

Being a sports turf professional

BY AMY J. FOUTY



I am sure many *SPORTSTURF* readers are experiencing the reality that our athletic fields in themselves often have become as big a focus as the teams that play on them. The microscope placed on athletic surfaces can be exhilarating and frustrating all in the same moment. It takes a dedicated sports turf professional to balance today's challenges and to gain the cooperation and understanding of the entire organization for a team to have a great field.

This leads to the question, "What is the definition of a professional?" I believe that, ultimately, a professional is someone who gets the job done successfully. Getting from point A to point B is where the challenge lies.

Being a sports turf professional is far more complex than I would have ever imagined before taking on the challenge. Our working environments are highly political and emotionally charged. The financial security of teams and/or departments can ride on each win or loss of the season.

So how do we balance the multiple aspects that we deal with — administrators, owners, coaching staffs, facility managers, sports managers, budgets, the media, and the general public? All too often, the understanding of what it takes to have safe and playable surfaces is lacking or misunderstood. How do we get the things we need to provide surfaces that our teams and organizations are proud of? How do we create successful relationships in these complex environments and at the same time maintain safe and playable surfaces for our teams to compete on?

Turf is the easy part

I believe in the truth of the old adage that maintaining the grass is the easiest part of our jobs. Following are some suggestions to help you develop your professional image and create stronger relationships within the complex environment of sports turf management to achieve your goal of getting the job done successfully:

Be a Professional. These are the major things I apply in all areas of my professional life. First, dress and conduct yourself in a professional manner. People will base their opinions of you on your appearance and on how you communicate with them. You have only one opportunity to make that first impression.



The microscope on turf can be exhilarating and frustrating.

Second, always be honest and forthright. At some point you will make a mistake. Personally and honestly acknowledging that mistake can be as important to your reputation as a professional as taking the appropriate actions to rectify the error can. Third, do your best to follow through on what you say. It can be as simple as returning phone calls, unlocking a gate, or turning in your bills or statements on time. Whatever the commitment, make sure that you are able to do the things that you say you will.

Finally, be considerate of those around you. People do appreciate it. Even such little things as a smile and hello can make a difference in the work environment.

Establish Your Credibility. Sports organizations are a complex environment in which respect must be earned. We have to begin by showing dedication to the success of the field. We must do what it takes to prepare the surface within the framework that we are given. Your hard work will speak for itself and earn the respect of those around you. People will observe your level of commitment to excellence and know that you are doing everything possible to achieve it.

I have adopted the policy that there is no reason to put off until tomorrow what can be done today. Take the extra time each day to finish what you start and pay attention to the details. Credibility in your organization will bring trust and instill the willingness in others to listen, understand, and provide the things you need to have the best possible surfaces.

Be Productive and Efficient. We have all heard the old saying, "Waste not, want not." I truly believe that it is necessary to be productive and efficient in all areas, whether it is in the fertilizers and chemicals we use or in the hours that we work. What are you accomplishing each hour of the day? Evaluate yourself and your staff on proficiency. Make the best possible use of the resources available to you. Surround yourself with quality people that share your commitment to achieving the standards you have set for your fields and facility.

Understand Those Around You. I strongly believe we need to be aware of the goals of all of all those we interact with in the professional arena. In addition, we must try to understand how these goals affect their priorities and their positions on various issues. They are only trying to do their respective jobs.

For example, the coach's primary goal is to have the best team possible. So, one of the coach's priorities is to have a safe, playable, aesthetically pleasing field that the team will feel confident playing on. For the accountant, the goal is efficient use of funds in the department as a whole to achieve a maximum return back to the department.

There are times when, as sports turf professionals, the positions of others on a specific issue may conflict with what is best for the field. When that occurs, we need to present our case and work with them to achieve the most effective outcome. In some instances, it may take years to establish the kind of working relationship that brings equal consideration for the needs of the playing field into the decision-making process. In others, a report demonstrating cost effectiveness may get the job done. So it is extremely important to know how to deal with each individual on his or her level.

