

# The Key to Success—Quality Athletic Turf

by Floyd Perry

**F**ootball season is back in full swing. The coaches are ready, the physicals have been completed, the equipment and the uniforms have been ordered and have arrived and the footballs are pumped up. What's left? Let's go get 'em!

That's the theme in all 50 states this fall, but something's missing in this equation: What about the athletic turf? Has anyone even been remotely concerned about its condition since last season? Has anyone ordered, spread and nurtured the seeding, fertilizing and top dressing for a quality and safe playing season?

The grounds personnel have their

own football agenda to work with and, needless to say, it's not as glamorous as the football coach. In fact, when it comes time to order supplies and materials and rent equipment, it's like pulling teeth, and sometimes administrators aren't so willing to act immediately upon the request then it would be to repair shoulder pads.

Isn't it interesting that 90 percent of the football season preparation goes into coaches clinics to locate new X and O formations, weight room schedules to bulk up player physiques, purchase orders to create new color designs for the old Blue and Gold and very little mention or attention to the care and maintenance where 60 to 100 cleat bear-

ing, turf-ripping folks will be located for three hours a day for the next four months. Isn't that interesting?

Turf grows by the inch and is killed by the foot. There haven't been truer words spoken, but sometimes its value falls on deaf ears.

Let's evaluate some philosophical concerns that can create some positive effects on our football turf and make the coach and team look like winners even before the first game.

## Institution Philosophy

The climate for better and safer athletic facilities is changing on all levels. In my travels across the country



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(over 1,500 facilities viewed) I have experienced a complete metamorphosis in attitudes involving athletic/football/soccer fields: Gates are locked after school hours; permission slips and liability waivers are necessary to use the fields by outside groups due to the occurrence of law suits; and an internal group scheduling regulates the amount of weekly traffic.

Here's a sample schedule for a combination football/soccer game field.

1. Football team-two hours a week on Thursday before Friday's game.
2. Band-two hours a week on Wednesday night for formation alignments.
3. Soccer-two hours a week primarily to work on patterns, no drill work.
4. Avoidance of outside institution activities during the key institution season: concerts, art shows, fairs, etc.

Keep in mind these procedures were not put into place overnight, but became policy after a serious injury lawsuit on an inadequately maintained facility. Also this institution had the foresight to create sufficient practice areas for the individual activities including their physical education program.

#### Rotation or split-field usage

Some institutions are closed down and completely renovated. This allows the community to always start the Pop Warner football/youth soccer/intramurals on quality turf and creates a strong confidence factor with the parents and taxpayers.

The more practical way to create safe athletic turf, since field rotation is not practical in many locations, is cross-field design. For example, you could divide your main field into two opposite length fields and avoid center play. Outstanding facility managers got this idea from the design of inside basketball courts with side baskets and different colored lines.

If the coaches and field personnel work together creating quality turf by moving their workouts around and shifting their heavy work to the end zones or sidelines they would have a better chance of keeping a strong biomass of turf for their big ball games.

#### Year round calendar

As coaches, teachers and administrators, we create a 365-day plan for our individual teams or students; the athletic facility manager must begin to create their plans and communicate them to the administration for support. The perception of the turf manager/groundskeeper must change because more pressure is being placed on our outside facilities daily. One

other big problem that creates major concern on our fields is Mother Nature. Do we have policies in place for rainouts or cancellations? Do we have a policy providing that teams cannot practice if the moisture level is too concentrated in our heavy clay sub-soils? Or do we just go ahead and destroy whatever has been achieved through hard work and preparation?

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## The key to success...

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The pendulum is swinging. Some institutions and recreation boards are creating safety committees of peers to help solve this 21st Century dilemma of not having sufficient quality turf for the young men and women to play on. Some colleges, high schools and recreation boards have set aside funding for annual capital monies to be spent on equipment, which aids in turf protection and re-establishment. I take my groundskeeping hat off to those groups.

### Capsular Analysis

More and more attention has been directed to athletes (men and women, boys and girls) on all levels. Part of that explosion has been the creation of intensified effort on the part of the maintenance staff.

More effort needs to be directed to the fact that turf is a growing plant and takes a certain amount of care to continue to grow properly.

What do you know of that can be baked, frozen, trampled, starved, overfed, dehydrated, saturated, compacted, cut too short, not cut at all, sliced, probed, smothered, painted and kicked, but still survive? It's athletic turf. But it can't take too much of any of those conditions without some help from the institution and their coaches.

## Causes for poor turf

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**Improper fertilization and liming:** Too little fertilizer, inadequate lime and poor timing of fertilizer applications are the causes of many turf problems. You should always have your soil tested to determine the fertilizer and lime needs.

**Lack of water:** Most athletic fields and recreation areas are at the mercy of the weather to provide water. Supplemental irrigation, especially during the summer months, often makes the difference between dense, high quality turf and sparse, clumpy cover.

**Poor judgement as to the time to use the field:** This is especially true of practice sessions on a wet, soggy field. Scheduled events, however, often must proceed regardless of the condition of the playing field. The most important factor is the soil condition. Soils will "puddle" and lose their physical structure if disturbed while wet. This packs the surface and prevents normal air, water and nutrient movement.

For more information on Lesco or the "Athletic Field Turf Maintenance Handbook," contact Lesco: 20005 Lake Rd., Rocky River, OH 44116-1545; 800-321-5325.

Floyd Perry is author of three books: *The Pictorial Guides to Quality Groundskeeping: I—Covering the Bases; II—There Ain't No Rules; and III—Maintain it Easy, Keep It Safe.* He has also produced three videos: *The ABC's of Grounds Maintenance: Vol. 1, Softball; Vol. 2, Baseball; and Vol. 3, Soccer/Football Field Refurbishment.* He travels throughout the United States conducting workshops for men and women who maintain athletic fields. For more information about Perry's tips or other field maintenance questions, call: (800) 227-9381, or e-mail [grounds@digital.net](mailto:grounds@digital.net).

## Corrections

In last month's editorial, Mike San Filippo incorrectly listed Steve Erickson's position with the Pittsburgh Pirates as head groundskeeper. Erickson's position in Pittsburgh is supervisor of field maintenance (assistant groundskeeper). The head groundskeeper for the Pirates' new stadium is Luke Yoder.

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