

Practice doesn't always make perfect

BY DR. DAVID MINNER
Professor, Iowa State University

Questions? Send them to David Minner at Iowa State University, 106 Horticulture Hall, Ames, IA 50011 or email dminner@iastate.edu.

Or, send your question to Grady Miller at North Carolina State University, Box 7620, Raleigh, NC 27695-7620, or email grady_miller@ncsu.edu.

The city of Chaska, MN has a very nice baseball field that is being used by the high school baseball team, city amateur team, and other baseball teams, including games and practices. Early spring practices by the high school are the latest addition. Usually they start using the field in late April when the temperatures are in the upper 40's to lower 50's during the day and 30's at night. The games don't seem to be the issue, but practices are at this time. Is there any advice or help that you can offer that can be shared with superiors?

Before we get to the story at hand please note that this question was offered by Jeff Schmidt of ProSource One on behalf of a city sports field manager, Brian Jung. Great job networking guys, and kudos to Jeff for placing service ahead of sales on this call.

Practice doesn't always make perfect, especially if it's on the game field. I write several letters a year maligning coaches and athletic directors for allowing practice to occur on the football game field, but with baseball there usually isn't an alternative field dedicated for practice.

Most all baseball fields at some point serve as the competition game field for some level of play. In northern climates spring baseball activities start as soon as "they can get on the field" and that usually translates into no standing snow, water, slush, or soft foot printing conditions. Coaches usually push the limit by using mats on soft ground around the mound and home plate.

The net result with these early spring practices is that normal wear is occurring at a time when the grass is not growing and the soil is soft. This leads to soil compaction and removal of turf cover. Administrators need to realize that traffic on athletic fields is a cumulative type of injury. A field rating program can help you determine just how much traffic your particular field can withstand <http://turfgrass.hort.iastate.edu/extension/EGtrafficsurvey.pdf>.

There are no universal numbers that tell you how much traffic is too much traffic; you need to determine that by evaluating your own fields under your specific playing conditions. For a better understanding of how traffic influences grass, mat, and soil go to <http://turfgrass.hort.iastate.edu/extension/EGtrafficscenario.pdf>.

There are no universal numbers that tell you how much traffic is too much traffic; you need to determine that by evaluating your own fields under your specific playing conditions. For a better understanding of how traffic influences grass, mat, and soil go to <http://turfgrass.hort.iastate.edu/extension/EGtrafficscenario.pdf>.

Recovery time on athletic fields is vital to maximizing playing conditions during the prime playing season. Most single team high school baseball fields will tolerate a spring and summer schedule involving both games and practices. Generally, competition games will take priority over practice activities. In this case there is also a priority that needs to be assessed between different leagues and with regard to special events.

Brian, like most field managers, doesn't make this decision. When he asks to limit field activity it is not a personal attack on a user group, although it is often perceived that way, instead it is an integrated assessment of field agronomics, experience with seasonal traffic, and the expectations for field performance at different times throughout the year.

The field appearance and playing quality has vastly improved over the last few years since Jung and the City Parks Department have put additional resources into core harvesting, topdressing, seeding, and rolling. Jung credits Dale Welter, a volunteer field manager, for taking this field under his wing and providing the TLC that was needed to take it to the next level. Yes, volunteers can be an effective and important part of a baseball field management strategy.

It's important to prioritize field use and to assess the degree of field decline occurring from each user group. User groups tend to think in terms of a block of time that they are allowed to be on the field. In this case the high school wants to use the field for early spring practice. Field managers are more in tune to the growing season and how the traffic during specific blocks of time influences field playing quality throughout the season. Somewhere in the decision process a parks director must weigh the virtue of allowing spring practice against the added traffic that results in poor playing conditions later in the season; and in this case when a major event like the Amateur Championship is scheduled.

Kicking the high school baseball team off of the stadium field doesn't solve the problem. The high school team and coaches deserve a place to practice as soon as the weather permits. There is a field at the high school but it is in poor shape, drains slow, and is seldom ready for early spring activity. I would work with the high school boosters and the City Parks Department to collaborate on a renovation of the high school baseball field and give the high school team priority use of this field for practice.

It may not work for Chaska but at other institutions we have installed a "short field" adjacent to the competition

Continued on page 38



WHEN HE ASKS TO LIMIT FIELD ACTIVITY IT IS NOT A PERSONAL ATTACK ON A USER GROUP, ALTHOUGH IT IS OFTEN PERCEIVED THAT WAY.

field where everyone wants to practice. The short field has only the infield grass and skin with no outfield. Cut outs can be used around the bases if infield skin is not possible. This field can be used for infield practice and several drills that wear out the game field, i.e. 3rd base to home situational drills, squeeze play, etc.

Where space is available, a whole field can be painted on grass and used for situational play. Over time, these areas often are developed into a full regulation practice field. Coaches love the extra space for maximizing practice time. The idea is to create effective areas off of the field where most of the practice occurs. Go to the field only when you need the whole field. We need your help coaches to improve game field quality and to provide a better training facility.

Inevitably some of you will be forced to continue practice on your game fields. Be sure that you are doing all that can be done to protect the field. Administrators need to realize that more activity comes with

more cost. Don't be afraid to request additional resources for additional traffic on the field.

Protective batting covers or "ding screens" can be placed on the grass in front of the plate area to protect against divots from batting practice and fungo grounders. Portable platforms can be bought or built to protect working areas in front of the mound and fungo areas. Labor must be arranged for set up and take down these protection items during practice. The coaches and team are usually responsible for managing this task. Coaches can instruct players to avoid needless and habitual digging in traffic areas at each position. Sod replacement on high traffic areas should be part of the routine budget. Field covers for winter protection and enhanced growth can be used to extend the growing season and speed field recovery.

Like most of the situations in this business, the problem involves grass and dirt, but the solution involves communication with those good people around you. ■

THE GAME MUST GO ON.



An Airfield is the ultimate sports turf drainage system whether you are playing on natural or artificial turf.

Artificial Turf Benefits:

- Drains remarkably faster
- Reduces installation time
- Reduces G-Max
- Eliminates rubber migration
- Eliminates standing water
- Strong enough for vehicles
- Below entire playing surface
- Air void for heating and cooling
- Allows flushing and sanitizing
- Maintains level playing surface

Natural Turf Benefits:

- Drains remarkably faster
- Reduces installation time
- Reduces irrigation requirements
- Extends playing season
- Eliminates standing water
- Reduces maintenance costs
- Below entire playing surface
- Superior perched water table
- Greater root mass
- Gas circulation through soil



405.359.3775
airfieldsystems.com

Fill in 158 on reader service form or visit <http://oners.hotims.com/12047-158>



great turf, safe play

With a super light footprint, the TD-460 can spread everything from sand and compost, to rock and wood chips. Marvel at the light to heavy, large 72" spread.



Call 1.800.845.7249
or visit www.tycropturf.com
Nothing's built like a TYCROP.



Visit us at the STMA Show in San Antonio, TX from January 18-19, 2007 in Booth #507

Fill in 136 on reader service form or visit <http://oners.hotims.com/12047-136>