Be an Effective Communicator. I am continually working on the best ways to accomplish this. It starts with understanding those you are dealing with and how they process information so you can present your topic to them in the manner and format they are most likely to consider. I have found that if your chosen topic is recognized as important to the individual, or if you can demonstrate why it should be important to them, they are more receptive to considering and understanding your point of view. To do this effectively, you need to educate those around you about the complex growing environment you deal with and how it has an impact on their day-to-day activities.

Become a Valuable Part of the Team. The more we, as sports turf professionals, understand about our fields and our profession, the more valuable we become to the organizations we work for. Set goals for yourself and your staff. Don't be afraid to try new things. Continue your education through workshops, conferences, networking,



becoming a Certified Sports Field Manager, and getting involved in committees at the local, regional and/or national level. There are valuable lessons to be learned all around us if we just stop, look, and listen. Don't be afraid to make a phone call or send an e-mail for help.

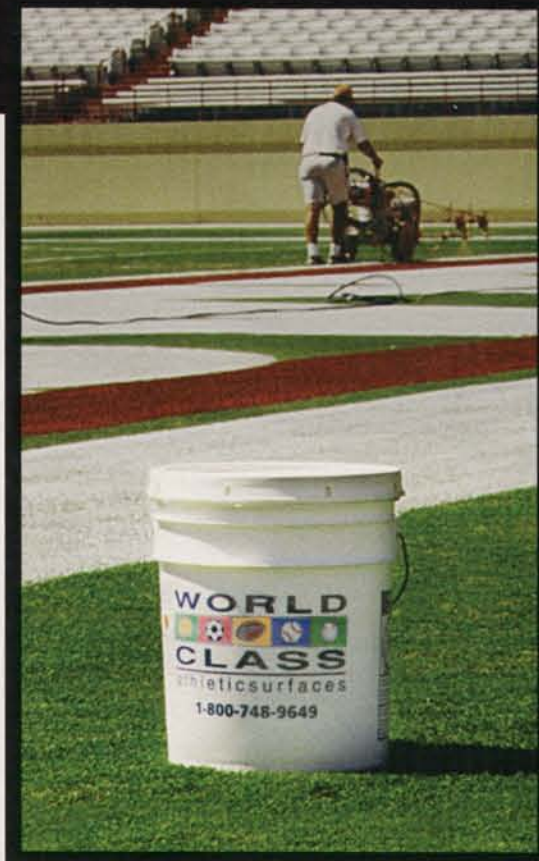
A wise person once told me to surround myself with the best. I believe that the Sports Turf Managers Association gives me that opportunity.

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Amy J. Fouty is the sports turf professional for the University of Michigan and president of the Michigan Chapter of STMA.

