

Off-field maintenance

By Jim Cornelius

Did you ever open your mouth and volunteer for something only to regret it later on? I did (guess I should have taken my mother's advice that my mouth would always get me in trouble) a few years ago when we were dealing with drought-stricken fields and the water ban that the state had issued. Our turf was going dormant, the mowers were sitting idle, the seeders remained on the shelving in the shop, and the guys were returning each day covered from head to toe in dust. My solution: "Hey boss we are fighting a losing battle here and I have to find something that the guys can do that is meaningful." Big mistake!

At the time we were beginning the renovation/rebuild of two of our high schools and construction of a third high school and due to budget cuts our maintenance department was down to three individuals with no new personnel in sight. The overwhelming work load of the maintenance department had them backed up by several months, which is totally unacceptable in the educational world.

Low and behold my boss decides that the grounds department can take on several responsibilities to alleviate pressure from the maintenance crew. The first item was graduation activities of the two high schools (not so bad, it is after the sports season and the guys could use something different) and how hard could it be to set up a few chairs and a stage and sit back and watch the activities? The second item was all concrete replacement that was scheduled for the year. Now this didn't sound fun and wasn't easy work, but okay, we were all up to the challenge.

Today graduation has now become a three high school event that takes up a week and a half of our time, as we set everything up for one school's practice, take it down and move to another. Worst part is they have scheduled rain dates so not only do we risk two practices in one day but we also take the chance of having two graduations on the same night.

This year was the first graduation after all the renovations and the construction of the new high school so we were faced with the challenge of designing and creating new backdrops (someone figured if we can paint fields then we can paint backdrops) for two of the schools. We were successful in getting all three in, and yes we did have two practices in one day and the following day we had two graduations at the same time. Working on synthetic turf for 16 hours a day in 90 degree heat gives an appreciation for those who work in cold storage units; you quickly learn the value of water in its liquid and frozen states. My advice is hydrate more than you think you need.

Then we did the concrete work that needed finished before school started. Of course we have to remember that we now have three times the amount of athletic fields to prepare for the fall sports as well. We always wonder if the weather will cooperate with us or will we be smart enough to work with the weather. This year is not typical (is there is such a thing when it comes to grounds?). The grass is still growing, the summer sports activities are growing, the teams are practicing earlier, and it seems that no one is interested in the band anymore—they have all taken up contact sports.

Dreaded other duties

There are many other tasks that the grounds department must endure that do not fit within the typical grounds spectrum. Helping to move furniture, packing trailers for school renovations, parking cars for special events, assisting the



West Chester Area School District crew: front row, L to R, Jeff Cole, Rich McBride, Bill Whitcraft; middle row, L to R, Laura Swisher, Randy Aman, Bill Simpson, Joe McGuire, Jim Loughin; back row, L to R, Gary Hake, Jim Cornelius, Don Young.

mechanics to replace air filters, pulling wires, installing water lines, removing telephone poles that have been abandoned, detailing trucks, making deliveries of custodial and educational materials, and anything else that needs to be done when we are the only ones having the extra hands that are needed.

If you work in public education you know that during the summer months the custodians are busy cleaning the buildings and during the school year the majority work on second or third shifts. The maintenance tasks only increase in numbers and size as all those projects must be completed during the summer break (funny how we don't get a break) and all things prepared for the students' return.

You may be thinking this is not a lot, so let me explain: my duties are not only to the grounds departments (we split our grounds department in half last year to develop a lawn/landscape crew and an athletic field/turf crew) but also include the HVAC department, maintenance department, warehouse, vehicle mechanic, and annual general fund projects as well as several capital fund projects.

I have learned that to be successful you must be organized, able to plan ahead, willing to ask for help, and most importantly you need to enjoy what you do. In public education we tend to forget who we work for and I have realized that no matter whom my immediate leader is or who is sitting in the superintendent's chair, I work for the children who pass through our

schools. I have used this to motivate my teammates and keep them thinking in a positive way without getting distraught over the political ramifications that come with any public position.

We post a lot of thank you letters and notes we receive and those that are most cherished and hang longer than others are those from the children (especially when they are done in crayon) that needed no prompting to write.

The most important task that my grounds crew does that is out of the normal task is to educate our users, from the student athletes, the coaches, athletic directors including all the outside user groups on how to respect and maintain our fields. No one ever thought that being a grounds person required being a teacher and I am proud to say that we have succeeded in doing so.

When the crew holds a training meeting they all must participate in the teaching aspect (there are no exceptions) in order to be seen and be heard. This has displaced the shyness that some of them attempted to hide behind and the program success is in the pride they have when they show up in the morning to a field and see that the last users left it as we have asked (ready to play). I would encourage everyone who has never attempted this to try it and you may be surprised with the results. ■

Jim Cornelius is buildings and grounds supervisor for West Chester School District in Pennsylvania and a member of the STMA's Editorial Subcommittee.



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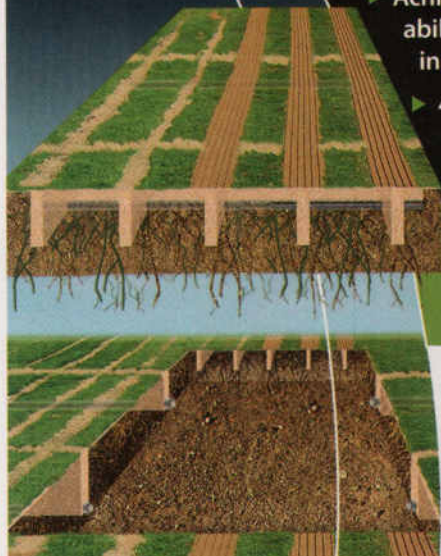
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