

BY KARI ALLEN

Trials and tribulations in Triple A

Your first year at a new facility is always a learning year, becoming familiar with the conditions and challenges unique to that facility. This was the case for me as the 2004 season was my first working for the Buffalo Bisons at Dunn Tire Park.

Buffalo is notorious for its bad weather. Having grown up in West Michigan, I haven't been shocked by any of the weather I have encountered here. That does not mean the weather has been easy for me to work with. One of the challenges of working in a northern climate is that there always seems to be a gamble on when the weather is going to break. Before the season started, we had to break up piles of snow to help it melt on the parts of the field that got the least amount of sun. We ended up having to remove a lot of water and ice from the infield skin as well. The parts of the field that were under snow cover the longest suffered a bit of snow mold damage, but quickly grew out of it once the grass came out of dormancy.

Because there was no turf manager here from the end of the 2003 season until I started in January 2004, when the field was under snow, I had a few more tasks to tackle in the spring than I normally would.

I prefer to get the field as perfect as possible in the fall, since you never really know what kind of spring and how much time you'll have to prepare the field for the season. A couple of the things I had to do were build a game mound and pull a ton of weeds. The mound had been removed the previous fall for one high school football game. Once I was able to get enough clay, that project took about a day with a vibratory tamp.

The more tedious and time-consuming task was removing weeds from the infield skin and the warning track. A lot of weeds, mostly annual bluegrass, had crept from the edges to about six inches or more in.

We got the field dry enough and playable for our home opener and soon realized that we had only seen the beginning of a season of wet weather. And those of us



with drainage problems learned quite a bit about our fields! We started the season with a field tarp that had very leaky seams. We would remove the tarp to find a muddy mess underneath, sometimes with standing puddles.

To be honest, we probably would have been better off leaving the field uncovered during this time. On game days following a rain, we would end up spending the entire day working on the skin. We did start placing buckets upside down underneath the worst seams to try and prevent water from sitting there and leaking through. That seemed to help some, but it was not a solution.

We finally purchased a new field tarp and had a pretty heavy rain, about 2.5 inches overnight, the first time we used it. Little did we know, our outfield drainage nightmares were just beginning to surface. The sand slit/Cambridge Bypass drainage system was installed in this field in the early 1990's. Those sand slits are still in tact and drain well. However, we have a 2-3 inch layer of organic matter that has formed throughout the field, which makes it very difficult for water to get to the sand slits and drain. After having some soil analyses performed, we

learned that the field can be expected to drain about 0.10 inch per day. Not good.

Fortunately, the field seemed to drain better than that in most areas. There are some low spots in the field, which of course, are the areas that gave us most trouble. When the water couldn't penetrate the organic layer quickly, it would run off to the low areas and sit there. Now, we started pumping water as much as possible, using a super sopper once no more could be pumped, and finally and only if absolutely necessary to get the game in, we'd spread some calcined clay in the worst areas to help absorb the water. I don't like using calcined clay in the grass, but sometimes we just had to.

I would have liked to have been able to aerate the field more often. I averaged about once every five or six weeks. We used a vertidrain mostly since we own it. I did not want to rent other equipment and then not be able to use it do to weather or other field use. Rainy weather and the extra events made sticking to my field maintenance schedule challenging enough.

Wind woes

The wind is another weather issue I faced. We actually had a game in April postponed due to wind. The winds were 20-30 mph, with gusts of 45-55 mph. Our stadium is located in a "wind tunnel" downtown, so the wind speed here may have been slightly higher.

The game was postponed because we had the tarp on the field due to rain the night before and thunderstorms were still in the forecast; we did not think we could safely remove the tarp, and it was possible we'd have to try and put it back on.

It was so windy, we had all of our sandbags down, stakes in all of the tarp's grommets, all of our equipment parked on the tarp, and 50-lb. bags of infield conditioner and calcined clay wrapped in garbage bags to keep the tarp down. The hood of our tractor blew off, and the rain we got blew off of the tarp as quickly as it fell on it. That was the worst of the wind, but weaker winds still caused problems. My big issue with the wind was its effect on blowing material into edges and everywhere else. We added 50 tons of warning track material and it still was low. Our engineers tell me that they see tons of warning track material on the roof of the stadium when they go up there. I've watched it blow around but never realized it got that high.

One morning after a windy evening, I came to work and found absolutely all of our infield material blown into the infield grass. The pile of material in the grass was an inch or two high nearest the edge, and more material could be seen as far as a couple of feet into the grass. Two days later, when the winds finally died down, I took our hose and blasted the edge to get that material out of the grass and back onto the skin. When it was windy on or near game days, I tried to keep the skin watered to help prevent the material from blowing around.

