

# Overcoming adversity:

BY SUZ TRUSTY

**D**edication to excellence in field management plus an aggressive approach to adversity earned Olmsted Soccer Field of the City of Westbrook, ME, the 2003 STMA Soccer Field of the Year Award in the High School/Parks and Recreation division. Olmsted Soccer Field is part of the 22 acres of playing fields within the city of Westbrook located not only at the high school site, but also at the elementary and middle schools and in city parks.

In the late 90's, Westbrook undertook a major field construction/renovation project for its high school fields. Olmsted Soccer Field, along with practice fields for football and field hockey, and combination game and practice fields for softball and baseball were constructed in the surrounding woods on an upper level of the school property. At the same time, the original native soil Olmsted Field, constructed in 1965, was completely renovated to be used as the football game field, varsity soccer game field, and track complex.

All of these fields share common construction elements. They were excavated to the native clay sub-base. This was topped by a gravel layer that contains a series of perforated drainage pipes covered with landscape fabric which channel excess subsurface moisture away from the fields. This was covered with a sand-based soil profile. Olmsted Soccer Field has a Toro automated inground irrigation system with seven zones and five series 2001 heads per zone. For surface drainage, this soccer field has a 1-percent pitch toward a drainage swale between it and the field used for field hockey. The turf is a combination of Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass varieties. The dimensions of the playing surface are 360 feet by 225 feet with additional room on the sides to shift the field layout to spread the wear. The portable bleachers can hold up to 500 spectators. There's enough space for another 200 attendees to bring their own chairs and stake out a viewing spot along the sidelines. There currently is no lighting on this field.

From April of 1999, as these fields were being prepared for the first season of play, through early July of 2004, the City's athletic fields were under the maintenance program of Sports Field Manager Lance Tibbetts. Tibbetts has "worked with turf" since his graduation from Southern Maine Technical College with an AAS in Plant and Soil Science in 1991. He had previously served as Parks and

Facilities Manager for the Town of Brunswick overseeing their athletic fields as well as the parks. Before that, he worked as a lawn technician and then a branch manager in the lawn care industry. This July, he moved to the position of Supervisor of Grounds and Facilities for the Town of Windham, ME, focusing on the School Department fields.

His replacement at Westbrook is Mike Didonato, who had worked with Tibbetts during the summers for four years. Tibbetts says, "Mike knows the programs and knows the fields. He is dedicated to what had always been our prime focus, providing safety and playability for the athletes while preserving and protecting the city's investment in its fields."

Didonato says, "The fields were looking great for the start of the school year. Lance had worked hard to get it all into shape before he left. We also have continued the great working relationship we'd developed, so I have a resource whenever I need it. The fall season is moving forward according to plans, so far with no bumps in the road." As Sports Turf Manager, Didonato, like Tibbetts before him, works directly for the City Public Services Department and plans and implements the field maintenance programs for all of the athletic fields within the city, including those on school grounds. (Before May of 2004, the position was within the Recreation Department.) During the school season, the fields on school sites are used primarily by the student athletes under the direction of the Athletic Director, with other uses coordinated by the Sports Turf Manager. During the summer months, he coordinates the field use schedules for all the fields, spreading the usage to the school sites as well. This arrangement provides the central control that allows flexibility in field use scheduling and for the maintenance procedures and rest periods so critical to preserving safety and playability in heavily used fields.

"Heavy use is an understatement," says Tibbetts. "The field originally handled soccer practices and games for the boys and girls varsity, junior varsity, and freshman teams, all fall programs. It also hosted the fall youth soccer league, with games on Saturday and Sunday. To reduce wear in the goal mouths, we scheduled the younger players on that field, setting up two game fields, running across the field, perpendicular to the layout of the high school field. The youth league stored their goals onsite, for easy access. Occasionally, the older youth players would be scheduled for a Saturday game, or a high school coach would schedule a scrimmage or make up game for a Saturday. Activity began with practices in mid-August



and ran into the first part of November.

"Lacrosse was added to the high school sports program 2 years after the field construction. It's a spring sport, beginning as soon as the snow clears way, usually in April, until the end of the school year in June. Practices and games are held on the Olmsted Soccer Field, generally Monday through Friday. So far there are no youth lacrosse leagues seeking weekend field use," says Tibbetts.

