

RYEGRASS ON SOUTHERN ATHLETIC FIELDS

I am an assistant athletic director in Mesquite, TX, a large suburban school district outside of Dallas. We have five high schools and seven middle schools. The pressure on our grass practice fields is very high. Can you discuss the pros and cons of planting rye grass on the practice field in the off-season vs. allowing the bermuda to go dormant and doing nothing other than regular maintenance. Several of our fields are used extensively for soccer in the winter. Some have no use outside of football season. Please share your thoughts. Thanks,

Scott Luce

This information will be printed too late to be beneficial this season but will be helpful in fall 2004. To overseed or not may be a personal preference decision unless the field is getting moderate to heavy play during the period of time when bermudagrass is dormant. If that is the case then the overseed can almost justify itself from a "protection" point of view. The decision may also be based on economics.

PRO OVERSEED:

If the pressure on your field is high (as you mentioned) then the overseeded ryegrass can protect the bermudagrass (to some extent) from traffic damage. The heavy foot traffic will excessively wear the dormant bermudagrass and you may lose some of the plant crowns. Bermudagrass will typically regrow in the spring from the rhizome (below ground stem), but it makes regrowth slower. Worn dormant grass introduces bare ground which is more subject to wear and erosion, plus increases weed incidence come spring/summer. Overseeded fields have a nice blue-green color, different from bermudagrass, that stripes very well. Many fans and some players like this look. It holds line and logo paints very well. In some cases an overseeded field may be more consistent (for ball roll) than a worn bermudagrass field during dormancy. If your non-overseeded field would be worn to bare ground it could potentially be less expensive to overseed than to re-establish your field the following year.

CON OVERSEED:

Overseeding is disruptive to game fields two times during the year. First, when the field is prepared for overseeding it is disruptive (cultural practices to plant). This is during a time when the field is usually about to come into play. Second, during transition the field may go through a period of time when the ryegrass is dying and looks unsightly. The bermudagrass is also trying to regrow and to fill in bare areas which may give the field a mottled look. There are chemical aids and cultural techniques for transition to try and "smooth" this transition, but

they do not ensure a good transition. There is no doubt that overseed grass competes with bermudagrass. With careful management and a warm spring, transition may not be a problem. If we have a cool/wet spring then the bermudagrass can really suffer. One also has to consider the increased cost of overseeding: seed, additional fertilizer, additional water, additional labor (mowing), and additional fungicides most years.

From a player's perspective, I have been told that grass stains can be a significant problem on light-colored uniforms if annual ryegrass is used and to a lesser extent with perennial ryegrass. Ryegrass tends to be a little slick, especially when covered with dew. Coaches have probably overemphasized this point.

With overseeding, you are more limited on preemergence herbicides for annual bluegrass control and you may have to time your last summer annual preemergence program so as to not interfere with overseeding. Winter annual weed control will also be much more difficult if not impossible with overseeded fields. Overseeding is time consuming. Overseeded fields have poorer traction than dormant bermudagrass fields as long as there is bermudagrass in place.



If your season ends (and field use is curtailed) around the first frost date (plus or minus a few weeks) then I would not overseed that field. Low-use fields during the winter will always look better the following spring/summer if they are not overseeded. That may or may not be true of higher use fields. If the field will be used heavily after the frost date and before spring green-up, then you may not have a choice if the wear cannot be tolerated. If the wear is excessive the worn areas may have to be replaced with sod after the season. If replacement needs are extensive the sodding cost and downtime may justify the upfront cost of overseeding.

If you decide overseeding is necessary for aesthetics or for protection, consider adjusting your seeding rates to meet your situation. If you can get by with lower rates you will typically have a better transition than when using higher rates. For instance, we often use 6 to 7 pounds perennial ryegrass seed per 1000 square feet on football (season almost over when bermudagrass goes dormant) versus about 12 to 15 pounds per 1000 sq ft on baseball (entire season played during time when bermuda is 50 to 100 percent dormant and has poor color). I would check with your state's turf specialists to find seeding rates appropriate for your region.

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