

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.

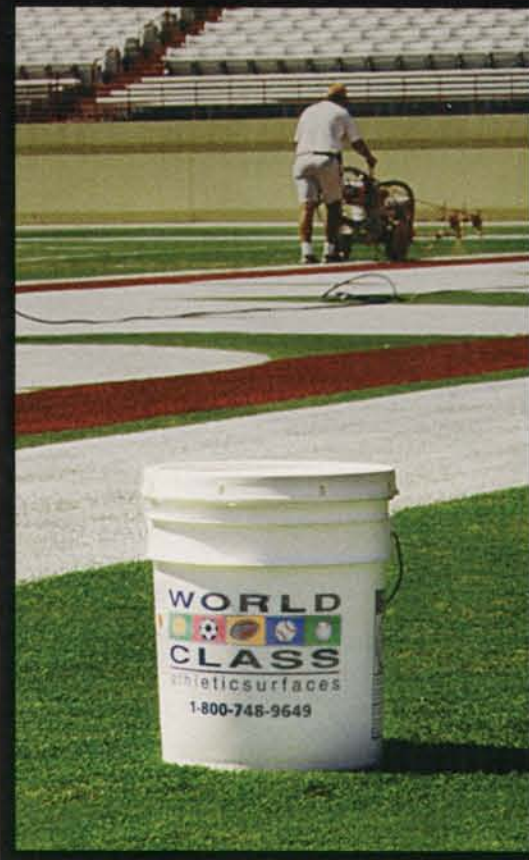
A wise person once told me to surround myself with the best. I believe that the Sports Turf Managers Association gives me that opportunity.

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