

Field Vandalism

SportsTurf recently received a question about vandalism. The issue related to a person that drove on a field with a car or truck and maliciously spun "donuts." The specific question related to the charges filed and recouping repair cost. While the question was great, as an agronomist I am significantly more qualified to address repairing the field than the legal aspects.



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I would imagine that many of you have come into work on a Monday morning and found that some knucklehead decided that your beautifully manicured field was an ideal spot to try and replicate the Olympic rings by spinning his tires. It seems that athletic fields and golf course greens provide too much temptation for some people.

I suspect the first thing most field managers do as they survey the damage is utter something about the questionable ancestry of the perpetrator. Depending on the extent of damage, it just became anywhere from a one to ten antacid day. Once you calm down, you should call your supervisor and the local sheriff's office to report the vandalism. You may want to make phone calls to inquire about insurance coverage. After you finish the initial calls, I suggest you take a set of digital pictures of the damage from several angles. Include some common object for a size reference. The pictures may be needed for insurance and/or legal proceedings.

Before discussing field repair, let's set up a few potential scenarios: 1) A dry field so damage is mostly to turfgrass surface, minimum surface depressions; 2) damage to turf and tire depressions from a quarter to half an inch deep; and 3) field was wet such that perpetrator's vehicle was at least momentarily stuck before they were able to "spin it free."

Along with these scenarios, there is an issue of how long you have before the field is needed for the next major event (i.e., was this in the off-season or a day before a scheduled championship game). A third issue that can impact repair and recovery relates to the location of the damage and the percentage of the field affected. If you're lucky the perpetrators just targeted your endzone logo, although there seems to be some sort of magnetism to the center of a field.

In scenario one, it is probably sufficient to topdress the field as you normally would to fill uneven areas. Use a soil amount similar to what you use as part of your normal cultural practice. A normal aeration would also be beneficial. I would also suggest fertilizing the field to promote turf recovery, especially if your field is a (non-dormant) bermudagrass field. If your field is a cool-season grass, then I would suggest re-seeding the damaged area. You are basically treating the field as if you have just had a hard game that resulted in heavy divoting.

If the damage has resulted in tire depressions or rutting that is deeper than your normal sand topdressing, then the depressions will have to be filled. Before you begin to fill



these ruts, I would suggest you take a spading fork and work the soil depressions made by the tires similar to how a golfer fixes a ball mark on a green. This will alleviate some of the compaction while mending the turf along the rut's edge. If the rutting is over a significant area, then a mechanical core aerifier may also be used to reduce the compaction. But in most cases using the spading fork will likely give better results.

If the field is bermudagrass and damage occurred during its growing season, and you have several weeks before the field is needed, then the ruts may be filled with a soil similar to your field's soil and you can re-grow in those areas. If time is an issue, then sod may be used to replace the damaged grass. It is usually best to take sod from the field sidelines so that the replacement grass and soil match what is on the field.

If the field is overseeded bermudagrass or a cool-season grass, you can put down the sod or re-seed the rutted areas, depending on the amount of time you have available for the turf to grow before the field is used. Note that immature grass will likely look and play a little differently. Until the grass matures, it will likely be a lighter green color than the rest of the field and will be more prone to divoting. I have seen some instances where the damaged areas have taken a year or more before matching the surrounding turf. Using green turf paint can be used to blend the areas in the short term.

The third scenario is the most troublesome because significant damage to the soil profile can result in long-term negative response. There is also the potential of drainage tile and irrigation line damage. These components should be inspected as best you can before field repair is started. If they are not damaged, repairs to the field can be initiated much like in the previous scenario. While backfilling these ruts and re-establishing grass can provide a successful fix, the only way to ensure field uniformity is to do a total renovation.

No matter what renovation measures are used, the field should receive increased attention for the first 6 months to year following the repair. To ensure uniform turf and try to prevent soil layering, frequent core cultivation, topdressing, and rolling will be necessary. Maybe now is the time to consider putting a fence around your fields. ■