After every game, I have someone take a rake or broom around all of

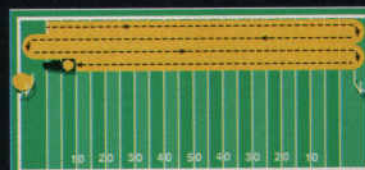
the edges to bring any clay material back onto the skin. When the team is gone for a while and there are no other events scheduled, I blow out the edges with the hose.

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There were only a couple of people I trusted to do this, since if you're not careful, you can easily blast away the infield clay, creating holes along the edge, or you could also end up building a hump in the clay or another lip.

The field is a potpourri of Kentucky Bluegrass, Perennial Ryegrass, and Annual Bluegrass. It's ugly, to say the least. Because there is such a horrific amount of annual bluegrass throughout the field, and we keep talking about replacing the field, I have just been managing the grass, rather than trying to suppress it at all. The field was last resodded in the early 1990's. During the season, I kept both the infield and outfield mowed at 1.25 inches, except for extra, non-baseball events. For those extra events, I preferred to keep the grass a little longer to help it withstand the beating it was about to receive.

I fertilize with about 0.5lb N per thousand square feet each month. My first application in March and dormant application in November are closer to one pound nitrogen per thousand. Throughout the season, I use fertilizers that contain mostly slow release nitrogen with some quick release. The fertilizer I used most often had a fair amount of potassium in it as well to help withstand all of the traffic put on it with extra events.

I use a preventative fungicide program. In July, we had a little brown patch on the infield/where tarp lays, but one fungicide application, at the preventative rate, no less, took care of that. As I mentioned, we also had some snow mold in March, but we



raked it up, fertilized, and it filled in quickly with annual bluegrass. Except for the two zones under the tarp, I didn't use the irrigation much at all this season, a result of above normal rainfall and less than adequate field drainage. I think I watered the field more in September alone than in the rest of the season combined.

Special event hassles

Like many turf managers, I have to accept numerous non-baseball events taking place on my field. Many of us now have to deal with concerts, company softball games, campouts, wrestling events, fire trucks, helicopters, etc. In West Michigan, it was cow races; Peoria turned their field

into a car lot for four days, and Buffalo has the National Chicken Wing Festival.

I don't know how many times I asked myself this summer if I was working for a parks department again or a professional baseball team. The Wing Fest is a 3-day event over Labor Day weekend. Food tents, merchandise tents, demonstration tents, a stage, Navy recruiters, TV station tables, the newspaper table, and a couple of inflatables lined the entire perimeter of the outfield. Restaurants come from as far as Texas and Alabama with their signature sauces. Most of these tents are half on the grass and half on the warning track. The track had to remain clear for utility vehicles to have access to the tents, which I found very interesting since the only people consistently using the track were the grounds crew.

We had forty or fifty trash cans spaced throughout the field, but when you get

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that many people in a space, you're going to have chicken bones, trash, and more chicken bones all over the place. Some of the hot sauces turned the grass black and killed it.

The worst was damage from foot traffic. We had Enkamat down at the field entrance, where the food ticket line was, and by all of the tents. I kept saying that the ground looked like county fairgrounds rather than a professional baseball field. After everything was cleaned up, I watered the field, just let it rest for a day (I felt bad walking on the poor thing), and fertilized it. I threw some seed down in the worst areas as well. It did look a lot better two days later, even though it still looked horrible to me. Many of the dead spots are still filling in quite nicely with annual bluegrass.

