Juggling user groups

BY BOYD "ROB" MONTGOMERY, CSFM

Rowing grass and maintaining safe playable athletic fields are the easy parts of the turf managers’ job. The headaches start when you have to interact with the many users of the facilities that you maintain. What it boils down to is that turf managers not only have to be experts in the field of growing and maintaining great facilities, but they also need to be partners in communication, organization, and sometimes mediation between the users of the facilities. Let’s break down these three very important aspects.

Without communication between you and your user groups, nothing else will work. Communication is the single most important key to being successful at working with these users. Where do you start? First, you need to identify the important contact with each group. A face to face meeting is a must! Phone calls and emails are great assets to the entire process, but you need to meet with these key contacts face to face. The meeting needs to be informal and have clear set objectives on your end. Introduce yourself, your objectives, and find out how you can help them.

It’s great to know that you need to put down X percent of nitrogen a year to grow healthy turf, but what you also should be interested in is finding out what the needs and goals are of the particular group. Sure you can talk turf and explain some of the fundamentals that may relate to some of their needs, but your goal should be to walk away with a clear outline of their needs.

The hardest part of this process is that after you have met with your groups you need to get a plan together that meets the needs of all the user groups. It is easy to get driven down the path of one particular group’s needs, but if you’re managing more than one group, you need to look at the BIG picture and how it affects the whole, not just the part.

Here are some examples of communications with user groups that I have found helpful:

1. Invite these key contacts to your board meetings. If their group will be affected by board decisions, they need to be involved. They may not have a vote, but they are allowed to give input to help with board decisions.

2. Many of these groups are run by volunteers or have key decision making positions that change often. Make sure that when change does occur within these groups that you are going through the process of meeting with them and discussing their goals and objectives. Just because you met with person A 2 years ago, doesn’t mean that now, person B shares all those goals and objectives. Board change over frequently ousers in new direction and goals.

3. If you have many user groups, e.g., 3-4 soccer groups at one facility, you might want to consider forming an advisory group that meets to discuss pertinent issues. This is a good way to also encourage good group communication.

4. Keep everyone in the loop. Just as you probably don’t like surprises, these groups react similarly. If it be by phone, email, or face to face meetings, keep them informed.

Of course if you are not an organized person, then you can communicate until your blue in the face and you will still fail. Many of these groups have guidelines and regulations that they are required to follow within their individual league structures. These need to be outlined in your meetings with your user group representatives. Generally, scheduling is the big issue with a lot of these groups as well as the facility or fields. Here is the issue. How do you allow enough time for cultural practices but also allow the groups access to the fields when they want it? This is the $1 million question! Though this issue always seems to create bad blood on both sides, with effective organization and planning both sides can be satisfied. Here are some scenarios and solutions that I have found successful:

Scenario: With a multi-use facility, encompassing 135 acres, we have issues with groups starting games all at one time.

Problem: It creates traffic issues that would require a wait of 1 1/2 hour or better to get into the facility.

Solution: Organizing the start times with each of the groups so that they stagger every 1/2 hour.

Scenario: We have two travel leagues with three youth travel soccer groups. Adult travel group, adult recreational groups, and recreational youth all play on the 25 fields we provide for each season. More than one of the groups use the same field throughout the season. Typically, the groups were responsible for providing field assignments to the league individually.

Problem: Many of these groups were not communicating and scheduling multi games at the same time on fields. They were also over booking fields with play by scheduling two to three times as many games on one field then another.

Solution: I developed a scheduling grid that allots a certain number of game spaces to each league for scheduling games. This allows us to make sure that each field has a close even distribution of games. It also allows us to build in maintenance slots or rest fields when needed.

I throw this in just to mention that sometimes you run into situations where these groups do not have the greatest working relationship with each other. This allows you to step in and show these groups that you are a neutral party that is impartial and only there to make sure the needs of the groups, community, and facility is being met. I am sure many of you are saying, “This wasn’t in my job description” but if you really think about it, how successful can you be if your groups are consistently fighting back and forth?

Much of what I have mentioned above has nothing to do with turf! In fact, you will find that as you increase your success with juggling user groups you will increase your office workload. Successful juggling of user groups at any level takes a commitment from all parties to work together on all three of these aspects! It’s not rocket science, but it is a necessity in order to survive, be professional, be successful, and keep your sanity.

