

# 25 lessons learned in 25 years with STMA

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**T**he Sports Turf Managers Association (STMA) is celebrating its 25th anniversary in 2006 and so I decided to reflect upon the most important lesson that I learned each year. But that noble thought faded as I realized how many times I've made the same mistake before finally getting it right. As I write this, it is the season to reflect upon what we have learned and where we are going. In no particular order, here are a few of my 25 lessons learned that you will be reading about as we commemorate the 25th anniversary of STMA. Sometimes you are the teacher and sometimes you are the student; see if you can find yourself in these lessons.

**Lesson #1:** The greatest field-related quote I ever heard, "**Speed is in the player not the field**", came from a football strength training coach while he was giving his opinion to a field design company during a debate on the anticipated mowing height for his field. The conversation ended immediately and over the years the turf manager and the coach together made the mowing height decisions based on what was needed to make the best playing surface. In this case their mowing height ranged from 1.25 to 1.5 inches. I have used the quote many times to dispel the debate concerning field speed.

**Lesson #2:** The greatest move I ever saw on a field was made by a sports turf manager on a high school administrator who had cut the subsurface drainage out of his field construction plans to save some money.

**The price of the lesson was a new pair of shoes.**

It had just rained and like most administrators he was in a hurry so we bolted straight for the center of the field with him at my side as we again discussed the price of subsurface drain lines. By the time we made it to the 50-yard line I could feel him lagging back. The cost of grading and sand was \$45,000, the cost of the missing drain lines was \$5,000, and the cost of a new pair of shiny black shoes \$125; watching the administrator finally getting the point as he tiptoed through the mud with his pants hiked up, priceless.

What was even more priceless was the sheepish grin sported by the sports turf manager while he cleaned those ruined shoes back in the shop and listened to the administrator's suggestion that he get some pricing to install drains in the field.

**Lesson #3:** I'm often asked if a certain product actually works or not. **My best advice is to become your own researcher.** Simply placing a 4 x 8-foot tarp or sheet of plywood on the ground before treating the field with the product in question will give you a realistic control for comparison.

**Lesson #4: Big roll sod** has been the most impressive development that I have experienced in athletic field construction and renovation. It allows for fewer seams, faster grow-in, reduced cost, and thick cut ready-to-play sod when needed. How did we ever survive without it? Please contact me if you know whom to credit for this invention and its historical use in the sports turf industry.

**Lesson # 5:** For years I listened to many specialists discourage the use of sand to improve athletic fields because **mixing sand and soil will make concrete.** The reality is that many fields have been improved by incorporating medium to coarse sand into the field through topdressing/aerification or tillage. The porosity benefits from sand incorporation are not realized until the final soil mixture contains at least 75% sand on a weight basis. Do you know the size and amount of sand in your field? Addition of coarse compost can also greatly improve fields by reducing compaction and improving moisture conditions.

Give freely of the things you learn because that is what STMA is all about. Borrow as many good ideas as you can from others because it is the greatest form of flattery, especially when you give them credit.

Don't be afraid to share your mistakes in front of others because we learn mostly by trial and error and success is just a series of mistakes that have been tweaked along the way.

In this season of reflections and resolutions I am most thankful for those professional and personal lessons that you have gifted me in 25 years with STMA. Whether you are just getting started in the sports turf business or have been involved in it for a while, try this exercise. In your long or short career, think about five people who are important to your profession. Ask those five people if they are STMA members or if their list would include an STMA member. You will be surprised how important STMA members are to each other and to potential members. STMA is headed in the right direction and you should be a member of the organization that already serves you in many ways. ■

