

Leveling the playing field

BY MARTY CURTIS

Growing up in a small town on the South Dakota prairie, I used to have to travel 50 miles or more to play ball. The drives seemed endless to me. Finally arriving at our destination, we poured out of the bus, filled with boundless energy and the confidence that we could play with anybody!

As our team gathered on the field, we always gazed around the ballpark to check out the general conditions. Memories of bold-colored advertising on outfield fences, smells of freshly mowed grass, and brightly chalked batter's box and base lines remain vivid in my mind.

The outfielders looked over the grass to see how short it was cut, trying to get an idea of how the ball would roll. They checked the warning track, if there was one, and gauged the distance between the turf and the fence while waiting for the coach to hit fly balls.

Infielders lingered at their various positions, ready to start pre-game warm-ups. We scuffed around the infield dirt checking conditions and fielding grounders, taking relays from the outfielders, and turning some double plays. The starting battery warmed up on the sidelines for a few minutes before moving on to the field to try out the slope of the mound.

The ballparks we played on varied from town to town in their design and condition. Some physical characteristics, such as the size of the ballpark, seemed proportionate with the town's size. But good maintenance was not a product of either size or wealth. The quality of the maintenance reflected instead the dedication and direction of the civic leaders. As a young ballplayer, I just accepted that some fields were less desirable to play on without wondering why. Now, after playing ball for nearly 50 years at various levels, I'm still impressed stepping onto a well-maintained field, only now I understand how and why.

Safety first

We of course try to maintain fields in the best possible condition for our athletes' safety. A smooth, level playing field is an important factor in keeping players from injury. And, from the perspective of municipal parks and rec leaders, avoiding litigation stemming from negligence is key.

Another point to consider is the need to schedule make-up games caused by rain or standing water; with the large number of teams playing on a limited number of fields, it can be difficult to schedule make-ups during league or tournament play. A well-maintained field can dramatically reduce the number of make-up



Barney Lopas of the Anaheim Angels cut this flag into his outfield after 9/11. Credit: PBI/Gordon Photo.

games needed by eliminating the standing water problem. As a player, I'm as disappointed today as I was as a kid to arrive at a ballpark eager for a game only to find unplayable conditions!

So what should you consider when planning maintenance for your ballfield? First, talk to the experts, the people who know about turf and how best to care for it. Next, purchase quality, durable equipment that is versatile and easy to operate. Remember that soil conditions change from day to day, and each park and complex will have its own special needs. Finally, familiarize your crew with the operation of the equipment and your high standards of maintenance. The turf industry offers a variety of teaching aids to help you learn about quality care for your playing fields. Take advantage of these opportunities.

When done right, a well-maintained playing field adds to the safety, enjoyment, and success of every player, no matter what their part in the game. And playing teaches us so much about others and so much more about ourselves. If you lose, say little. If you win, say less!

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