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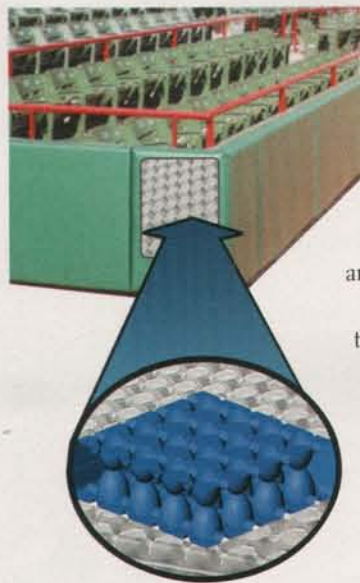
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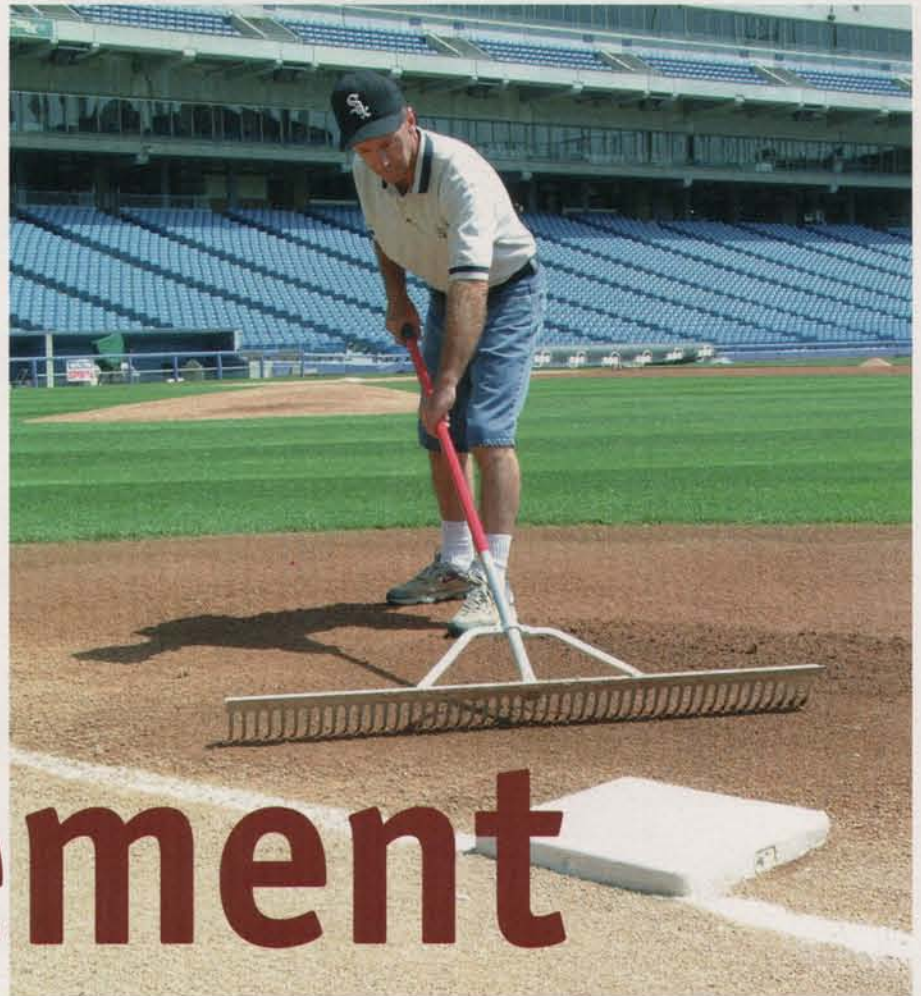
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Hands-on training: key to advancement



Head groundskeeper of the Chicago White Sox, Roger Bossard, believes one of the most important issues in the industry is finding good, experienced people. "We don't do enough to train our groundskeepers," he said.

It is exceedingly important to understand the dynamics of good groundskeeping practices and continue to develop skills to enhance this time-honored trade. This December he will be hosting a groundskeeping training event unlike any in the industry. This 3-day intensive workshop will go beyond the basics of field care and delve into problems every groundskeeper and maintenance crew have faced.

"This is truly an education you can't get in a classroom. There has never been a

training program like this in the industry," added Bossard. The courses will focus on building fields from the ground up, managing daily upkeep (including disease, insects, weeds and seasonal issues), and designing sportsfields. Participants will rebuild three of the Spring Training fields at Tucson Electric Park where the White Sox and Diamondbacks play.

The program gives valuable experience needed by sportsfield professionals at every level of play. Because the training is hands-on, everyone will leave with a real understanding of the work and how technique is crucial. Coaches, athletic directors, team owners and managers can pick up valuable insight into the profession's best practices.

"I had a minor league owner once say he'd love to spend a day with me, to better understand what his groundskeeping staff does and how he can make decisions that help them work more effectively," said Bossard. "This is the perfect program for that."