Boyd Montgomery is Director/Facilities & Maintenance for Sylvania Recreation Corp., Sylvania, OH. He also is an STMA Board member as well as a member of our Editorial Advisory Board.
When applying chemicals, you want to be sure you don’t miscalculate. If you apply too little, you run the risk of the product not working effectively. If you apply too much, you may be looking at potential damage to your turf, not to mention a major unnecessary expense.

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**This information provided by Toro. Visit www.toro.com/calibrate or contact your local distributor at 800-803-8676.**
Topdressing tips

BY SCOTT KINKEAD

Topdressing, done correctly, can provide many benefits that help sports turf managers maintain a healthy, safe and highly playable field. Some of the benefits are controlling the thatch build-up, leveling playing fields, and changing the soil composition to create a better growing medium that is less prone to compaction. Of course topdressing is most effective when it is integrated with other maintenance practices.

Like any maintenance practice, a topdressing program requires planning and preparation before getting started to ensure that things are done right. Forty years of experience designing topdressers and working with turf professionals on topdressing programs has taught us the importance of doing the proper planning up front. Once you start a program, you want to be able to stick with it. Infrequent applications with differing material can cause more problems with your turf. The following are some of the factors to consider when selecting topdressing material and topdressing equipment that will help you meet your particular needs.

Choosing material. The best topdressing mix may not consist of the same material that is on your field, e.g., if your field soil drains poorly and compacts easily, it makes sense to avoid using the same soil in your topdressing mix. The first and best option should be to consult with a local agronomist or a university soil testing facility to explore the different types of material available and determine which type makes sense for your field and your goals. Materials can range from 100 percent silica sand to a 70/30 mixture of sand and peat, but usually consists of high sand quantities.

A topdressing program should include consistent, routine application and a consistent mixture of material to avoid layering. Particles should be screened and typically 60-75 percent should be between .25 to .75 millimeters in size; coarser sand that measures .1mm or more should be kept to a minimum because mowers can pick up larger particles. Extremely fine sand should be kept to a minimum, as well.
Applying the proper rate. Topdressing applications can range from 1/32-inch for thatch control to 1/4 after aerification for leveling and changing the growing medium. Most sports fields will focus more on the heavier application two to three times a year after aerification.

Amount of material. The size of the turf area and the thickness of application will help you determine the amount of material needed.

Equipment options. Topdressing equipment should have features that can apply topdressing with control, uniformity, accuracy and reliability. The less uniform and consistent the spread the more man-hours spent overlapping and dragging in the material. The less accurate and consistent the application, the less benefits you will experience from the program.

The two different types of top dressers are a broadcast spreader and traditional drop spreaders. Drop spreaders generally use a hopper, a belt and a brush to deliver the topdressing and tend to be better at consistent heavier applications. Broadcast spreaders use spinners to deliver the topdressing and tend to be better for frequent lighter applications.

One of the important features is the ability to handle material regardless of composition or moisture content. Material with higher peat content can tend to be wetter and more difficult to spread. Chevron, or patterned belt technology with a brush, for example, allows topdressers to handle materials consistently and apply materials evenly, which results in a more efficient application. This also allows applying calcine clay to infields.

There are also hydraulic driven topdressers and ground driven topdressers. Ground driven units can guarantee consistent applications regardless of speed changes. It is important to keep units that are hydraulically driven at consistent speeds as slowing your speed will thicken the spread and increasing your speed will lighten the spread.

The most important part in choosing equipment is testing the machine out before purchasing it. If a manufacturer says they can spread wet material consistently, then have them demonstrate this. Don’t make your program fit the machine; the machine should fit your program.

Capacity. A larger hopper capacity topper means less downtime in having to load the hopper, so typically the larger the fields or greater number of fields, the bigger the top dresser should be.

Towing equipment. The smaller top dressing units can be connected to most standard utility vehicles or towed by a small tractor. Units with 4-cubic yard hoppers require much larger tractors. Always check the weight fully loaded with sand to the capacity of your towing vehicle.

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July 2004
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