

Looking for a little help and advice

I coach a high school soccer program in Louisville that uses a 3-year-old Bermuda field. It is now brown and dormant and we are considering playing games on it in early March. The field will be a little damp, but fairly dry for this time of the year.

Will there be short-term and/or long-term damage if the field hosts four 80-minute games high school-age players? The high school team won't use it until August. I have been told that you probably cannot damage this type of Bermuda field at this time of the year with minimum play.

*Coach John
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In 1981, as a 25-year-old graduate student with Dr. Jackie Butler at Colorado State University, I learned the answer to this question. I'll always remember his sighing through the weathered mustache that filtered many pearls of wisdom: "Dave, there are grass problems and there are people problems. Smart people can usually solve grass problems, but grass seldom solves people problems."

The booming demand for access to fields has accentuated the need for people to work together to solve "grass problems." There is a limit to the type and amount of traffic that grass fields can tolerate. It is very rewarding to hear from a coach who was concerned about the present and future condition of his field. I could make an argument for both sides of this situation, but the more I put myself in the roles of grounds manager and coach, the more I realized that the real message is in the decision process and not the judgment.

In reality a soccer game or two played on a dry and dormant Bermudagrass field would probably not cause substantial damage to the field. Most turf managers would agree, but their fear is that doing so will open the door for more activity and they will lose all control over traffic regulation. Allowing added activity could be perceived as a sign of weakness. Since the grass is dormant and not able to actively recover it does not take much more than a few games before the protective mat of vegetation is removed and the soil exposed.

Some of our traffic trials in the transition zone of Missouri showed that Bermudagrass football fields could recover from fall traffic if they did not receive any spring or summer traffic. The combination of fall football and spring soccer proved too much for the bermudagrass. Traffic when the Bermuda is dormant in the spring or when it is starting to green seems to really set back the fields.

In this case it is a measure of how much traffic do you allow in the spring and how much injury actually occurs. Let's put it this way: If the ground is moist and wet and the players are bringing up any soil or mud, then you are causing substantial damage. Native soil fields that are too wet for play can be severely damaged in a single event.

Here is how I make the call on whether or not the field is too wet. Check for "squishy feet" by standing on any part of the field where you have concern and shift your weight back and forth from one foot to another for a minute. If you start to make a noticeable depression in the ground or you develop a wet spot as if you are squeezing water out of a sponge, then the field will likely have substantial tracking and divots. It may look fine for a couple of minutes, but as the contest progresses repeated trampling of the soft ground will give way to muddy conditions. This is of course the worst-case scenario and should be avoided since this single event can have an immediate and

long-term negative effect. This is especially troublesome in early spring when soils are wet and evapotranspiration is low and also in late fall when grass is thin and soils take longer to dry.

Moderately moist soils, somewhere between just after irrigation and field capacity, are also prone to compaction. Water is not pumped out of the ground as in the "squishy feet" example, but the surface will have many noticeable cleat marks pressed into the Playdo-like soil surface. Both of these situations will result in mud sticking to shoes and exposed on the surface.

If the field is sufficiently dry enough so that there is no free moisture on the surface and there is no sticky soil exposed, then it is likely that the compaction will not be a major concern for that particular event.

But here's the tricky part: Even with these guidelines it is not solely the field's condition that I use as the basis for making a final decision. In fact my response has less to do about grass and everything to do about people, because people solve grass problems.

You need to build a working relationship with all of those who take ownership in the field: coaches, players, turf managers, athletic directors, boosters, and volunteers. Somewhere in this group an alliance must be formed that says "I will help you if you help me."

Back to the judgment call. You fight to keep people off of the field under conditions of "squishy feet" and all of your allies should support you in this because to be on it will be detrimental to all the field's users. Even with this you sometimes find the game being played, e.g., it rains after the game starts but it's decided to finish anyway. Don't say, "I told you so" and make enemies, just submit your list to help remedy the situation.

This is a good time to request topdressing, sod, equipment, etc. You are one up on the alliance scorecard and you should capitalize on it.

Now suppose conditions are not as wet as squishy feet and instead are more in the Play-do stage. It is correct that moist soils will add to compaction, but when you have to make the judgment call, you need to think about developing the relationship with other users. You may know that it adds to the cumulative effect of compaction, but you also know that the coach may really need to get in one more practice before the big game. Be smart about picking your battles and knowing when to strengthen the alliance.

It's about give and take and building relationships. I am not saying roll over and let the fields be repeatedly destroyed. You have probably already been down that dead end street before. Given a reasonable chance most of you can grow grass, but to get that chance you may first need to grow a relationship with the field users.

In addition to your arsenal of things that make you better (i.e. mowers, players, new uniforms, fertilizer, helmets) be sure to give proper attention to reason, patience, fairness, and trust. These tools could also use a little sharpening from time to time. **ST**



Have Questions?

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