Bossard's 35 years of experience and family history uniquely qualify him for this kind of extensive, hands-on training institute.

Bossard inherited the spirit of invention from his grandfather, Emil, and father Gene, legends in baseball lore. Roger developed a patented process for installing sand-based fields that speed drainage that is now being used at parks around the league.

As a sportsfield builder, Bossard and his team pioneered the techniques used in retractable dome installations. Because of his specialized knowledge and experience, he is recognized as the premier sportsfield builder, designing high-profile projects around the world. Other teams around the league to consult on their projects often call Roger, and he's known for doing all his own soil analysis. His famed hands-on style keeps him down in the trenches with his crew every game day.

In addition to Bossard's insight, several other industry professionals, including Alan Sigwardt, director of grounds and engineering for Pro Player Stadium in Miami, and Dr. Hank Wilkinson, former STMA Scientist of the Year, will be contributing at the institute in Tucson.

Speaking from experience

When asked about the projects that have shaped his experience, Bossard said, "Every construction project has its own unique challenge. However, the Miller Park installation was extraordinary."

"Because of construction delays at the stadium, we were installing the field in December of the worst winter on record. There was 14 inches of snow when we started



One of Bossard's most challenging stadium projects was Miller Park in Milwaukee. With over a foot of snow on the field and frozen turf, specially designed heating tents had to be brought in to house the 2-million BTU heaters for 12 days to install the irrigation system and the turf.

and upwards of 30 inches before we were through," said Bossard. "The dome was scheduled to be finished before we started putting in the field, so the outdoor temperature shouldn't have had any effect on us. It wasn't finished though, so we had to devise a way to install the field on frozen ground."

The field had to be thawed before the sod could be installed. A foot of snow had to be plowed away and a 6-inch trench of frozen ground had to be torn out by frost teeth on D8 bulldozers to put in the irrigation system. "But we were ready for opening day and that's all that matters," added Bossard.

Bossard and his team also developed a unique irrigation strategy for Miller Park. Its overhead, integrated hydraulic irrigation system was the first of its kind. It heats water from 80-93 degrees, then runs it through the irrigation system to help bring the turf out



Bossard says, "When I work on my field, I get all these great ideas in my head that I know can help other groundskeepers, techniques they don't teach you in school. This is my opportunity to pass on valuable experience."

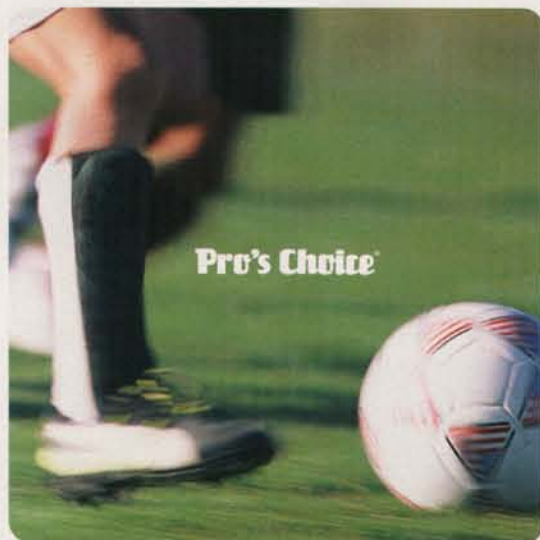
of dormancy and establish growth in the cool weather. "Sure, projects like this may push the envelope of creative sportsfield care," said Bossard. "But the point is that the best way to broaden your skills is to work with the most experienced people in the game. This forum provides that opportunity."

"In the end, it's what you do on your field that counts. This course will teach you how to properly maintain your field, but more importantly how to fix mistakes that may have happened in the past. You'll design a program that meets your specific maintenance needs and be able to apply it."

"And if the attendees are really lucky," added Bossard, "I may even reveal a few of my grandfather's famous '17 Tricks of the Trade'—strictly for nostalgia, of course."

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