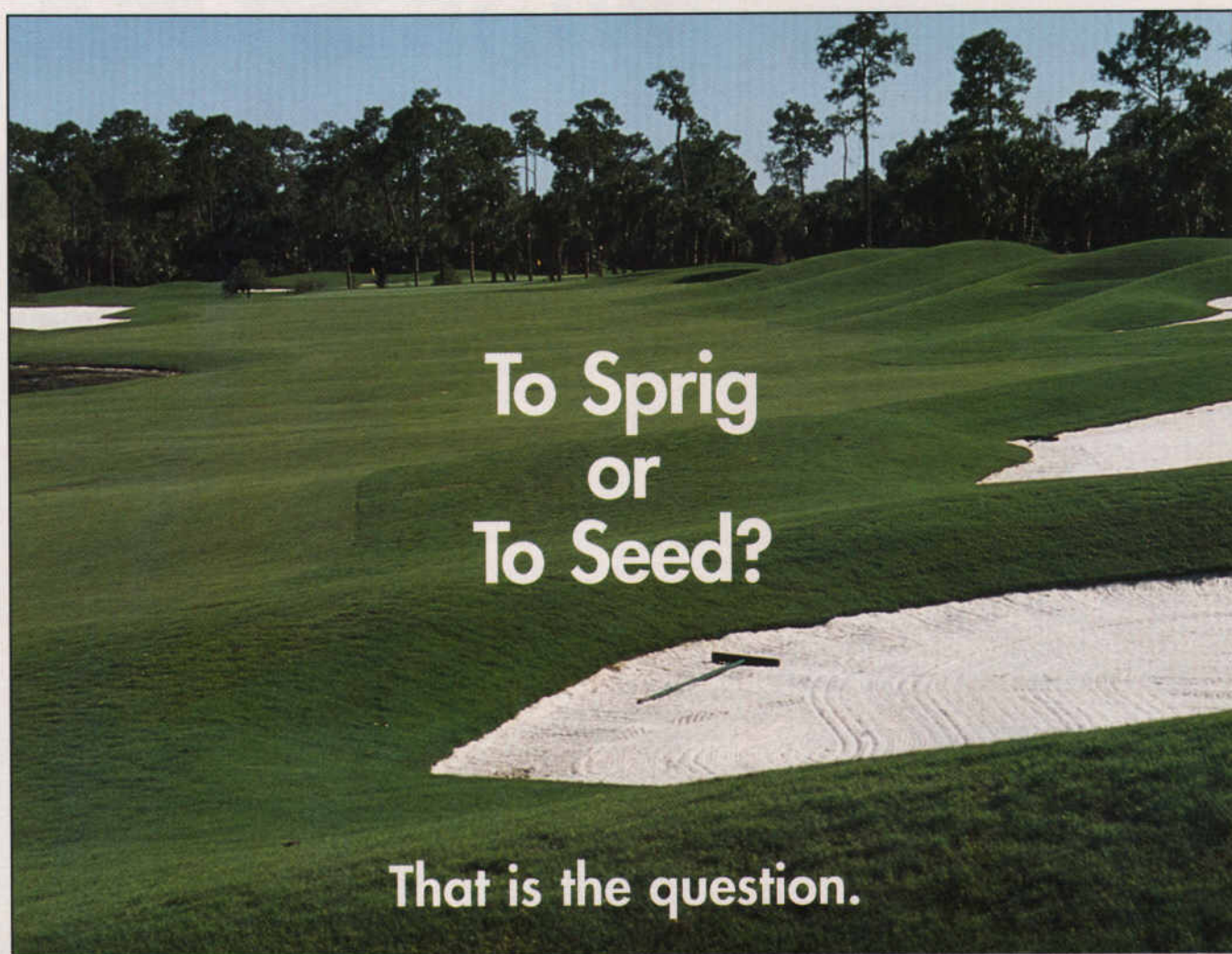
A drum and bugle corps competition was another event I didn't care for. Having been in marching band, I use to love drum corps. I'm not so sure about that anymore, unless maybe they start competing in parking lots. Now, the chicken wing festival had me frustrated; this event made me downright angry. One group was supposed to practice for a couple of hours before the competition. They took the field earlier than they said they were going to, so we assumed they'd be done early. Nope. They ended up practicing for eight hours. The same corps trampled through the same formations for eight long hours.

We had to paint a college football field for them, using the right field foul line as a sideline. They were just going to march over the mound. We had removed all of the topdressing material from the infield skin before painting the field. The group that was practicing had worked up so much of the clay, you would never have known that any material had been removed.

Then, while fixing their lines in the dirt the first time, we noticed random people associated with these bands repainting lines in the grass! It was about ten against two, so I was losing that battle, though I never backed down. The contact for the event was even trying to help me, but he had his own issues that were out of control. I can only imagine what I would have been like had it not been turf paint they were using. Then, after my confrontation about the paint, another guy actually came up to me and asked me to remove the pitchers mound. Unbelievable.

Actually I was less stressed out about work this year than I have been in the past. All of these extra events still bother me, but I'm more laid back about them. I can whine about things, but when I stop and

think about it, I know there's always someone in a lot worse situation than mine. Plus, I have more confidence in myself and my crew, a pretty good budget, and my supervisors actually understand that some of the events they plan for the field are going to do some damage and that I am not a miracle worker. And, of course, watching your boys win a championship helps in keeping life upbeat! **ST**
Kari Allen is head groundskeeper at Dunn Tire Park, Buffalo, NY.



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