

Award winners share softball field tips

Two turf managers who recently won an award from the National Fastpitch Coaches Association share some tips on maintaining infield skins:

West Point

Mike Rubbino, athletic facilities manager for the United States Military Academy, says, "Each day starts with a hand watering, amount is condition dependent. We have an automatic system but use it sparingly to avoid over or under watering. It is important to control the moisture level of your entire playing surface, not just the turf areas. It is not uncommon to water the infield as many as four times a day.

"Next up is the hand work. Scrape and fill the wear spots with extra emphasis on the plate and mound, and don't forget the bullpens. If you use the same level of attention in the bullpens, your pitchers and catchers will notice," Rubbino says. "Hand rake a 4-foot circle around all four bases and pitching mound to avoid over dragging these sensitive areas. To avoid lip buildup hand rake three or four feet around the edge of the infield.

"Scarify lightly while dragging. You can get more aggressive with the scarifier when the field has a day off. Water again lightly as needed and finish up with another light drag or a cocoa mat. Paint the pitching rubber and home plate. Install freshly painted bases and touch up the transition areas between the warning track and the infield with a rake.

"Switch the direction that the field is dragged daily to prevent material from building up at the edges. Maintain the field in the off-season at least twice a week until the ground freezes and get back on it as soon as possible in the spring, which is February at West Point," says Rubbino.

Texas A&M

The Texas A&M softball field was built in 1994 on what was a dairy cow pasture, relates Craig Potts, assistant manager for athletic fields. The heavy clay soil profile does not allow for any internal drainage, which can make things a challenge for the staff during a rain event, says Potts.

The Tifway Bermudagrass turf is over seeded with perennial ryegrass and mowed at 3/4 of an inch every day when possible. Like most baseball and softball fields the main area of concern is the skinned area. The key to having a good skinned area is the right amount of moisture, says Potts. "To get ready for games and practice we will start with a mat drag to smooth out the infield from the practice or game from the day before. After we drag we will sweep out our mound and batter box areas to get ready to clay our holes," he says. "We then start watering the dirt with heavy coats of water until water is standing on the infield.

"We then monitor the skinned area to stay on top of the moisture in the dirt. We will probably water the dirt two more times before lunch," Potts says. "After lunch we will water the dirt again then start applying clay for the mound and plate areas. Once this is finished we will continue to monitor the moisture in the skinned area



Photos courtesy of USMA

and apply water if needed.

"About 30 minutes before the field will be used we nail drag the infield and then apply a finish drag. If more water is needed we will then apply another coat. Our goal is to get as much moisture in the skinned area as possible without allowing the top part of the skinned area to bake up in the sun," Potts says. "We will apply conditioner on an as needed basis; the calcined clay products seem to work best for our skinned area." **ST**