

Index your field

I need to establish a set of guidelines for field usage. We have a new facility that includes baseball, practice soccer, and a soccer game field to go along with our two older practice fields. Since no guidelines were in place for the fall season the ensuing free-for-all resulted in damaged fields.

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There are two excellent resources to help quantify activity on your fields. In addition to developing a field maintenance strategy to deal with field wear and tear your challenge will be to empower the athletic director, coach, and any other user groups so that they also develop a field activity level that reduces wear and improves playing conditions.

The STMA Playing Conditions Index® (PCI) was developed to give sports turf managers a “snap-shot” of a specific field at a given point in time. Approximately 30 questions related to resources, activities, and agronomic performance are used to produce a numerical value that ranks a field from excellent to unplayable. STMA members can access and print out the PCI at www.stma.org/MemberServices/PCI. The index can be used to justify additional resources, information for media relations, communicate with parents, coaches, players, and administrators.

Another Field Wear Index FWI was developed by STMA member David Schlotthauer from Brigham Young University (see www.sportsturfonline.com, click “Articles & Archives,” then “February 2008” to find this article). The FWI uses hours of field usage to guide the level of suggested field management practices. Both indexes are flexible enough to be modified for any athletic field situation and they both indicate that the index may need adjustment for your specific field situation. Evaluate the field for at least one year or playing season before using the information to influence field use and management decisions.

Once you record the activities, inputs, and injury to the field you will need to use your communication skills to present the information to your user groups in such a way that they will participate in improving the fields. Coaches and athletic directors have ascended to their position by surrounding themselves with good people that help them make good decisions. Make sure you are giving them tangible information in the form of field ratings and repair costs so that they can make good decisions when they finally realize that you are on their side.

Here are some tips to help coaches and sports turf managers share the success or failure of their playing fields:

- **Wet conditions.** Rutting and tearing up the field during wet conditions is unforgivable if there is an alternative. Use the synthetic field if available, that’s what it is for. Have an activity cancellation policy in place for games, practices, and other field uses. Use pictures to document the disastrous rutting that occurred after activity on a field that was too wet.

- The rule should be play games on the game field and practice on the practice field. Occasionally the coach may want to use the game field for a special practice and this should be

allowed. Coach, don’t abuse this or you will lose one of your biggest supporters.

- **Rotate activity.** Coach, ask your sports turf manager to help set up the facility to reduce traffic by rotating your practice activities. The coach needs to take the lead on policing traffic and the sports turf manager needs to support any changes in field orientation, painting, extra goals, and developing drill stations. Coach, here are a few traffic patterns that we need help changing. Don’t place the football on the same yard line for each play; a distinctive wear pattern around every 5-yard line shows your lack of creativity. Portable soccer goals are a must for warm-up. In fact, avoid repeated activity on any painted lines, i.e. calisthenics and cutting drills. Just move over about 3 feet to spread the traffic pattern.

- **Take pride in the field.** Baseball coaches and players often assume management of the mound, batter boxes, and infield lips. The sports turf manager should hold clinics specifically to teach proper techniques for managing the baseball field. Once they begin to take pride and ownership of their field then they will start to self regulate excessive traffic.

The real challenge is to realize that you both want the same thing, a better playing surface. I know how most sports turf managers think and I am getting better at understanding how a coach thinks and what they want from a playing field. Coach, it is very likely that your sports turf manager has a 2- or 4-year college degree, has served as an apprentice for at least 3 years and may have spent more hours on your field than your combined coaching staff. They know the field and its limitations.

At an STMA field tour in Phoenix, a head coach was asked why they never listen to the sports turf manager. His reply surprised me but gave some great insight into how and when to communicate. He explained that yes, coaches are very concerned about field conditions and they are very aware that their sport turf manager does a marvelous job taking care of the field. And yes, he wants to receive input on spreading wear patterns.

But, during practice they are so focused on coaching and teaching that they completely forget about the field and in fact they don’t want to even think about the field at that time. So, don’t even try to make a suggestion during practice. Schedule an appropriate time to meet with the coach and even more importantly the assistant coaches and sometimes the trainers or equipment managers. That is the time to make the plan for spreading the traffic pattern in such a way that it fits into the team’s practice regimen.

You may have better success if you rely on the assistant coaches and equipment managers since they often designate drill locations, set up cones, and place the football between practice plays. The one thing you can usually control is paint. And where you paint, they will stand. So move the paint and move the traffic.

The message here is to first have a traffic management plan that is understood by all users and managers of the field. Then decide that you are all on the same team that strives for a better playing surface. And finally, win over your adversary by giving in a little and expecting the same in return. ■

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