

The King of Grasses- fine and fast

I am planning to lay down new sod in our infield this May, but I'm not sure what kind of grass to lay. I want something that is fine and fast. Typical Arizona climate, 100 degrees in the summer months, but we do have some cooler weather in the winter, do get below freezing at times.

*Cory Williams
Kingman, AZ*

This question allows me to elaborate on three areas: adequate background information, coach/grounds crew interaction, and grass selection process.

I requested more information before I realized that I was talking to the coach. I replied "Cory, I need more info. What town in Arizona? What fields do you like in your area? Do they use a warm season grass like Bermuda or a cool season like Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass, or tall fescue? Get me the name or phone number of your grounds manager or a local ball field that you really like and I will call them to find out what has worked out best for them. Then I can recommend specific varieties once I have found the proper species. Do you have irrigation? When do you play most of your season, what months?"

The point here is whether you are requesting or giving information it is important to provide a very clear picture of the conditions and what you are trying to achieve.

Coach Williams responded, "We currently have a mix of Kentucky blue, some Bermuda, some fescue, it is a mess right now. My grounds guys want to lay down some new seed of Bluegrass/Perennial Rye mix. I am weary of this; I really want to do this myself.

"Our irrigation coverage is not the greatest but we do have an irrigation system. Kingman is in the Northwest part of the state about 90 miles east of Las Vegas. We are on our field from January until early August. Our climate is similar to Las Vegas but we don't get as hot as Phoenix. I like the grass on Coach Sam Knapp's field at Durango High School in Las Vegas."

Sports turf managers should always ask the coach to give examples of what they like. It shows you are trying to please them and gives you a clear picture of a goal you may want to achieve.

I called Coach Knapp in Las Vegas and he confirmed that they were using a hybrid Bermudagrass that is overseeded with perennial ryegrass to provide some green for the winter playing season. The coach shared some of his experience in caring for his field and I appreciated his willingness to return my call.

This brings me to my second point. If the baseball coach is not getting the quality of field that they need then be assured that they are going to take matters into their own hands and try to improve the field. Makes sense to me. In some cases they become pretty good grounds managers and make the field better. In other situations they become a real headache for whoever is responsible for the grounds, and ultimately makes the field worse.

Regardless, the coach and the grounds manager need to first develop a good working relationship and second develop a plan for improving the field. STMA at the local and national level can provide opportunities for

both to grow in their understanding of how to build relationships and manage fields. If you are a sports turf manager and an STMA member, be sure that the coach knows that you are actively involved in continuing education and that you have the ability to access the knowledge base for sound field management decisions.

A good sports turf manager will strongly consider the coach's playability concerns about the field. Before the coach embarks on the self-righteous act of taking over control as field manager it is important to assure that they have lobbied for adequate resources and training opportunities for the grounds crew, i.e. does the grounds crew have membership in the local or national STMA. I checked, nobody from Kingman, AZ, is an STMA member, so my only contact is directly with the coach.

Coach Williams, here are some suggestions for your specific field. You most certainly need to run these by your grounds manager since they have local experience and will likely be involved with the continued care of the field. Bermudagrass is the King of Grasses for sport fields and I use it whenever possible. It provides the lowest growing, smoothest, and fastest ball-playing surface that there is available. At mowing heights of 0.5 to 0.75 inches this grass is much more summer tolerant of drought and heat compared to any cool season grass. Reel mowers are best but many high schools are getting by with a reasonable infield using rotary mowers set at 0.75 to 1 inch. Don't expect to mow Bermudagrass higher than 1 inch for baseball infields.

The apparent failure of bluegrass/ryegrass on your field is another reason to try Bermudagrass. You will probably option to overseed with perennial ryegrass to make the field play better in the winter and spring season. You will need to develop a strategy with the grounds crew to remove the ryegrass and insure a quick transition to replenish the base of Bermudagrass between spring and summer. Some strategies include; taking the ryegrass out with herbicides such as Kerb or Manor or scalp mowing in combination with nitrogen fertilizer and restricted irrigation to "burn out" the ryegrass. You may want to also consider using perennial ryegrass varieties that transition better from spring to summer because they die faster as temperature increases.

My experience with Bermudagrass has been from Maryland to Kansas in the transition zone. There always is the chance that a severe winter will cause severe injury to the Bermuda, but it has always been a risk that I have been willing to take. If the Bermuda up and dies then it provides a good base for establishing bluegrass or ryegrass so that there is not much down time on the field. So far my batting average is about 850 in favor of success with Bermudagrass. Talk it over with your grounds crew and if you go with the Bermudagrass let me know which way Kingman, AZ, takes the old batting average.

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Have Questions?

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