



Keys to building a major league mound

BY BILL BUTLER

The mound is the center of the baseball universe. It is where every play of the game originates. Around the country there are many different theories on how to construct mounds. Some coaches want them extremely high, while others want them to slope sharply. Unfortunately, neither of these aspects benefits your pitchers. In my 13 years of pro baseball, I've worked with some great pro coaches, and they've all told me the same thing: "Keep it legal."

Early in my pro career, I raised a mound at a pitcher's request, only to be lambasted by a minor league coordinator. He said, "Don't listen to him, he doesn't know what he's talking about." The coach went on to explain that when young pitchers (especially high school or younger) pitch off a mound that's 3 inches too high, it throws off their mechanics. They may adapt to their home mound, but if they go on the road and pitch off a regulation mound, they're all out of sorts. Then other bad habits develop to compensate for the differences in the mound.

If a kid is lucky enough to get invited to a tryout camp, he'll probably be one of 50-80 pitchers getting 10 minutes to throw. At the camps, usually at universities or minor league parks, you will definitely be pitching on a regulation mound. If the player has adapted to a much different mound, it may take him most of his 10 minutes to adjust. Scouts don't want to hear excuses. You have 10 minutes and you need to make them count. So to ensure good, consistent pitching mechanics, proper mound building techniques are imperative.

Mound mechanics

First, stretch a string line from the point of home plate to the center of second base. Make sure the string is pulled tight. Next measure 60 feet, 6 inches from the apex of the plate to the front of the rubber in the center. The center of your rubber should be marked by the string line you ran earlier. Make sure your measurement is 60 feet, 6 inches across the entire front of the rubber. This will ensure it is square with the plate.

Now that you have the correct placement of the rubber, it's time to bury it.

Always try to fill the center of a four-sided rubber with either cement or packing clay so it doesn't move easily once set. When burying a rubber, surround all four sides with packing clay and tamp sufficiently. Double check your centering, distance, and level after this procedure to make sure nothing has moved.

I use Pro Mound packing clay because you can work with it straight out of the bag. You need clay with good texture that will hold up to a lot of wear and stress. Last season I hosted my first professional All-Star game. That means 18 different pitchers on your mound all in one game. After the game there were barely any holes at all. I thought that was definitely the ultimate test for a mound clay.

Now that the rubber is set, measure in 18 inches from the center of the rubber. From this point you will measure the diameter of the mound. It must be at least 18 feet. I personally cut mine at 20 feet. The extra distance in front really helps prevent wear and tear to the area in front of the mound. I also like a big table on my mound, from which I taper off the rest of the mound.

The thing most amateur mounds lack is a table. The table is the pitcher's work area—the area behind and to the sides of the rubber. This area should be perfectly flat and level with the top of the rubber. Pitching is all about balance points. If the area behind the rubber slants back, the pitcher's first move will be



off-balance, and everything to follow will be off as well.

I use my 36-inch rake as a guide. I measure 36 inches out to the sides from the front corners of the rubber, mark those points, and then measure 36 inches back from those two points. Set nails in all four points and stretch a string line. This will give you a nice level and a guide to work with. Water this area and fill in with packing clay, about an inch at a time, tamping as you go. Always keep your clay moist as you work. Never add clay dry.

Once your table is built, it's time to work on the slope. The slope should drop one inch per foot from the front of the rubber out 6 feet. So, 6 feet in front of the rubber should be 6 inches lower than the rubber. Once you figure where these points are, dig down an extra 3 inches in the landing area, the v-shaped area in front of the rubber.

Starting at the center of the rubber, measure out 6 feet. From this point, measure out 4 feet to each side, and set nails. Run a string from the front corner of the rubber down to the other two nails. This is your landing area. Dig down 3 inches, water to help form a solid bond with the soil and fill the area with packing clay or clay bricks.



Most amateur mounds lack a "table," a pitcher's work area behind and to both sides of the rubber.

If using the loose clay form, fill an inch at a time, tamping and watering as you go. Let the water soak in between layers. If using bricks, wet and blend all the seams. When you are within a 1/2-inch of grade level, fill in with your infield mix. The base clay will allow you to dress the area and protect your subsurface from cracking in direct sunlight. Most importantly, it allows players to kick out a little something without creating holes.

Finally, taper the rest of the mound from the table and work area to the sod, so it has a smooth transition and there is no hazard of tripping. Cover the mound area with a soil conditioner or drying agent,

like Soilmaster or Rapid Dry to control surface moisture.

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Bill Butler is the Field of the Year Award-winning head groundskeeper for the Lakewood Bluesclaws. This article was supplied by Oil Dri, makers of Pro's Choice.



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football. Bluegrass is pretty bad at that time of year. Don't give up on Bermudagrass just because your stadium is not in the south. Dr. Tony Koski, extension turfgrass specialist, at Colorado State University, Fort Collins, says there are seeded hybrid Bermudagrasses that work well in cold climates—not cool, but cold.

Bluegrass is at its best in the spring when Bermudagrass is struggling to get going. Ironically, Bermudagrass looks best in mid-August when bluegrass looks lousy. A northerner has little to worry about with disease and even the perennial Southern problem of mole crickets is not a factor in the north.

"Yukon and Riviera are two varieties that look very good," Koski says. Koski has Yukon growing under Colorado conditions for years. Riviera thrives at a mowing height of about three-quarters of an inch. It is a newer variety of Bermuda. As such, it will be harder to find and more costly.

Even with more typical blue or rye grass, a dormant seeding in January or February can pop new grass two weeks earlier than traditional seeding, Sherratt says. "The mortality rate (on seed) is high," she cautions, "so boost the seeding rate 30 to 50 percent."

Another tip: "Pre-germinate the seed and keep people off the seedlings," Daily says.

While not every sports turf manager has the budget of a professional stadium, there are ways to get what you need. One way is to approach several different departments or clubs and ask them to split the cost of necessary gear to get grass growing faster. All coaches really do want a safe, nice playing surface for the athletes.

Another is to take the old extension route and change a management practice in one area or on one of several fields. Perhaps change the fertility program in the end zones or put a grow tarp on a single practice field. Anyone who has spent any time on a field will notice the difference quickly. The improvement in one area of a field will sell itself for other fields.

Lastly, be sure everyone is on board with the program. "Educate your superiors and administrators on the care of fields. It will pay off in the long run," Burns says.

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