

MOWING FOR A PRO LOOK WITHOUT A PRO BUDGET

For generations, sports and sports figures have had a tremendous influence on Americans' buying decisions. Whether intentionally or indirectly, athletes have helped countless millions of fans decide what kind of shoes or brand of mitt to buy, or even which gum to chew. From an early age, kids want to be more like "the big guys," and that attitude holds true at every level.

It even affects us in the sports turf industry, because all players want to participate on fields that "look like the pros." In an era of satellite dishes and 24/7-cable coverage, fans now have unprecedented exposure to visual images of top-level sporting events they'd probably never actually get to see in person.

"Everybody wants that professional ballpark groomed look, with the fancy striping and pattern mowing," says John Mott, superintendent of recreation, sports grounds and campus facilities at The Ohio State University. "It's just increasing in popularity, and striping was a really big part of what we were looking for when we bought new rotary mowers."

"We have a demanding audience, and the people we're involved with really want to see what they see on TV," agrees Daryl Kimbrough, manager of the Grounds Department of the Mount Prospect Park District in suburban Chicago. "It's especially true of the parents, because they want the best for their kids."

Kimbrough and his staff are responsible for maintaining 26 baseball/softball



fields, 16 combination soccer/lacrosse fields and four football fields, in addition to hundreds of acres of parks. Mount Prospect has hosted the Amateur Softball Association national championships several times and its high standards are well known.

"People are concerned about the aesthetics here," Kimbrough says, "and it's not always very realistic, to be honest. But there are some things we can do to upgrade those appearances," he adds. "We wanted to show the difference in the appearance of the actual sports surfaces as compared to the rest of the parks, and so we started striping the turf."

Maintaining appearances

Parks and public athletic facilities are significant factors in promoting a community's lifestyle and neighborhood pride. Naturally, the residents expect the nicest fields they can get. The same is true for schools. The campus visit is often a key factor for high schoolers making their choice of a college, and the quality of recreational facilities can be extremely persuasive.

"Thirteen years ago we didn't even stripe the game fields, for the most part," says Brian Gimbel, superintendent of athletic grounds at Ohio State. "But then we

started getting into the habit of striping them, and everybody thought the facilities looked so much better that way. Then they had the desire for those aesthetics to carry on outside of the stadiums too."

"Everybody wants the fields to look the best, which is our goal," agrees Mike Loudermilk, grounds foreman of the Oconee County School District in Seneca, SC. Having to maintain 19 different athletic fields in a variety of school locations across the county, Loudermilk's crews need to please a diverse audience.

"We do a lot of striping, and most of it just depends on what kind of mood the coaches are in and what kind of design they want," he says. "We may bulls-eye the center of the soccer field and then stripe the end zones. For football and baseball fields, we use either checkerboard or straight line stripes, or sometimes a diagonal stripe. If they get a new design that they want to try, a lot of times we'll try it just to see how it looks. Fortunately, the community's been very supportive."

Aesthetics vs. expenses

Given the ongoing demands for improved aesthetics and satisfied patrons, striping is understandably a high priority for many sports turf managers. Achieving attractive striping isn't a tough challenge in itself, because many good mowers can provide it beautifully. But what does that do to your financial priorities at budget review time?



Parks, community athletic facilities, school districts and state universities are publicly supported organizations. Being such high-profile users of residents' tax dollars, they have very scrutinized constraints on expenditures. It can be a tricky balancing act: If a turf manager wants to invest in striping equipment to deliver the first-class aesthetics people demand, the purchase still has to be justifiable on a cost-value basis.

Fortunately, manufacturers have been successfully addressing those concerns in recent years. New rotary mowers have come along that satisfy both sides of the equation for turf managers: excellent cutting and striping ability plus the cost-efficiency of increased productivity and lower operating expenses.

"Initially, it was kind of a difficult sell to the powers-that-be," says Mott. "But once we got some credibility, and they saw how efficient the new rotary is, it was much easier."

The machine he's talking about is a Toro Groundsmaster 4700-D, a 60-hp turbo-charged mower with seven free-floating, rotary cutting decks. Ohio State counts on its 12.5-foot-wide mowing swath and heavy-duty rollers behind each deck to it create a distinctive striping.

"It gives us a nice balance of the high-quality cut, the striping and the efficien-

cy," Mott says. "At one of our parks, we're now mowing it in 45 minutes and it used to take probably an hour and a half, and the mower still gives us what we're looking for in terms of striping."

"We needed something that would stripe, and the new Groundsmaster did everything for us," agrees Mount Prospect's Kimbrough. "It gave us the clean look, it gave us the striping and the guys could move it at a good rate from a productivity standpoint."

With so much emphasis put on the quality and appearance of their playing surfaces, Kimbrough and his staff agreed to dedicate their new rotary mower and one operator to the athletic fields, full-time.

"We try to mow those fields twice a week during the season, weather permitting," Kimbrough explains. "That means you're doing 2 and 3 acres apiece, multiplied times 26. But by taking this amount of acres of the actual playing surfaces off of our regular mowing crews, it made a huge difference in our ability to get around to all the other park properties, because it took a lot of time off of them," he says.

"So in essence, you can take the same people, improve your fields' aesthetics and increase productivity. It allowed more time to do other things and other cultural activities. Even if you're just finding more time to do aerating on a high-traffic area, and you're not doing anything else to it, you're creating a better and safer environment."

"I'd love to have two of those mowers," says Oconee County's Loudermilk, who has a Groundsmaster 3500-D. "Timewise, that's where it's really saved us. We figured we could take the amount of time, labor and so on that would be saved with this machine, and use it for other things on the ball field, like aerifying or topdressing, whatever we need to do."

"We were fortunate enough to be able to set aside the money to buy such a machine," says Kimbrough. "And a big part of it was because of our devotion to the programs and the leagues we serve here in our community. If I was a businessman and I wanted to have a happy customer, I would think this would have a very high value from that standpoint. It's just a matter of who's setting the standards," he adds.

"When you're able to actually increase the aesthetics of your parks and your ball fields, it makes a difference," Kimbrough continues. "We'll even hear it from the residents here, too. They just think it looks so nice after that mower's been through there. That's quite a statement for a resident to call up and tell us something looked nice."

"We want to continue giving something of quality to our customers and the university, and striping is a big part of that," agrees Ohio State's Mott. "And if I can take less manpower, mow more acres, make a nice presentation and get the quality of cut I'm looking for," he adds, "it's a win-win." **ST**

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