The spring schedule now puts 60 lacrosse practices and 22 lacrosse games on the field. Fall soccer has 72 practices, 20 high school games, and 48 youth soccer league games. That's a total of 132 practices and 90 games. In addition, there are 74 possible days of Physical Education classes on the field, weather permitting. The PE teacher is also the golf coach. Those players occasionally hit some practice shots from the common areas, next to the field.

"We've done a few sessions teaching students the fine art of divot repair because of that," laughs Tibbetts. "Actually, the PE instructors and the coaches have been great. They're willing to shift areas of a field, or switch fields if necessary for practices or classes. They'll even check in to see which field we prefer them to use if we haven't prescheduled adjustments."

Lacrosse does add more abuse to the field. Tibbetts says, "We didn't object to this addition because that the facility has no summer soccer activity. That allowed time for maintenance procedures and a rest period to bring the surface back to top condition for fall soccer. In fact, the players from the last lacrosse game are just leaving the field when we start ripping down the goals for renovation. A lot of the larger municipalities have more user groups to accommodate. If Westbrook had soc-

cer on the field all year, I'd probably have sought a different site for lacrosse.

"Preserving field quality at the high school site requires vigilance. Most of the upper level fields are unfenced and a walking trail, open to the public, winds through the property. All of the high school fields are posted with field use by permit only signs and we were pretty aggressive in policing that the first year especially. We don't mind the occasional dad and kid throwing a ball around, but we direct any larger, pick up games to one of the lower maintenance public-use fields within the city park system."

The 2003 season presented some severe challenges for Tibbetts and his crew. He says, "I was recovering from back surgery in the fall of 2002 when the city contracted for construction of a new concession building that would include four restrooms and an improved irrigation pump room. During demolition of the old concession building all of our existing irrigation wires were severed and the irrigation pump was damaged though we didn't detect the pump damage until late June 2003.

"Construction began in late April of 2003. The contractors poured the slab, established eight-foot block walls, and then abandoned the project. We watched with horror as our field hit each stage of drought stress and no work was taking place on the building. Our soccer field went from April until the middle of July without an operational irrigation system. Without irrigation, I couldn't mark heads in the spring to allow for any aerations or slice seedings. During the entire spring lacrosse season we were limited to spreading seed in the goals and other heavy play areas to limit the wear damage. Then, just as the season was winding down, Mother Nature abandoned us too, and the rains stopped."

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As field conditions worsened, Tibbetts instituted protective measures. "We gradually raised the mowing height of cut to 3 inches and mowed only as needed. Toward the middle of June, we stopped all mowing and banned all equipment and all foot traffic from that field. Though baseball and softball summer programs were fully scheduled on those fields, for player safety and field preservation, we closed the entire complex at the same time. By then, over 60 percent of the soccer field surface had been lost to drought and disease.

"With the city still in dispute with the original contractor in the second week of July, Alan Bickford, Director of Maintenance for the school district, came to our rescue. Even though the building still had no doors or a roof, he directed the district's plumber to run the pipe for our irrigation systems. My brother-in-law, Dana Pickrell of Pickrell Electric, traced and spliced all the severed wires, snaked them into the partially constructed building, and installed a new 48-zone waterproof irrigation panel. With this completed, we had 29 days to get all the fields in the complex ready for the fall double sessions."

To accomplish this, Tibbetts and his summer crew of Mike Didonato and Jeremy Gardiner aggressively attacked the situation. He says, "In 8 days, we double aerated all the fields, followed by double aerating with 3/4-inch tines and slice seed-



## Maintenance Program for Olmsted Soccer Field

### August

- Fertilize entire field according to soil test results at the rate of 1 lb of N per 1,000 square feet
- Shatter tine entire field in two directions
- Apply perennial ryegrass to goalmouths
- Apply Merit insecticide if needed for grubs, following standard IPM procedures
- Apply weed controls as needed following standard IPM procedures
- Lay out soccer field
- Paint field twice a week (Tuesdays and Fridays)
- Mow field with reel mower at height of 1.5 inches
- Irrigate as needed (Usually every other day at 20-minute cycles)

### September

- Fertilize entire field according to soil test results at the rate of 1 lb of N per 1,000 square feet
- Shatter tine goal areas
- Aerate goal area and overseed with perennial ryegrass
- Paint field twice a week (Tuesdays and Fridays)
- Mow field with reel mower at height of 1.5 inches
- Irrigate as needed

