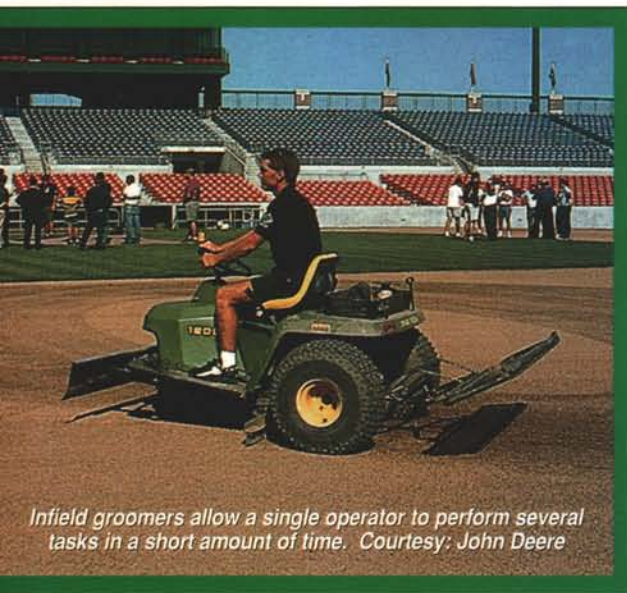


Infield Grooming

by Bob Tracinski

Daily maintenance of the infield skinned area is key to producing top playability on baseball and softball fields. At least 70 percent of the action of the game takes place on the infield basepath, batters box and baseball's pitchers mound or softball's pitching circle. An average of 70 percent of the sports turf manager's baseball and softball maintenance time is concentrated on these areas.



Infield groomers allow a single operator to perform several tasks in a short amount of time. Courtesy: John Deere

Homeplate and mound daily maintenance demand the precise attention that can only be achieved by hand. This makes it even more important to develop quick, effective and efficient methods to maintain the remainder of the skinned area.

Field groomers provide the availability of three infield maintenance attachments mounted on one unit and give the operator the ability to switch quickly and easily from one of these attachments to the other, without leaving the driver's seat. With front-, rear- and mid-mount attachments, the operator can move skinned material to cut down high spots and fill low ones; deep scarify to the desired depth; and wrap up the job with the finishing pass. This boosts

efficiency, allowing one person to do more in less time. Since labor costs form the highest percentage of the field maintenance budget, this makes field groomers a cost-cutting factor as well.

While the infield skin material may form a basepath enclosing turf or cover the entire infield area, each field's "dirt" is a combination of clay soil, sand, soil amendments and moisture. Maintaining the desired moisture levels and working the material combine to create an underlying packed layer covered by a shallow topping of looser material.

Skinned area maintenance is a continual balancing act between proper drainage and playability. If the infield material is too soft, add clay/soil; if it's too firm, add sand, calcined clay, calcined diatomaceous earth or other amendments that loosen the surface. Moisture control is essential. Too much water and the skinned material becomes "muddy;" too little water and it can get hard as concrete.

The following scenario fits most high profile field basic baseline daily maintenance practices:

- Practice daily removal of excess clay from all inside and outside edges of the turf with a soft-bristled brush, rake, "leaf blower," or stream of water to avoid lip development—that ridge where infield material builds up in the turf along the infield and outfield edges of the skinned basepaths.
- Use a scarifying drag as needed to penetrate one to three inches into the skinned area to break up the surface and loosen any areas of compaction. The infield material and field use will dictate the frequency of this step but, for most fields, it's at least weekly.

- Prepare new infield material in the same proportions as the existing skinned area material. The new material will need to be moist, but not overly wet. It should be wet enough to "bond" with the existing material, dry

enough to keep from sticking to equipment, but not so dry that it continually needs rewetting.

- Add new material as necessary. Base the addition of any commercial infield mix or soil amendments on the texture of the infield material and the desired moisture level. If desired, work a higher percentage of commercial infield mix into the top quarter inch of the skinned area.

- Use a leveling drag to move material from high points to low points, and to create a level surface. Roll or tamp the area to create a solid base. Continue adding new material, "spiking" or scarifying, rolling or tamping, until the desired level is reached.

- Eliminate differences in the level between the turf soil surface and the skinned area, or of the "feel" of the area as the player moves from the turf to the skinned surface and back again. This helps give the ball a "true" bounce, whether it hits turf or the infield "dirt."

- Keep leveling drags 8 to 12 inches from the edge of the turf to avoid throwing infield material onto the turf and creating a lip. Use hand rakes and tamps to level the areas next to the turf. Start and stop each dragging procedure at a different point on the field each time to keep a level surface.

- "Finish" the area with a finishing attachment or mat drag. After the infield turf has been mowed, water the infield clay. Water the clay again after mat dragging it.

- Monitor moisture and apply water as needed until batting practice begins. Following batting practice, touch up the skinned area with a finishing attachment or mat drag.

- Touch up the skinned area again during the fifth inning drag and, if needed, at the second and seventh innings. 🧢

Bob Tracinski is the Business Communications Manager for the John Deere Worldwide Commercial & Consumer Equipment Division headquartered in Raleigh, NC. He serves as public relations co-chair for the national Sports Turf Managers Association.