

Tarp tips: start with communication

By Marcus Dean

Tarpping can preserve the playing conditions of your field. If a tarp is put on properly it will prevent excess water from getting on your dirt and causing playability issues. Groundskeepers at all levels watch the Weather Channel and local stations and check internet sites, as well as use computerized weather systems trying to get an edge on Mother Nature. By using all the tools available, we can decide how much water our infield can take and at what moment we need to roll out the tarp to preserve playability.

In the past we've seen TV "highlights" of grounds crews battling with tarps. What fans don't understand is that once a game starts, everything is in the hands of the umpires, who can call for the tarp when THEY think it is needed. If the umps wait too long, they make it very

difficult for the crew to get the field ready after a rain delay or even the next game. These umpires have caused some of our colleagues to come under unwarranted criticism.

To help avoid this problem, if you know weather is going to be an issue for an upcoming game, **communicate** with every party involved in the tarping process (umpires, coaches, front office staff, and game workers) to ensure they know what is at stake with your field. Tarping is a lot easier when all parties involved know what the current situation is, what weather is coming, and what the playability consequences are if your dirt gets too much water.

Generally all levels of turf managers rely on their respective teams and any one else with a pulse to pull their tarps. Minor league managers rely on the front office staff to help pull tarp. If you don't have a willing

Dean stores his tarps on 20-foot, double-walled plastic drainage drums with 40-inch diameters.



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front office, sooner or later it will come back to bite you. At most colleges, the team puts the tarp on and reports, at the turf manager's discretion, for the removal or dumping of the tarp.

Of course the major leagues are a whole different situation. Most turf managers at that level have a staff of up to 30 on call for just the tarp. If there is a certain % of rain in the forecast, this crew knows to report to work. Some teams have full-time positions for a "tarp coordinator," the job being to make sure there are enough people there when the tarp is called for.

Just like caring for an infield, everyone has a different set up when it comes to tarping. There is not a right or wrong way to tarp, as long as we can preserve the playability of the skin we have tarped in the right way.

University of Kentucky

Tarping at the University of Kentucky is a full time job. We tarp both baseball and softball fields year-round. Most of our tarping occurs between September and May (pretty much



Bungee cords connected to the dugout benches help hold down the softball tarp at Kentucky.



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Dean's TARP TIPS

Use sand buckets instead of sand-bags. The buckets are easier to carry, stack, will not hold water, and will last longer. We use empty paint buckets and fill them about 1/3 with sand.

Make sure your tarp's seams run in the same direction as you are pulling, e.g., if you pull your tarp north and south, your seams should run north and south. Having your seams run perpendicular to the direction you pull your tarp may cause them to stretch and eventually leak.

Skin tarps allow some water to get on the edge of your dirt. They will keep the majority of your dirt dry but are not as effective as a full tarp. These wet spots are right where the shortstop and second baseman play, which raises a safety issue.

If you use players to help you pull the tarp, make sure they don't have cleats on (plastic or metal). The metal spikes will cut right through the tarp, and plastic cleats potentially can cause damage as well.

If the wind is blowing, you will need more people to pull the tarp. Do not hold on to the tarp if it starts to "blow up." It is not worth risking personal injury over a tarp.

When buying a tarp, I highly recommend getting one with straps. It is a lot easier to pull.

If you cannot afford a new tarp, shop around to see if someone in your area has one for sale. Do your homework though to make sure you are not inheriting someone else's problems. Buyer beware!

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Sand buckets are easier to carry, stack, will not hold water, and will last longer than sandbags.

the whole academic calendar). We tarp in the fall for fall practice, individual workouts, and camps; winter tarps in order to keep the field ready for practice in January; spring tarps are for in season games and practices; and summer tarps are for camps and high school games.

With both facilities in mind, we average pulling at least 150 tarps per year. All this tarping has its advantages; yes, that's right **ADVANTAGES!** We have developed great relationships with our two head coaches, John Cohen and Eileen Schmidt. Without their cooperation, all this tarping would not be possible. We can always count on a couple players and coaches from the baseball team to help pull off the tarp. If the softball team is practicing or playing, putting the tarp on is not a problem.

Our baseball tarp is a Covermaster 170 x 170-foot, 7-ounce tarp with straps. We store it behind the third base cut out. Without water, we can pull our tarp with four guys. With water we want as many people as we can get. Our tarp is folded three times using the half method (fold it over

in half once, then fold in half twice and finally fold in half a third time). We then roll it on a 20-foot, double-walled plastic drainage drum that has a 40-inch diameter. We hold our tarp down with 12-inch, T-handled spikes that our mechanic welded. He cuts one 12-inch section in half to get two handles, then welds a half spike on top of a whole spike.

We have a skin tarp for our dirt as well. The skin tarp covers the entire infield dirt as well as baselines, in four overlapping sections. We hold the skin tarp down with sand buckets. This tarp is used in December and January.

Our softball tarp is a 120 x 120-foot, 7-ounce Covermaster with straps. We have pulled that tarp, dry, with as few as three guys. Our softball coach requested that we fold this tarp accordion style. The tarp rolled up on the same size drum and stored behind the first base cut out. We hold the tarp down with 12-inch T handled spikes, sand buckets, and bungee straps attached to the benches.



12-inch, T-handled spikes.

We have a full infield of dirt, no dirt in front of the dugouts, with the grass starting along the back lip. The spikes are used in the grass, the sand buckets are used along our backstop, and bungee cords connected to the benches in the dugouts. The skin tarp is held down with sand buckets. We use the skin tarp when the skin will be covered for long periods of time, which allows us to keep the dirt dry while not putting any pressure on our grass.

Here is how some other turf managers work with tarps:

Ray Sayre, Greenville Drive

Our tarp is 170 x 170-feet and we use an accordion fold that allows us to be quick and efficient when pulling the tarp. We roll it up on a 50-foot tube and store it just beyond the dugout on the third base side. This reduces the distance we need to pull the tarp, which is important when it is already raining.

During a typical day we will put the tarp on with 4-6 people but for games our tarp

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crew is 12-16 people. Once the tarp is on the field we use 10-inch tarp stakes to hold it in place. When winds pick up we also use our larger equipment on the corners and edges to help hold it down. Two large turf fans are used for air circulation under the tarp. This air will create a tarp bubble that can reduce water on the tarp and help minimize disease pressure on the covered grass areas.

Here in South Carolina we average about 45 tarp pulls each year. A lot of these are due to the afternoon showers we receive almost daily. We watch the weather constantly to follow weather patterns which together with our rain percentages form the basis of our tarp decisions. Usually a rain chance of 40% and higher will cause us to put the tarp on. I will not gamble with the weather; I have tried to out-smart Mother Nature in the past and it is not worth it. It is much easier to put the tarp away dry than it is to risk canceling a game and losing that revenue!

Chris Pearl, Lexington Legends

Our tarp is located just past the umpire's cutout on the first base side. It is rolled up on a 28-inch diameter, double walled plastic drainage pipe. I have been part of 4-man crew to put it on. We accordion style fold using three folds. I use two blowers that came from the old inflatable at our kid's zone in the stadium. They are squirrel cage type blowers, which really produce a lot of air. The blowers are located at each coaching box and have an extension cord running to the dugout for power. I anchor my tarp with 12-inch nails put in the handles, twisted a few times, and set at an angle. I use the front office staff to help me pull the tarp when needed.

Marcus Dean is the assistant sportsturf manager for the University of Kentucky. ■