

# 8 steps to an easy field facelift

BY JEFFREY T. FOWLER

**I**n the past 10 years I have been called to countless athletic fields to lend some advice to the athletic field manager, school custodian, or the school board member that wanted a “better” field for the young athletes in their district. After a few stops with similar answers, I realized that many people were forgetting the basic steps that we need to keep in the forefront of our minds when maintaining athletic fields.

Now, I realize that each of these 8 “facelift” steps has been or could be written about in their own book form, but this article serves as a friendly reminder of the basics.

## 1. Soil testing

Soil testing is the first step in any field facelift. Without a soil test we have no idea what the soil needs and thus what the turf plant needs to thrive. I like to compare soil testing to a human blood pressure. Medical professionals can tell a lot about our health by taking our blood pressure. Turf professionals can tell a lot about their soil’s health by conducting a simple soil test. This test will give you the soil pH and nutrient levels present in the sample.

A soil test is conducted by taking 20-32 core samples on the field, mixing them together and allowing them to dry. Take a representative sample and send it to a certified laboratory. (Check with your local County Extension Office for a list of laboratories in your state that can perform this test.) Costs will range from \$6-\$20, but this test will pay for itself many times over in the amount you save on lime and fertilizer expenses.

## 2. Lime and fertilizer

Dollar for dollar, fertilization does more to improve poor quality turfgrass than any other single management practice. Proper fertilization practices will produce a dense, medium to dark green turf that resists pests and environmental stresses. However, careless application techniques and/or applying excessive amounts of fertilizer at the wrong time of the year can result in serious turf

damage and contamination of water resources. Successful turf maintenance fertilization requires assessing the nutritional requirements of your turf, understanding fertilizers, how much and when fertilizers should be applied, as well as proper application techniques.

## 3. Mowing

Whether you are mowing with a reel or rotary mower, make sure that your blades are always sharp. Mowing frequency depends upon the rate of growth. Don’t remove more than one-third of the green growth in one mowing, e.g., if you want to maintain a height of 2 inches, mow when the plant reaches 3 inches. Clippings do not need to be removed as long as you maintain a regular mowing schedule.

## 4. Aeration

Aeration disturbs the soil to relieve compaction. Compacted soil does not allow proper air, water, and nutrient penetration and makes it difficult for proper plant root growth. Core removal should be performed at least two times a year when the plants are actively growing. There are many different aeration methods that can be used during the playing season that will not disrupt play.

## 5. Topdressing

Topdressing is adding sand or soil to the surface of the turf. Topdressing gives you a chance to improve the soil quality, improve the seedbed for new plants and rooting of both new and existing plants. Topdressing also gives an opportunity to level the surface of a playing field. The material used should be chemically and physically very similar to the existing soil unless the intent is to modify the soil texture.

## 6. Overseeding

Overseeding into thin turf or small patches of bare soil can be done in late



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winter, spring, or early fall. When overseeding, it is especially important that the seed comes in contact with the soil and has space to germinate. Perennial ryegrass overseeded at the rate of 3-4 pounds/1000 sq. ft. serves very well. Perennial rye is a quick germinating variety that can tolerate enough wear to be effective on an athletic field.

### 7. Playing surface

I have been asked many times at different athletic field maintenance seminars if I would do a quick demonstration on "puddle repair." My answer has always been the same, "NO." You cannot fix puddles; you can fix low spots in your playing surface by constantly working the skinned portion of a softball or baseball field. Working with your favorite leveling drag, you need to constantly be working the skin in all directions to maintain a playing surface that will not form low spots.

### 8. Transition areas

The appearance of the transition areas can make your field look like a million bucks or a million ducks, depending on the care. These areas where the grass and skin areas on a baseball or softball field meet, where players run on and off the field, or athletes always walk to and from the practice field, can really make or break the appearance, safety, and playability of a field. You need to continually work to keep these areas from forming lips, dips, and safety hazards on your playing fields.

### 9. Communications

Wait, the title of this article is eight steps to an easy field face lift, not nine steps. Well, just like Garth Brooks sings in "Friends in Low Places," I was going home one night and thought to myself, Jeff, is that really the way to end this article? No, so I wrote another step, just Garth wrote another verse.

Even if you know everything there is to know about the first eight steps of a field facelift, no one will understand them if you do not follow step nine. You have to let people around you; bosses, supervisors, coaches, players, volunteer parents, and school administrators know what you know. Not only what you need for a safer and more playable field, but also why you need it. Your job as turf manager is to maintain fields; their job is to do something else. You need to communicate your needs and your reasons for them so that everyone better understands the importance of the first eight steps.

If you adopt these nine steps, and formulate a game plan for your fields, these steps will leave spectators saying, "How did they do that?"

**ST**

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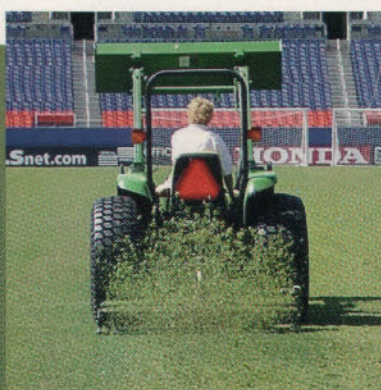
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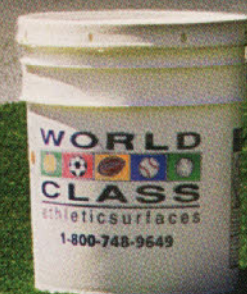
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