

BY MIKE REISENAUER

MANAGING PLAYABILITY DURING WEATHER EXTREME

Managing and maintaining sports turf fields for Washington State University Athletics is a challenging job. The weather in the Pacific Northwest varies so much from year to year as well as week to week. It is said around here if you do not like the weather wait an hour because it will change. That said, we typically get cold springs and warm summers. This year we started with summer in May and it was still hot in September. The work to have a playable field in extreme weather conditions begins way before anyone steps on the field. Here are a few examples of working with the climate changes we get and how they impact our fields:

Begin with establishing good, consistent cultural practices. Be willing to go the extra mile and do what it takes to make changes to benefit your fields. This can involve educating yourself and staff members on new practices and scheduling more time for fieldwork.

Develop and implement a management plan for each field for the year. Write this down and plan each and every task that is to be performed so that you know ahead of time what will be needed for the week or month. Religiously log each job down when you complete it as well as things that could have been done better for next year. I look back at my logs all of the time to compare fertility programs or just to see when we started mowing a particular field each year.

Budget properly to accommodate the goals of the coaches and administrators. Keep in close contact with everyone on what the field needs for improvement so that the money is earmarked ahead of time. Be persistent and don't take no for an answer. There is always a way to find the money or get the job done.

Keep an arsenal of supplies and equipment on hand. Be prepared. It can take years to build up enough equipment to adequately maintain fields for the playability that is desired.

Have knowledgeable staff that can help you out. You can never have enough people to help you out in a bind. Be willing to put in extra time and effort to ensure jobs get done.

At Washington State we have three Pac-10 sports turf fields. Some interesting

weather extreme conditions have affected playability on all three. Each field is a cool season established Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass field with the salt and peeping of *Poa annua*. For the most part each field has a good irrigation system and minimal subsurface drainage. The Lower Women's Soccer Field and the Bailey-Brayton Baseball Field are native soil fields and the Moobery Track Field is a sand-based field.

In November 2000 we held the NCAA first round women's soccer tournament on the Lower Soccer field. The game was on a Friday so I watched the weather forecast closely to anticipate any drastic changes. A cold front was coming in on Friday so I chose to mow, paint lines and logos, and prep the field for game conditions Thursday after practice. No kidding, I painted the lines and logos that Thursday afternoon in a short sleeve shirt and it was sunny and 55 degrees out. It started snowing at four o'clock Friday morning. By six o'clock we had 4 inches of snow and I had our equipment staged on the soccer field before the coaches and event management even got there.

All parties involved brainstormed about what we might do. How can I make this playable, how is this going to affect the field next year, and how much time do we have were questions that instantly came to my mind. We chose a rotary nylon broom to sweep as much of the snow off the grass as possible but when it became too heavy and deep we used the snow blower, on which I'd installed a rubber belting on the blade that scrapes against the ground. This works well and also keeps the edges from digging into the grass. The event management staff used more than 20 snow shovels to help remove snow in areas that the snow became too compacted or the ground became too soft to travel across.

The game started and the snow never stopped. At half time we topdressed the front of the press area, the sidelines where the officials ran and the goalmouths with sand and over seeded each area. We also broomed off all of the lines again. All within 15 minutes. The playability of the field was remarkable for the weather and the field grew back together nicely the next spring.

The Moobery track field is easier to maintain during weather extremes. For example, the javelin can stick in the wet or dry ground, the discus lands or sticks in the ground, and the hammer has a long wire handle so as long as it only goes 15 inches in

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the ground you can still find it. Yes, they leave cannon ball-sized holes in the ground coming to a stop. This is not a problem to the person wearing snowshoes or someone wearing a size 16 shoe. Fortunately most of our throwers are big enough they probably wear that size of a shoe. It has become a big issue for the employees that need to mow the facility as well as the mowers mechanically falling apart while they are bouncing across the field.

To try to minimize this we will be rolling areas with the most damage and then aerating as needed to manage compaction. Heavy topdressing with sand and then dragging will also help.

The Bailey-Brayton Baseball field is currently undergoing a \$1.3 million renovation. The University and the athletic department have chosen to switch to a synthetic turf because we just cannot consistently maintain a safe, playable field in the spring. Our springs just do not warm up enough and are too wet for the Pac-10 season.

This spring our team tarped the infield before our first home game and it rained about 1/4 inch that night, then it froze. Our staff spent 4 hours out on the tarp breaking up the puddles that had frozen and then loaded the ice into utility vehicles. We then hauled it off the field and dumped it in a pile. It looked like a large ice truck had crashed behind the stadium. We have shoveled snow off the tarp before as well.

In the summers before we have held tournaments on the field which will start at 7 in the morning and go until midnight. This will last for a week sometimes. When it gets hot in the afternoon we will syringe the infield grass with a garden hose. There is a fine line here so do not soak the grass. This slows the transpiration rate and we get less injury. It makes all the difference in playability by day 6 and 7.

Playability is relative to just how "extreme" the weather gets. If there's problems before the weather hits, playability is already in jeopardy. **ST**

Mike Reisenauer is Sports Turf Manager for Washington State Athletics. He can be reached at miker@wsu.edu.



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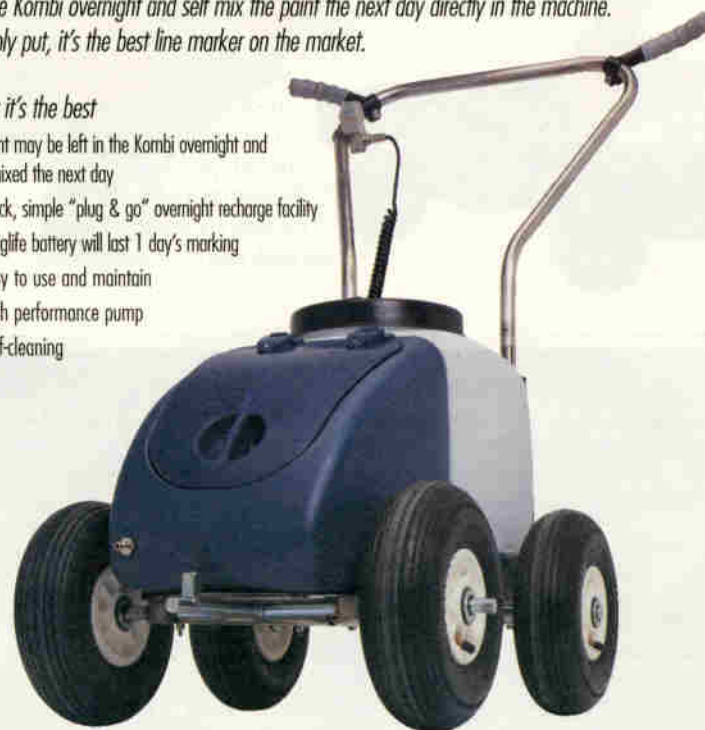
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