

# Who is on first?

*Our baseball season is about over and I have not quite a month before we start summer baseball. Is there is any order as to which should come first, verticutting or aerification, or does it matter? Also, can I do both right behind each other or is there a time period required between them? I also plan to do some topdressing. In the past I have used clean sand to topdress. Is that all right or do you have another suggestion for our sandy Florida soils?*

*Bob McCullough  
Head Baseball Coach  
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**B**ob has some great questions, but I wanted some additional information before I got busy typing him a response. I found out that Bob's field is Tifway (419) hybrid bermudagrass that is not overseeded. Most years the "freeze line" does not go as far south as Central Florida, but I occasionally see high school and college fields overseeded in the Orlando area as well as even further south. The reason given is to provide the same striping that is commonly seen on big-league ballpark fields.

Bob's fields are well drained and the sandy soil is not prone to compaction. This is not too uncommon for much of Florida. Along with nice weather, it seems we were given another break with our predominantly sandy soils. The last bit of additional information I sought was related to Bob's irrigation system. The response was positive. "I have adequate irrigation."

With Florida's sandy soils, a good irrigation system is needed to maintain healthy turf during dry periods. It is not unusual for our soil's field capacity moisture content to be 8 percent. With actively growing turf, it does not take long to pull enough water out of the rootzone so that you are left with drought stressed turf.

I thought I had all the information at this point to answer Bob's question intelligently and then a thought occurred to me. "Why is he verticutting?" Bob is almost two hours south of me. While the bermudagrass in my area has not yet reached its maximum growth rate, Bob's has probably got a 3-week head start. Most of the time I suggest verticutting to either (a) thin out overseeded grasses or (b) reduce thatch in bermudagrass. Since Bob did not overseed, then he must need to remove some excess thatch. It is best to remove thatch when the grass is actively growing since this can be a significant stress on the turf. Given the location of the field then this may be an acceptable time to commence with the dethatching.

The question of when to aerify can be answered similarly to when to verticut. Aerification of bermudagrass fields usually is justified for two reasons. The first is to encourage overseeded grasses to begin transitioning and secondly, to



alleviate compaction. This field was not overseeded so the justification was to alleviate compaction. I always tell people the best time to aerify is whenever they can. Athletic fields are notoriously overused so cultural practices such as aerification have to be fit in between events. Sounds like Bob is on the right track trying to fit aerification (and verticutting) in between two baseball seasons.

The question of the order between the two cultural practices may be a significant question in some circumstances and not in others. There are at least a couple of equipment companies that have developed these super machines that can accomplish multiple cultural practices with one pass. Some can aerify, verticut, and vacuum at the same time. The only significant downfall of these pieces of equipment is price. While they may very well be cheaper than buying three pieces of equipment, the cost of these multiple-use machines may be more than some can handle.

So if you are like Bob, you have two pieces of equipment, which should you do first? I could think of at least two scenarios that could influence the order. Aerify first and the soil surface is softer and more prone to surface disruptions. To put a tractor back over the surface to verticut can cause rutting from the tractor's

weight. On the other hand, once you aerify you can use your verticutting to chop up your aerification cores you brought to the surface. If you verticut using a triplex mower then the weight is not a significant factor.

From the grass' perspective I do not think it really matters. Which is why you can do these practices right behind each other. What matters is that the irrigation system works so that you can irrigate the fields in the days following these cultivation practices. Both aerification and verticutting tend to dry out the soil from the increased light exposure and air movement in the soil, along with the desiccation brought on through severing the turf shoots and roots. The turf may need some extra irrigation water applied to prevent excessive desiccation of the turf while it is overcoming the stress.

As for the topdressing question, I would suggest that topdressing sand should be physically and chemically very similar to the existing soil unless the intent is to modify the soil profile. If the clean sand has been working well in the past, I see no reason to change.

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## Have Questions?

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