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green science

# Cures for the "high traffic, low budget" blues

BY DOUGLAS FIELDING

**W**hen I read articles about the difficulties expressed by people maintaining fields that have 70 games a year or people stressing over 1/4"-inch of sand topdressing every two weeks I just shake my head. Most of the fields our group, Association of Sports Field Users (ASFU), maintains handle 470-750 practices and games per year, mostly for soccer, lacrosse, and rugby.

We are generally brought in to deal with fields around San Francisco Bay after user groups have given up on getting local authorities or school districts to cut the grass more than once every 2 weeks or turn on the sprinklers occasionally. By the time we see a field it is not uncommon that someone had been injured due to its condition.

Once I was talking with a parks director and six of her maintenance staff. The subject was fertilizer and she turned to her crew chief and asked, "What type of fertilizer do we use?" And he responded in all seriousness, "Oh we don't use fertilizer, it makes the grass grow."

The primary maintenance issue in the public sector is a lack of budget and overuse, coupled with the belief that it is impossible to have any impact on field use. But it doesn't have to be this way.

Grass isn't a policy it's a plant. We can bring a dirt patch field back to playing condition in 10 weeks if there is NO traffic. User groups and politicians have to accept a 10-week maintenance shutdown (or restricted use as outlined below) during a growing season (winter doesn't count) if they want decent fields. If they aren't willing to do this then they shouldn't complain about the quality of the fields.

Our organization is a non-profit coalition of sports field users, everything from youth soccer to women's rugby. We represent more than 17,000 players. We believe when you actually explain the maintenance reality to field user groups a majority will choose less playing time on better-maintained fields rather than more playing time on poorly maintained fields.

Field maintenance in a public sector environment requires speed and attention to detail. The minute the users' season ends, start your 10-week shutdown. If you wait, you lose time from your "growing season" and are headed toward failure. If you can't produce a decent field, why should the field users support your work?

Speed, speed, speed. Seven days before the season is over (end of November in the fall and mid June for spring) we slit seed the fields with perennial rye. We use perennial rye because it moves quickest

from seed to top growth. We can't afford the luxury of grasses like Kentucky Blue, which take more time to establish. We don't care that the players are cleating up our newly seeded field because we don't yet have germination.

The day after the season is over we put about 30 yards of organic topdressing on every field, working morning to night. As soon as this is done, we put about 400 pounds of a high phosphorus (e.g. 18-24-12) product down to give the roots of the seedlings some help. Then we aerate every field. On our most heavily trafficked fields, we have seeded, topdressed, filled depressions, fertilized and aerated them within 3 days of season's end. And thanks to the early jump on slit seeding we are getting germination as the aerator is being taken off the field.

Once our maintenance is done all our fields have "Field Closed" signs on highway construction barriers in the middle of the field. Some local governments consider playing on a closed field to be destruction of public property with fines for abusing organizations and players. A few fines here and there and I can honestly say that playing on a closed field is not a major problem. But we also regularly patrol the fields to kick off the occasional transgressor. If it rained the night before but it's a sunny day, look for them.

Next we start working on problem areas. Almost every field we deal with relies on sheet drainage and the few sand based fields we work on have had so many maintenance people with so many different ideas over the years that the fields themselves are now really soil-based fields with a sand subgrade.

We locate problem areas by running the sprinkler system and checking all heads to check rotation and throw. Water ponds in depressed areas. We use field paint to circle the mini pond or the dry spot. We then put a flag in the center of the area with an analysis of the problem, i.e., "sprinkler riser too low" or "area about 1" below grade."

If we have problems we can't fix or see something we don't know about, we call Ali Harivandi, our local turfgrass specialist with the University of California Cooperative Extension. Ali has a network of people with specific expertise, for example a rep from the local water district, who does free evaluation of irrigation systems. Helpful people like these most likely exist in your community.

About 7 days after the season is over, we have completed both our general and our spot specific maintenance. Then we water once during the evening and then midday to keep the seeds and seedlings moist. Over the next four weeks we will stop by the field almost every day, adjusting and fine-tuning the water. After four weeks the grass is up and can take a little watering abuse.

During the summer shutdown we allow our grass

to grow to about 4 inches tall. Then about four weeks before the season starts we gradually bring down the height of the cut to 1 1/2 inches, our playing height. In mid-August, we apply a slow release fertilizer (22-5-8) that will carry us through the fall season.

Once the season starts, we line the field using a pressurized paint liner (rather than aerosol cans or lime), which we find cost effective if we are lining more than two fields in one day. Just this year we have experimented with using about a tablespoon of growth regulator per five gallons of paint on our first lining. We have found that this helps us hold our lines and reduces labor cost on future linings. However, we only use this on fields that are so tight that we don't have a lot of options for "moving" the field. In most instances, we prefer to "move" the high traffic areas every six weeks by relining the field to alter the location of these high traffic areas. No matter which form of lining we use, it is coupled with stopping by our fields during the first week of the season to educate users about not working teams in high traffic areas for regular practice.

During the season we fill holes, repair and adjust sprinklers, however, we have found that "in season" maintenance work aimed at growing grass (like over seeding), other than aerating, is generally pretty ineffective as anything we do is torn up by the players in a few days. We also work with user groups to have them educate their coaches about moving drills around so that they save the high traffic areas for games. We encourage that fixed or heavy goals be removed and replaced by lightweight movable goals.

If we aren't on the shutdown approach, we are on the "no cleated sports other than softball/baseball" from March 1 to June 15. In this case the field has no shut down period but we do the slit seeding and topdressing 2 weeks before the baseball season opens. We put out signs that say "No Rugby, Soccer, Lacrosse or Ultimate." The field is a little thin at the start of the season but it only takes a few weeks and the field looks great. Because baseball/softball is a holiday for our fields, by the middle of June, the fields are in great shape for the soccer season, which starts in mid August or early September.

### Costs

With labor rates at about \$20 per hour it costs us about \$12,000 per year to maintain a field (excluding the cost of water which runs about \$5,000 per year). Our maintenance includes, mowing once or twice a week, aerating and fertilizing about four times a year, topdressing twice a year, removing all trash a couple of times a week and field prep every week (including lining). We are also on the field about two or three times a week adjusting water and checking for problems. But the actual cost of maintaining a playing field versus any other public grass area is significantly less than \$12,000 because every public grass area needs mowing, irrigation, etc. We figure the additional costs for an athletic field (compared to just public grass area) is only about \$6,000 per year.

There are two things that set our maintenance approach apart. First, is that people who work on our fields have total responsibility for the quality of the playing surface. If the sprinklers are broken, or the grass is too long, or there is a gopher hole, there is a single individual who has 100% responsibility. They may need to call in a sprinkler mechanic, but if the field isn't in good shape, it's their problem.

Second is speed and attention to detail. We visit the fields every few days adjusting the water, looking for problems, etc. And the problems are fixed immediately. All of this is doable in most management programs; it just isn't done in most localities.

As for funding we often derive our maintenance revenue from field fees. On the fields we totally manage we charge youth teams about \$10 per hour and adult teams \$25 per hour. The basis for field fees is that athletic fields require a higher level of service than do other publicly maintained spaces (median strips, general park areas, etc.). At the above rates, two hours on one of our fields costs a youth player about \$.67 and an adult player \$1.66. Our users have no problem paying these fees, provided they get a decent field in return. **ST**

*Doug Fielding is Chairperson of ASFU, a non-profit group that maintains and develops playing fields and represents the interests of players to governmental agencies. He can be reached at [doug.fielding@companion-group.com](mailto:doug.fielding@companion-group.com).*

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