

Cutting heights

I have noticed a lot of variations in the height of mowing the soccer, football, adult softball, and youth ball diamonds. I am wondering if there is a desired height for these facilities. Currently we keep everything at 3 inches and we have no problem with late season "browning" and our players seem to like the extra cushion in the outfields. I was wondering if we lower the blades, will we cut back on our maintenance costs?

City of Wilmington, OH

I was about to comment about your high mowing height, and then I noticed your fields are in Ohio. Not that Ohio fields should be higher than anywhere else, only that you are most likely growing a cool-season grass. Our warm-season grasses (mostly bermudagrasses) are typically maintained a lot lower than fescues, bluegrasses, and ryegrasses.

Your question brought up several good points about mowing height that I would like to address. First, should different field types and different levels of play require different mowing heights? Second, if fields are mowed lower, will that result in lower maintenance costs?

Let me address the first question using part of your statement. If the "players seem to like the extra cushion" then perhaps you have found a good mowing height. One of the most difficult tasks as a field manager is to get to the point where everyone is happy with the field's condition. Often we change our practices to meet the demands of the field's users. If everyone is happy with the field with your normal level of maintenance then you have accomplished a great feat.

An argument can be made that some sports benefit from a lower mowing height than others do. For instance, with soccer the field surface can impact the speed of the game and the accuracy of the passes. A shorter mowing height usually transfers into a quicker, more direct roll of the soccer ball. The University of Florida's soccer coach talks about "playing the ball to the feet" when they play on dense, closely mowed bermudagrass versus "playing the ball in the air" when they play at northern schools with taller-cut cool-season grasses that have a bunch growth habit. I know our soccer team probably plays within a given season on fields mowed anywhere from 1/2 inch to 3 inches. To me that means that different levels of play probably do not justify different mowing heights, just reasonable mowing heights.

Can't mow away bad hops

Football, lacrosse, baseball and softball do not depend on the field surface as much

as soccer for ball response. It could be argued that bad hops for baseball and softball may influence the outcome of a game, but mowing height alone will not produce or eliminate bad hops. The turf and good judgment can dictate the mowing height. To strengthen that opinion, most surveys I have read have indicated that players (and coaches) could not generally differentiate moderate differences in cutting heights.

Now to address the second question. From an academic perspective, the lower you mow it, generally the more frequently it should be mowed. The basic recommendation is to mow no more than 1/3 of the plant with each mowing. So, if you have a lower

mowing height, it will generally require a reduced interval between mowings, which may not fit in with a reduction in maintenance cost. Generally, the higher the height of cut, the less damage you see following use, and the more cushion. Realize that cushion is as much a result of soil conditions (compaction and soil moisture mainly) as grass height.

There is another reason to vary mowing height—turf recovery. Some managers like to let the grass grow a little higher during the off-season to allow the grass to fill weak areas. Before the season begins, they slowly lower the mowing height to the desired playing height.

On the other hand, some turf managers feel by letting the grass grow tall, you reduce the lower leaves on the plant, reducing density. By keeping the grass at the in-season height the grass is conditioned to perform at that height. From my perspective the choice between those two theories depends on the desired in-season height. Turf can be mowed below an optimum height for special events, but must be allowed to recover if you want your turf to last through the season.

Lastly, let me provide a more specific answer to your question. Your 3-inch height is probably on the upper end of the suggested mowing range. In my limited association with northern athletic field grasses, I would probably suggest a little lower mowing height during the season (say 2 inches) and perhaps the 3-inch height during the more stressful summer months. The 2 inch height gives a "cleaner" look and should not have a significant impact on browning, wear, etc. and should fit well with each of the sports field types you mentioned.



Have Questions?

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