

NJ turf manager takes a holistic approach to field maintenance

BY DEBBIE CLAYTON

The lawn care industry was just coming of age when James Hermann started his own turf-management company in 1986. His objective was not to conform to the standard five-application program, but to provide residential service on a commercial level.

"I wanted to take care of homeowners' lawns the same way companies take care of their properties," says Hermann, owner of Total Control, Inc. near Clinton, in northern New Jersey. "My concept of total control includes lawn mowing, fertilizing, pest control, and shrub pruning on an as-needed basis. I never believed in the rigid program most lawn-care companies were promoting. It doesn't make sense to fertilize in July when the grass is brown."

After spending his early career managing a thoroughbred horse-breeding farm, Hermann became fascinated with turf when he helped build a turf racetrack. "If you think kids tear up a soccer field, you won't believe the damage five horses running down the middle of a turf racetrack can do," says Hermann. "I was intrigued with learning the ins and outs of how to maintain turf."

Since he enjoyed being independent and wanted more of a challenge, Hermann went out on his own as a turf manager. His first account, a commercial contract for a telephone company with 16 half-acre sites, is still with him and has grown to 60 sites. Despite his original desire to focus on residential customers, his business has evolved into 75 percent commercial accounts, 20 percent athletic fields and 5 percent residential customers.

One-man operation

Currently, Hermann works for three local municipalities, maintaining soccer and baseball fields, as well as a Little League complex with four fields. As a one-man operation, Hermann does all the mowing himself, which allows him to view the effects of his program on a weekly basis. "If I fertilize with the wrong product, I'm the one who has to maintain it," he says. "As a result, I have much more respect for fertilizers than a lot of people do. I like to use slow-release fertilizer products because they are more forgiving than quick-release products."

When Hermann takes on a new athletic field contract, his number one concern is balancing soil nutrition. This generally requires bringing phosphorus and potassium up to optimum levels. Once that is accomplished, he applies a straight nitrogen product.



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Hermann fertilizes athletic fields a minimum of three times a year. He follows soil test recommendations, putting down one-third of the nitrogen required in the spring and two-thirds in the fall. He uses slow-release nitrogen sources such as Nitroform and Nutralene because they allow him more flexibility in application timing, among other advantages.

"I'm particularly impressed with the way those fertilizers are released by microbial action in the soil." He says, "In both products, the carbon to nitrogen ratio is approximately one to one with nearly all the carbon available for microbial utilization. Microbes consume the carbon for energy and then release the nitrogen. The nitrogen release mirrors the needs of the turfgrass plant. If I don't get around to fertilizing right on schedule, it doesn't matter. The nitrogen is there when the plants need it. You just

can't time the release as well as Mother Nature does."

For example, Hermann's area experienced a severe drought in 1999. It didn't rain from the beginning of June through early August. But Hermann had fertilized the athletic fields using Nutralene at the rate of 3/4 lb. nitrogen per acre in the springtime. "Those fields came back with a vengeance," he says. "The microbes didn't need energy during the drought, so they conserved the nitrogen and used it later. The fields came back strong and lush."

In addition to providing proper fertilization, Hermann recommends aerating athletic fields four times a year. He actually advises municipalities to buy the equipment and aerate themselves for cost and time efficiencies. "I can teach them the best times to aerate, but it's usually cheaper and more timely for them to do it themselves," he says. "For instance, it's best not to aerate at the beginning of the season. Through the winter, the turf has been heaving through frosts and thaws, and typically is already opened up. But spring soccer fields should be aerated midway through the season, and all fields should be aerated at the end of the season when compaction is at its worst."

Constant communication necessary

Athletic field management involves constant communication between the leagues, the coaches, and the teams. Communicating to everyone about weather-related conditions and when to play and not to play on the field is an essential part of successful field maintenance. "I've learned this from being on the mowing end and from being on the maintenance end," says Hermann, who serves on the board of directors of the

New Jersey Sports Turf Management Association.

Though he ended up with more commercial than residential accounts, Hermann is still selective about taking on new residential customers. "I tell homeowners if they want their lawns lush and growing all year, don't come to me," he adds. "Your turfgrass will slow down in the summer because it's supposed to do that. I also practice IPM wherever possible. When I talk to customers, I mention safety. One guy was concerned this year because he and his wife had just had twins. I told him I was concerned last year when it was just his dog on the lawn!"

Hermann feels he can provide better service to his customers because he sees the lawns and fields he maintains on a weekly basis for mowing. "I love my work and I think it shows," he continues. "Sometimes the guy sitting at the desk got into the business because he loved being outside, but now he hires other people to do the work. Personally, I never want to get to that point."

How does James Hermann run such a diversified business all by himself? For one thing, he sets distinct priorities: "My sports fields are my number one concern," he says. "Mowing management affects every other aspect of sports field maintenance."

To effectively maintain a height of 2 1/2 inches, athletic fields in Hermann's area must be mowed every 3-4 days during the growing season. Hermann mows either Monday-Thursday or Tuesday-Friday. "That way, I can readjust if we get rain on one of the days," he



Hermann's concern is balancing soil nutrition

adds. "But I try not to mow on Wednesday, because then I'd have to go back on Sunday. It took me 15 years to figure that out!"

Hermann saves Saturdays for field maintenance so that he can use parent volunteers. "The leagues prefer it that way so they can keep costs down," he notes. "I spray weed and insect control on an as-needed basis, but I can usually juggle something in my schedule to work in those applications."

What about the 60 sites he manages for the telephone company? The majority of them are extremely low maintenance. "Most of them are industrial pads located in the corner of a field somewhere," Hermann explains. "I usually just clean them up, mulch them, and use a preemergent herbicide to keep the weeds down. Some of them only require maintenance once a year."

Hermann mounted his sprayer on the truck he uses to transport his mower so he can spray and mow during the same visit, if necessary. "I try to be as efficient as possible," he says. "I often work on the low maintenance sites during the early spring, the middle of the summer, or late fall, when I'm not mowing much else."

Finally, he fits his residential customers into a schedule similar to the athletic fields. "It's always a balancing act, but I've learned to make it work."

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