

# Cowboys' practice facility is a star

**C**hris Morrow, field manager for The Dallas Cowboys Football Facility, Irving, TX, won the Sports Turf Managers Association 2004 Field of the Year in the Football, Professional Division.

Morrow took over the "play-calling" duties for the practice turf for one of America's most celebrated franchises in 2002, arriving in Texas to find inadequate equipment and barren, un-overseeded centers on the two main fields. He chose to grow in the areas rather than sodding; the native Texas Black Gumbo soil had developed a hard pan after years of repeated aerification at the same depth that limited percolation, stolon and rhizome development, rooting, and oxygen levels.

Morrow began an aggressive deep-tine aerification program, along with verticutting, to open the soil and promote some lateral growth. Each process was followed by heavy topdressing that aided in physically amending the soil and speeding turf recovery. He says years of mowing above 1 inch and excessive nitrogen lev-

els had created a puffy and grainy Bermudagrass, which started to show one month into the job and forced Morrow to mow in one direction for weeks because of the scalping that came from the weak and grainy conditions. He also tested the soil and began nutritional plans to bring all growth elements into balance. The test also helped determine the most compatible topdressing sand for the fields.

Interestingly, though both fields were built at the same time with the same materials, Morrow found they were two different animals, so he had to get creative with his fertility programs.

## Irrigation

Morrow found valve-in-heads at the 20's, 50's and goalposts, and a single row of 1-inch heads down the center. The Texas heat and winds blew water everywhere resulting in poor coverage, so he had to find a way to cool the hot spots. He used ice to cool and water simultaneously, and constantly used hoses, up to 200 feet long running from spigots to movable impact heads. In spring 2003, he installed quick couplers to quell the problem.

That winter Morrow pursued a comprehensive equipment deal. Through contacts and face-to-face negotiations with a national supplier and its local distributor, Morrow obtained the equipment necessary to professionally groom his fields.

In his second season he initiated a foliar fertility program to better meet plant nutritional needs, and added groomers to his mowers to address the grain issue. Morrow also added the Dri-Ject process to his program, which allowed him to get more sand into the soil profile for better drainage and nutrient movement. He also lowered his mowing height of cut to promote a tighter playing surface.

In summer 2003, a tension structure was built over the artificial surface at the Cowboy complex which created another problem. Heavy rains dump hundreds of gallons of water on one side of one natural turf field. Aerifying and water penetrants have eased the problem, but with artificial field covered, Morrow lost his sled field and had to create a "push up" sled area from scratch, adding another acre of managed to turf to maintain.







The fields are out of play only in January and February. Off-season workouts begin in March and mini-camps run from April through June. Morrow has developed a good working relationship with the team's strength coach. "He needs the fields to strengthen the players and he understands that I need to strengthen the fields," he says.

Morrow is a one-man operation, which means there's no time to do something over if it's not done correctly. In a letter to the STMA Awards Committee, Dallas owner and general manager Jerry Jones wrote: "Chris has done an outstanding job getting our fields in top condition. I believe they are some of the best in professional sports, and despite the daily wear and tear, the practice surfaces are always ready for the next assignment we throw at them. I know our players and coaches respect the job Chris does with getting our fields in this condition. It is of vital importance that they know they can trust the surfaces on which they are working." **ST**

## Dallas Cowboy Practice Facility Maintenance Schedule

January-February: Field at rest.

March: Mowing/foliar feeding as needed.

April: Mowing 3-5 times/week. Foliar feeding continues.

May: As temperatures start to rise, mowing height is lowered to start stressing overseed. Mow 6 times a week. Aerification, verticutting, and grooming used to initiate Bermudagrass growth. Topdressing after each process. Foliar feeding continues.

June-July: Same as in May, with the addition of KNO<sub>3</sub> or CaNO<sub>3</sub>. Increase fertilization as required.

August: As in June and July, with painting added as team returns from camp.

September: As August with foliar adjustment as needed.

October: As September, with overseeding late in the month.

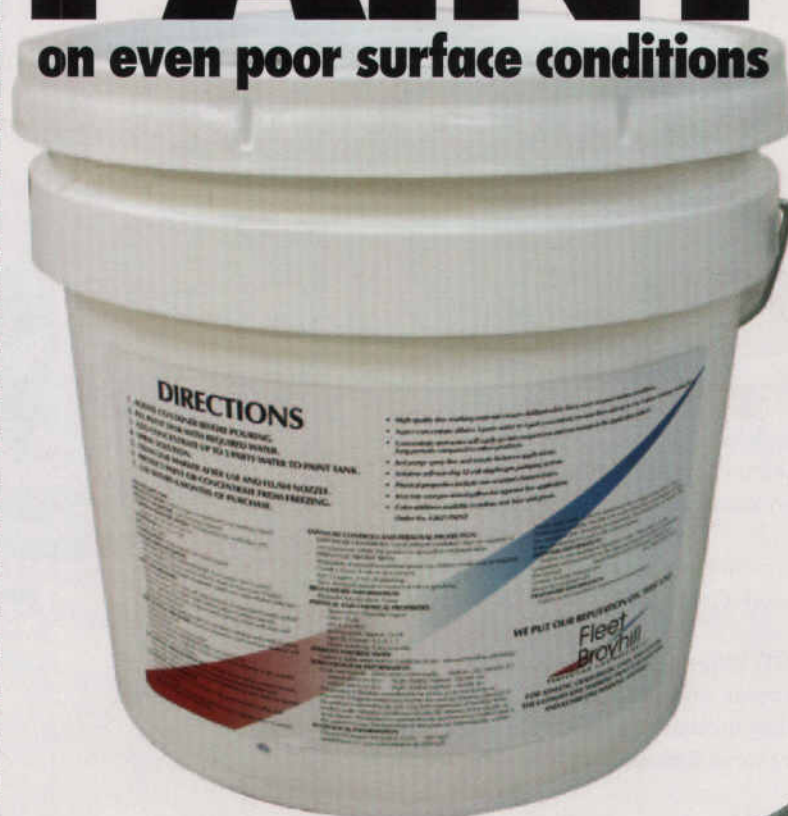
November: Mowing down to 5 times/week. Pre-germination of rye seed to fill in high traffic areas.

December: Same as November.

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