

Topdressing a baseball field

BY HENRY T. WILKINSON

Topdressing describes the application of a structural material to the top layer of turf. A structural material is one that is not solubilized rapidly in water; examples are soil conditioners, sand, and soil. Fertilizers and pesticides are examples of non-structural materials that are also applied to the top of turf. Topdressings benefit your field several ways:

1. Improve the quality of the turf surface. Topdressings fill the voids or uneven spots in a field, thus making it more uniform. Balls will roll true, and athletes will run more efficiently.

2. Protect the turf crowns. When balls hit them or feet tear and stomp them, turf crowns are weakened or killed; when the crown is damaged, the turf will thin and then die. Topdressing will surround the crowns and give them some protection from damage.

3. Improve the soil's porosity and reduce the organic thatch. Turf requires an abundance of soil pores for growth. These pores should be big enough to allow roots, water, and air movement. As turf grows, it forms a large

"Topdressing benefits will be realized when you add small amounts over several years"

amount of organic matter that supports the crowns and the upper part of the roots. The dead organic matter (thatch) is most beneficial for baseball if it is about 5/8 in. If the organic matter is thinner than that, the turf will be hard and jolting to the athletes' feet. If it is thicker than this it will start to impede water and fertilizer movement through the turf root zone, resulting in wet, shallow roots. The rate at which thatch forms depends on both the variety of grass used and turf growth speed. Topdressing the turf will incorporate structural materials into the thatch. This will improve the rate of thatch degradation and maintain better soil porosity.

Do I need to use topdressing?

Most baseball fields can be improved by topdressing. Both the skinned area and the turf areas will benefit.

To keep the skinned area in the best possible condition you will need to topdress. The skinned area of a baseball field is often built using heavy-textured clay, and

then a soil clay amendment is worked into the top few inches to achieve a desired surface. It is difficult to give specific recommendations for adding more ceramic conditioner to a skinned area, because each field is managed for the preferences of the home team.

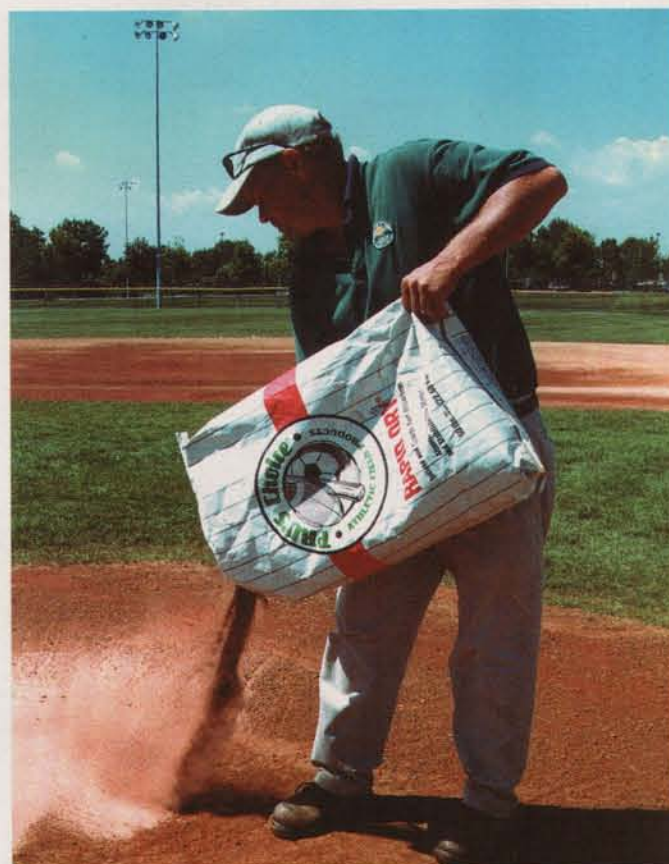
The surface of a skinned area should be almost 100% soil clay amendment. Your choice will depend on what the team and you want. How often your field should be topdressed is a decision that you must make based on the manageability of the skinned area. When you are struggling to keep the skinned area smooth or supple for the movement of either the athlete or the ball, topdress. You will probably add 2-4 bags each time you topdress, and you will need to topdress about once or twice a month.

When you apply the soil amendment, make sure you not only spread it out to maintain a uniform surface, but rake it into the top inch of the soil. You want to achieve a gradient of clay and soil amendment in your skinned area. This will help you manage the water you add to the skinned area to achieve the desired playing surface.

Ceramic conditioners will dry out the skinned area and cause it to become hard and crack. You must add water to the skinned area to achieve a great playing surface. The only way to know how much and how often to water a skinned area is to practice.

Topdressing baseball turf can help your turf and produce a great playing surface. You will want to review the information on how to use products for constructing a baseball root zone. Topdressing with any calcined clay can lead to problems if you use it improperly.

Never topdress a turf area with a structural material containing more than 40% ceramic conditioner. The more clay soil amendment you add, the greater the chance of stressing your turf. However, if you follow the recommended rate, you will safely achieve an excellent turf surface. The maximum limit is 40%, but the generally recommended rate is 30%. The rest of the material in the topdressing should be the same material that the turf is growing in. For example, if your field was built on the existing soil, then add 30% or less ceramic conditioner to the same soil. If your field was built with sand, then add 30% soil amendment to the same kind of sand.



Each skinned area is different, and you may want to customize your surface for (or against) a player.

How much topdressing should be applied?

For a single application of topdressing, add enough to achieve a layer 1/8-in. thick or less. Never add more than a 1/8-in. layer of any structural topdressing per single application.

How often should a field be topdressed?

This depends on many factors, including how much play the field gets, how fast the grass is growing, and the type of grass you have. In general, an aggressive topdressing program would include applications once per month while the grass is growing. Further, a topdressing program will achieve the greatest benefits when done for the life of the field. However, even one application per season will provide some benefits.

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