### October

- Last fertilization before winter a 1 lb of N per 1,000 square feet
- Paint field twice a week (Tuesdays and Fridays)
- Shatter tine entire field
- Mow field with reel mower at height of 1.5 inches
- Apply bluegrass/perennial ryegrass mix to worn areas

### November

- Mow field with rotary mower due to debris from trees
- Winterize irrigation system
- Make dormant seed application to goalmouths with Bluegrass
- Allow field to go dormant
- Paint fields as needed (depends on playoff game schedules)

### December - January - February - March

- Field dormant - Monitor periodically for adverse conditions, act if necessary

### April

- Take soil test to determine nutritional needs
- Fertilize entire field except goalmouths with 24-5-11 w/Dimension at 1 lb. N per 1,000 square feet
- Apply bluegrass/perennial ryegrass mixture to goalmouths
- Fire up irrigation system
- Mow field with rotary mower at 2-inch height

### May

- Fertilize entire field according to soil test results at the rate of 1 lb of N per 1,000 square feet
- Shatter tine entire field in one direction
- Apply bluegrass/perennial ryegrass mix to worn areas
- Paint field for lacrosse twice a week (Tuesdays and Fridays)
- Mow field with reel mower at height of 1.5 inches
- Irrigate as needed to supplement natural rainfall

### June

- Fertilize entire field according to soil test results at the rate of 1 lb of N per 1,000 square feet
- Aerate entire field
- Apply bluegrass/perennial ryegrass mix to goal areas
- Apply insect control as needed following standard IPM procedures
- Apply weed control as needed following standard IPM procedures
- Paint field for lacrosse twice a week (Tuesdays and Fridays)
- Late June - Post field as closed to use and shut down for the summer
- Mow field with reel mower at height of 1.5 inches
- Irrigate as needed (Usually every other day at 15-minute cycles)

### July

- Fertilize entire field according to soil test results at the rate of 1 lb of N per 1,000 square feet
- Double aerate entire field
- Topdress entire field with 70 tons of compost
- Overseed entire field with bluegrass/perennial ryegrass mix
- Apply insect control as needed following standard IPM procedures
- Apply weed control as needed following standard IPM procedures
- Mow field with reel mower at height of 1.5 inches
- Irrigate as needed (Usually every other day at 20-minute cycles)





ing in two directions with mix of 50 percent bluegrass and 50 percent perennial ryegrass. Then we topdressed with 60 tons of compost and fertilized with a starter fertilizer. We ran the irrigation system twice a day on 20-minute cycles for 2 weeks to bring the field moisture level to field capacity. Once that was established, the irriga-

tion was cut to once a day at a 25-minute cycle. We monitored the irrigation and seed germination and adjusted our cultural practices accordingly. Two weeks before the season, we aerated thin spots and applied a blend of perennial ryegrass varieties. The fields weren't beautiful, but they were safe and playable for the start of the fall season."

The aggressive program didn't stop there. Tibbetts says, "Three weeks after double sessions we went back on the soccer field and aerated the goal mouths three times, removed the cores, spread more of the turf seed mix, and topdressed lightly with washed sand. We then eased into our pre-planned maintenance program, monitoring field conditions daily and making adjustments as needed to bring not just the soccer field, but all the fields back to our standards. At the close of the soccer season in the second week of November, we dormant seeded with bluegrass blend. Though there was virtually no snow cover over winter, and temperatures dropped to 40 below zero in January, nearly 70 percent of the seed germinated and took hold. As soon as we could get onto the soccer field in the spring of 2004, we core aerated, dragged in the plugs, and spread more of the 50/50 bluegrass and perennial ryegrass seed mix. The field was in great shape for the start of the lacrosse season."

While they could have taken a less aggressive and easier approach to the challenging events of 2002-2003, and blamed lesser field quality on the circumstances, they're glad they tackled the problems aggressively. "We learned a lot about the resiliency of the fields and of our crew during this ordeal. Producing the safest and best possible playing surfaces is more than a goal, it needs to be the heart of every sports turf management program," says Tibbetts.

Spreading the word on sports turf management and mentoring others in the process is a large part of what Tibbetts is all about. Just ask Mike Didonato. Tibbetts is also currently filling that role as the STMA Board representative of those in Parks and Recreation positions. **ST**

*Suz Trusty is a partner in Trusty & Associates, a communications and market research firm in Council Bluffs, IA.*

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