

# Ducks' crew *makes blue work*

**E**ric Fasbender, CSFM, has a bachelor's degree in history but he didn't abide by the subject when it came time to improve Kilkenny Fields on the campus of the University of Oregon in Eugene. Despite naysayers who said Kentucky bluegrass doesn't work for athletic turf west of the Cascade Mountains, Fasbender and his cohorts risked their jobs by choosing a grass that hadn't been used in the area for more than 20 years.

Knowing that these practice fields have to stand up to summer soccer and lacrosse camps as well as the Oregon football program, Fasbender said, "We chose Kentucky bluegrass because of its ability to withstand and recover from wear, superior shear strength and stability, and its ability to compete with the large amount of *Poa annua* here in the Pacific Northwest."





Something must have gone right because Kilkenny Field was chosen the 2007 STMA College Football Field of the Year.

Fasbender said the region's mild summers and cool, wet conditions the rest of the year makes Poa thrive. "We have a 'see it, kill it' philosophy that has been successful so far. We know we are never going to 'cure' the field of Poa but we can address what is there and hold the line," he said.

"We use kill canes filled with Round-Up when we mow and have an aggressive spray program combining herbicides targeting Poa," Fasbender said. "We use growth regulators to help our bluegrass outcompete it."

"Fertility plays a large role in what we do to stay on top of disease. We've managed to avoid the horror stories of the design process and have only had to make limited curative fungicide applications in the past 3 years," he said. "We apply granular fertilizer every 2-4 weeks depending on the season and field conditions. All apps are slow release and include iron in the nutrient package."

Fasbender said other facilities in the Pacific Northwest are trying bluegrass. "Overseeding is one of the challenges we face. We overseed twice a year but because the field is in use so much, we do it in the winter and summer rather than spring and fall," he said. He uses turf blankets after football season through mid-March to keep the plants going, and overseeds after spring practice, in mid-May before summer camps begin.

**SportsTurf:** What's most important piece of equipment or product in your program?

**Fasbender:** I have to say that our aerator and topdresser are the most important pieces of equipment in our program. Anytime you have football players "dancing" around on your turf, you are going to deal with compaction issues. We aerate as much as we can to relieve the compaction and topdress lightly to protect the crowns of the plants. These two pieces are also important because they help us with our aggressive over-seeding program. We over-seed to continually introduce new and better varieties of turf and keep a mix of old and new plants in our sample. We aerate and pick up our cores before seeding to create a seedbed and then topdress after to protect the seed.

**ST:** What are your biggest challenges and how do you approach them?

**Fasbender:** Controlling the Poa annua is our biggest challenge and working around the rainy weather and the nearly continuous field use are close behind.

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# FIELD OF THE YEAR

It seems that we have more "off-season" workouts than ever before. College athletics is now a 12 month commitment for our athletes and it can be a fight just to get our fields the rest they need. Open communications with our coaches and their understanding of, and cooperation with, what we're striving to accomplish is what makes it all work. They realize that we are trying to provide the best possible surface for their athletes.

**ST:** How do you communicate with coaches?

**Fasbender:** I think that face to face communication with administrators, athletic directors, coaches and staff is the most important thing a sports turf manager can do to develop a successful program. Sometimes the one to one connection is not always possible though, and you need to try any means necessary to communicate.

I am very fortunate because our Head Football Coach, Mike Bellotti, and I have developed a great working relationship over the years. I understand what he wants to accomplish on the

fields and what he expects, and he values my opinion and appreciates my input and suggestions. I attend every football practice to be available for questions, but also so I can see how the fields are being used and how the turf is performing. This practice has gone a long way in gaining our coaching staff's trust. That is something that I picked up in my time in professional baseball. If an infielder gets a bad hop, you want to see exactly where it happened, not hear about it second hand the next day. I connect with all of our





coaches regularly even if I don't have anything pressing to talk about. My favorite icebreaker topic is a favorite here in Eugene, the weather.

**ST:** How do you see the sports turf manager's job changing in the future?

**Fasbender:** I hope to see more people getting certified. I know that there are a lot of people who are eligible, but have not taken the exam yet for a variety of reasons. There are many people in this industry that are extremely talented and knowledgeable and certification is an important step in your professional career.

I also think that technology is going to change more than a few things in the industry. It is astonishing to think about all the advances in equipment, materials, and supplies in the past 10 years. Think of what is on the horizon for the next 10!

**ST:** What attracted you to a career in sports turf management?

**Fasbender:** I grew up in the Chicago area and both of my parents were baseball fans. My family

would go to White Sox and Cubs games early so that we could catch batting practice. Of course, once BP was over, the grounds crew took the field and I can remember being fascinated by all of the jobs that they were doing.

At home, I was the kid with the whiffle ball field in the backyard with the perfectly mowed grass and the chalked lines. Fortunately, my parents humored my interests as a kid. When it came time to go to college, I chose the University of Tennessee where my initial major was architecture and graphic design, but I soon learned it was not for me. One of my friends suggested that I try sports turf management. I didn't even realize that was possible. I switched majors and started working for Bobby Campbell on the university athletic fields and the rest, as they say, is history.

**ST:** How do you balance work and personal life?

**Fasbender:** My wife, Liz, is one of the greatest people on the face of the planet and a blessing in my life. She supports me during the busy times

of my year and I support her when things get hectic at school or with her coaching. She teaches chemistry and coaches JV girls soccer at one of the high schools in Eugene. I count my blessings everyday that I have her as my wife and that she supports my career in a way that most women wouldn't. I told her when I first got into this business that she could tell me to quit at anytime and that I would find another career path. She has never hinted at that and only encouraged me when times got tough.

I know it was hard for her to move across the country when we took this job at Oregon, but she never complained and again only encouraged what I was doing. Thanks, Ace!

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