

Dirt on dirt

BY ERIC SCHRODER

Player safety is the number one goal when choosing and using your infield mix, whether it's providing a good base in Cincinnati for Sean Casey's knees, true hops for a prized Class A shortstop in northeast Ohio, or your field.

Greg Elliott of the Lake County Captains and Doug Gallant of the Cincinnati Reds discussed soil compositions and infield skin maintenance at last December's Ohio Turfgrass Conference in Columbus. Here's a recap of their presentations:



"You must know what you have," Elliott said, "so get a professional soil test. Once you know what you have you can determine what needs done with what materials." His Eastlake Ballpark, 16 miles northeast of Cleveland, and winner of consecutive Sally League Field of the Year awards, features a sandy clay/loam mixture: 58% sand, 22% silt, 20% clay.

Gallant reported that Great American Ball Park infield soil mixture is 71% sand, 13% silt, 16% clay, with

10% of the volume including Turface soil conditioner that's blended at the plant. Don't till your soil amendment too deep, like 8 or 10 inches, because it won't do you any good," said Gallant.

"Soil conditioners can help level your surface and better manage moisture, which limits rainouts and delays," Elliott said. "It's extremely important to use one of these products. This year we are going with Quantum Turf, a new red-clay product from Moltan."

Calcined clay products are inorganic amendments formed by expanding clay at high temperatures (calcining). MuleMix, Turface, Klawog, and Pro's Choice among others all manufacture calcined clay products. Diamond Pro makes a vitrified clay product, which reduces absorption rates and allows water to pass through to the base soil.

"We use 10-15 bags of conditioner every four days. We like to keep 1 to 2 tons in the top 3 inches. Pro League Red (Turf) has smaller particles that Gallant said is better for passing water. The vitrified Diamond Pro product "acts as a barrier between infield clay and the players, holds moisture, and helps drainage."

"Without these products the surface would be more sticky, and less playable," Gallant said. He added that to topdress in Cincinnati he uses a 50/50 mix of Turface and Diamond Pro products (the products are not mixed nor spread together however).



Maintenance

Gallant said his routine infield skin maintenance includes a first-thing-in-the-morning "tickle" which he describes as "light scratching." Then he comes in with a groomer, followed by a drag mat (from Beacon Athletic, about (continued on page 18)



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(continued from page 11) \$100). "A broom can work better than the cocoa mats especially during dry conditions," Gallant said.

"We also like the stiff, waffle mats, which have a beam to fill empty spots and level high spots," he said. "When you're dragging, go slow. Pick up the drag at different points on the infield to disperse loose material. Then rake parallel with your grass edges. I also recommend using bases with plugs that you can drag right over.

"Keep your top 1/4 inch loose, especially if you can't water. Your players will be able to tell the difference," Gallant said. "One other thing: if you edge and keep your grass/dirt interfaces clean, it can go a long way toward making your field look better."

"Controlling your moisture levels is the most important thing," Elliott added. "Each manager has to learn what works for his or her field. You can't control soil composition always, but you do control time for repairs and maintenance."

For managing lips, Gallant said use a garden hose to blow product back into the dirt, then rake the grass up. Ask coaches and players to rake out their lips a few times a week.

Water management

"We hand water six to ten times a day depending on conditions," said Elliott. "Water management is the key to success while dealing with any soil. Over watering can result in muddy, wet conditions, potentially causing an injury. Under-watering can create cement like conditions resulting in injury.

We use hoses to hand water the skin while the team is in town and skin heads while they are gone. The skin heads allow us the freedom to keep the moisture consistent so we are not forced to over water before the team returns."

"Water is everything to dirt; your soil needs it as much as your turf," Gallant said. "At Great American, during a game day, we're puddling the infield every hour until about 2 PM, when we start backing off watering."

Gallant bought skin tarps for his infield dirt use only, which he said were especially useful during Reds' road trips. "We puddle the infield, put the tarp on, and then we don't have to water it when the team's out of town," he said. Gallant says it cost \$4,000 for his customized tarps, but he thinks most managers would be able to use an old tarp and cut to fit their fields.

"If the infield dirt sticks to my foot, it's too wet to work," Gallant said. Once it's ready, gently work your dirt in one direction to open some air channels, Gallant recommended. Use drying agents for puddles (put the agent right in the puddle and then scrap it out, it's reusable) because it changes your soil profile, he said.

To prevent having to do more work than necessary, Gallant recommended daily maintenance, minimizing wind and water erosion, monitoring foot and vehicle traffic, and keep all mechanical dragging at least 12 to 18 inches from grass edges. **ST**

Eric Schroder is editor of SPORTSTURF.

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