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Q&A

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Two Sports too many

I have a question on our football field/baseball outfield. The baseball coach cuts the outfield at approximately 2 inches during the baseball season without watering the field and it has been dry. I have started watering the field and it has greened up but is not growing very fast. It needs to be thicker. I would like to get it to about 5 inches for football—does that seem about right?

Multiple sports and multiple activities always lead to someone getting the short end of the stick. Every effort should be made to have separate fields for separate sports, i.e., baseball only, soccer only, and football only. Fields that receive autumn football and spring soccer only have from early June until mid-August to recover, and summer is the least desirable time to renovate with necessary practices like coring and reseeding.

In your case when spring or summer baseball follows autumn football the center outfield area is often left too worn out or rutted for baseball play. Like any good coach you are loyal to your sport, staff, and players. I suggest that the football and baseball coaches present a united front when talking to the school superintendent about getting separate and equal facilities for their respective sports; you deserve it. Multiple sports on single fields can lead to unsafe playing conditions and school superintendents should view this as a risk to students.

In the mean time here is what I suggest to make the grass perform the best that it can for both football and baseball. First and foremost realize that you both are responsible for the field 52 weeks out of the year, not just in the fall for football and in the spring/summer for baseball. A team effort here will make it better for both. You asked about the three basic turf inputs, water, mowing, and fertility, so I suspect that you both have been providing turf care during your respective season of play.

Watering. Stopping irrigation after baseball ends (mid-July) and before football practice begins (mid-August) is not a good idea. You need to start the season with the grass actively growing. Fields that receive baseball only may get by with irrigation only during the playing season, but since your administrator requires double duty on this field it is imperative that the field management plan allow for active growth and recovery of the field for 52 weeks out of the year.

Allowing the field's growth to slow or go summer dormant because of a lack of water is counter productive

to both sports (see *Sportsturf* August 2001 p. 46 for more on how to water). You need to think of the field as the 10th man in baseball or the 12th man in football—give it the respect that you would one of your players and it will be there for you when you need it most. The field doesn't know who's playing on it, but it does know when it is not being treated right.

Mowing. There are many Midwest high school football fields that are mowed in excess of 3.5 in. and your question asks if 5 in. would be suitable. My answer is no. Somewhere along the line the train jumped the track with this mowing height business. I suppose it's because of the old turf management adage that non-irrigated grass should be mowed taller in the summer. While this may have some truth it does not mean that excessively tall grass will withstand traffic more than shorter mowed grass.

Taller grass gives the appearance of covering the ground better, but it is a proven fact that taller grass produces fewer shoots per square inch and this reduces the density of plants covering the soil. I tell my students that as sports field managers (especially football), their job is to keep the player's cleats off the soil. Later they realize that this becomes a strategy for developing a thick cushion of mat and thatch to separate players from the soil and maintain the integrity of the surface.

The key to developing this mat layer is maintaining active turf growth in all seasons. Mowing at greater than 3.5 in. will reduce shoot density and reduce the overall mat layer that protects the field during intense traffic. Mowing frequency must also be considered when addressing mowing height. For your baseball/football use I suggest that you set the mowing height at 2-2.5 in. and that you plan on mowing the field twice a week during active growth

to insure that no more than 1/3 of the leaf blade is removed at each mowing. Clippings should rarely exceed 1 to 1.25 in. at this preferred mowing height.

To improve the field I would maintain active growth during both the baseball and football seasons by watering to keep the grass green and growing, mowing frequently at 2.5 in., and fertilizing in the spring and autumn. Your situation is not uncommon for high school fields in districts where the administration doesn't want or can't for some reason put sufficient resources towards playing field quality. If you continue down the path of limited watering and insufficient mowing, then you would be better off keeping a taller more drought tolerant mowing height. Just keep in mind you won't ever maximize the safety and playability of the field, let alone the performance of your players. **ST**

Have Questions?

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