

Used correctly, crumb rubber can help

I recently tagged along on the Midwest Chapter of STMA's "Tour on Wheels" that included a stop at Brookfield-Riverside High School to check out their crumb rubber-amended football field. Athletic Director Otto Zeman was ebullient about how this soil amendment had helped improve conditions on a field that sees 45-50 games each fall and is maintained by a one-man crew, an old Kifco sprinkler, and ServiceMaster.

Later I talked to Jim Stepp, who supplied and put down the recycled tire rubber. A former asphalt contractor, Stepp has a custom-built machine he's trying to patent for this work. "It takes ten times more pressure to pull grass from these fields," he says. "The rubber migrates with roots and creates air pockets, which helps retain moisture or absorb moisture as necessary."

Stepp had mentioned the research that's been done on crumb rubber and turf, specifically at Iowa State and Michigan State, so I went straight to the sources:

In Ames, Dr. Dave Minner has seen successes and failures along the way. "Since it's being used in new fields as FieldTurf, Prestige, and AstroPlay, it might be more widely accepted for grass now," says Minner. "But rubber is not a cure-all for intense traffic. Don't use it with the expectation of having more events.

"Our research shows sand topdressing results in the same amount of grass survival as topdressing with crumb rubber. Both are significantly better than no topdressing at all," Minner says. "I suggest if you're interested in rubber that you buy a ton of material and put it between the hash marks, from the 50- to the 45-yard lines. Try it for a year and if after that the area has more grass, then buy enough for all high traffic areas."

In East Lansing, Dr. Trey Rogers says there's two ways to handle rubber: till into the rootzone profile or add as topdressing. "It's no magic bullet, but with topdressing we've seen improvements to justify using crumb rubber. There's an increase in wear tolerance. Of course you still have to maintain the turf," he says.

But it's a mistake to put down 1/4 inch and leave it at that, it won't work. "You must use 3/8 to 1/2 inch to see benefits," Rogers says. "It's not a case of half the material will yield half the results."

Like Minner, Rogers says it's a waste of money to use crumb rubber in non-high traffic portions of your field. And he adds a comment that might be said for many products: "We proved it works but it doesn't replace good turf management."

Credit due: Our September issue cover photo of Virginia's Scott Stadium was taken by Jill Calhoun.



Eric Schroder

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