestions?

*Michael Krone  
Director of Grounds  
Missouri Baptist College*

Bumpy fields for baseball and softball make you look bad as a grounds manager and certainly get the players and coaches wondering why they can't have a smooth field. There are many areas of the field that can become uneven and this could lead to dangerous trips and bad hops.

Lips can be a problem at any place on the field where the dirt area meets the grass. The dirt collects in the grass and a bump can build up so high that your infielder needs a ladder to get the cutoff throw from left field to home (an actual complaint I heard from a coach). Poor dragging technique and wind are the biggest culprits in making lips. Most of you already know of this problem and have ways of dealing with lip prevention and renovation. Check the smoothness of the transition area between the dirt and grass by placing your heels in the grass and your toes on the dirt. Close your eyes and rock back and forth from heels to toes. Don't call me if you get shin splints.

The general grass areas of many high school and park facilities can also become very bumpy and uneven. Winter heaving, worms, sunken trenches, patch sodding, and clumps of grass are typical

situations that make a field bumpy. I'm talking about 1- to 2-inch depressions or bumps that are sometimes less noticeable because you are mowing at 2 to 2 1/2 inches with a rotary mower. If you can switch to a reel mower then you can mow at a lower height and also get a continuous rolling effect from the mower. Triplex-type mowers can be used for the entire field, or if you really want to look like the pros then consider a walking mower dedicated to the infield grass. Some of you have tried using walking greens mowers, but they usually have a maximum cutting height of 1/2 inch. I have been complaining that there are not enough walking reel mowers that are made specifically for baseball cutting heights of 1/2 to 2 inches. I seldom give specific product recommendations, but there are only two mowers that I have found that meet this need; McInemower.com and nationalmower.com have walking reel mowers in this height range that are reasonably priced and will have you mowing the infield like a pro. Let me know. If there are others and I will be happy to support them as well.

In order to lower the mowing height you will need to get rid of those humps and bumps. Here's a simple little program that even the low budget programs can afford. The material cost is about \$300 per infield for sand and seed—you need to supply the coring, dragging and other labor. The following can be applied to the entire grass field if desired; however, I present it as another example of concentrating your resources to manage the "field within the field."

In this case, the most precious real-estate is the 86 by 86 foot infield that is part of the whole field. You can be the smooth hero or the bumpy villain. This is a simple way to show that you really can manage a field just like the pros. Your goal is to get the infield as smooth as a pool table, or maybe a putting green. It is best if you have automatic irrigation because you will want to lower the mowing height to show off just how smooth the field is. Scalp the field with a mower to get all the grass debris off and expose the bumpy surface. A walking rotary mower set at about 1 inch or lower will do just fine. This is a stress on the grass,

but seldom kills it. Choose a time when you have about one to two months to allow the field to recover with minimal play. Hollow core as much as you can stand it, 3/4-inch tines on 2 1/2-inch centers should be your goal. Remove the cores if possible or grind them up with a verticutter. Topdress with approximately 1/2 inch (18 tons for the whole grass infield area) of medium to coarse sand (minimum of 60 percent between 0.25 and 1 mm).

You may need more sand, especially if you remove the cores. The goal is to have enough loose sand or soil on the surface to be able to drag the surface and fill in the low spots. With one session you can smooth out all the depressions that are less than 3/4-inch deep. Another coring, topdressing and dragging may be needed to smooth the field to your desired expectation. A leveling drag made out of heavy angle iron can be used. Others have used four straight 4 by 4 by 10 square landscape posts with the corners of each post facing down to spread the sand. Depressions greater than 1 inch may need to be hand-filled with sand and smoothed. Two workers on each end of an aluminum concrete screed can level an infield in no time at all. Tape rebar rods to the aluminum screed if you need to add weight. A final drag with a flexible steel mat will give a smooth finish to your renovation. Seed and fertilize before and after topdressing to insure good coverage. Use the highest recommended rate for a new seeding. Seed can also be drilled or sliced into the final surface. Add water and get ready to mow. Mowing height for a premium cool season infield can range between 5/8 to 1 1/2 inches, while bermudagrass can tolerate heights from 3/8 to 3/4 inches.

So, if your infield is like a bumpy pasture, take a day and turn it into a smooth and fast surface. You can consider your project a success if the hitting coach "loves ya baby," but the pitching coach...well, just raise the mound for the pitching coach.



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