

Field care by the athletes

COMPUTERS' SPELL CHECKERS have pushed dictionaries off desks; robotics has replaced human hands in many aspects of the manufacturing world and yet, when it comes to athletic field care you still find that some of the best ways are the traditional ways (human power with manual tools).

Yes we have machines that help with the larger tasks and we use these as tools the way they were meant to be used (and sometimes in ways the manufacturers never intended!). By and large the industry has not changed all that much even though we have a better selection of turfgrasses, soil analysis, topdressings, research materials, soil amendments, etc., to aid us in meeting the challenges we face every day.

But trash still finds its way onto the ground. Holes on pitching mounds and batters boxes continue to be dug. Grass contin-

ues to grow. Sometimes there are just not enough hours in the day to do it all. But here at the West Chester School District in southeastern Pennsylvania, we have opened our ears and instituted a different approach to our problems. We now have athletes doing grounds maintenance as part of their education and athletic experience on our sites.

Instead of coming to work with built up frustration we now come to execute a task, we finish what was started, we plant seeds (not only grass seed but educational seeds) and we now work outside the box on most occasions. We still only have five employed in the athletic field maintenance department yet our team has grown to more than we expected, and the best part is the majority of the athletes work for the ability to use our facilities. Here is how we do it.



Our frustration was at an all time high when the district was renovating two high schools and building a third; our athletic field numbers were growing yet the staff count was not. Administration realized that the dollars being spent needed to be protected so they formed a committee to work on developing an Athletic Strategic Plan for the High School Athletic program. They covered everything from student safety and conduct to field maintenance.

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Having the privilege to be part of this committee, I helped institute an evaluation tool that we revised from information from Dr. Dave Minner and many others in the STMA and Keystone Athletic Field Managers Organization. We developed a communication tool using Red, Green & Yellow flags for each of our fields along with updated emails of field conditions as they changed in status from one flag color to another; we established and implemented a more meaningful facility use policy for both outside and inside venues; limited the amount of use by outside organizations to reduce wear and minimize traffic to where we could maintain quality turf; and we developed and implemented rules and guidelines for all users, which included that all users be taught how to help maintain our facilities.

All of the items incorporated into the Athletic Strategic Plan are important and meaningful, yet the one we embraced was the last one. Teaching our users was and still is huge. Never in my dreams did I think that we could get users/athletes to help maintain the fields. In the past most groups expected the best yet would rarely help out. Occasionally a group would dump dirt (yes dirt, not topsoil, topdressing or soil) in a goal mouth, kick it around, sprinkle some cheap seed, and call it helping us.

We began meeting with the middle school teams as they were more receptive to what we wanted to do, and the coaches liked the fact that we weren't asking them but the students to participate. Our promise to them was simple—help us out with a few small items (filling holes after practice, using divot mix on the turf where needed, spreading some seed in the goal mouths before practice, etc.) and we would provide them with game day facilities each day they took the field.

The first season we had about 70% participation from the middle school teams but once the other coaches saw that some fields

were exceptional they quickly realized they too needed to work with us. As we went into the second season the students began asking when we could meet with them and this has progressed to the point where they now email when they need seed, or a rake or shovel is missing from its place.

Each season brings something new; we now teach our outside users by holding mandatory training sessions that every coach involved in each organization must attend before the group is issued their permit. We began holding these in the spring and quickly realized that with the unpredictable spring time weather in Pennsylvania, one fourth of the spring season was over before we got everyone trained. Now we hold them in late October when we are putting our fields to rest for the upcoming winter and this allows us to be more aggressive with our training.

Each team member participates in one or more stations that we have set up. We begin with a brief explanation of why we hold the training classes, dealing with trash at all our facilities and what responsibilities they have regarding trash, how to maintain the player bench and spectator areas, and lastly the care of our fence. Then depending on how many are present we either divide them up to the different stations or we work as a group from one to another. Our stations are natural turf areas where we explain using a field within a field; repairing divots with provided mix; pitcher's mound care, repair and covering with provided tarp; home plate care and repair, base path care and how each of the provided tools are used, as well as how to deal with water puddles, wet infields, etc. We show them how we take care of these areas and allow them the opportunity to show us a different way, try our way, and we answer many questions that they come up.

Some organizations have committed 100% to our efforts while others have gone over our expectations. We now have groups willing to mow (following our guidelines) fields, handle the irrigation responsibilities (again following our guidelines), provide manpower and equipment to help apply topdressing, grass seed, infield mix all of which we provide so we control the materials used. All of this did have initial costs (nothing is free) that we quickly recovered from saving man hours that the groups provided.

We did purchase tools for each field, buckets for divot and seed mix at each field, tarps for each home plate and mound area, batter box jigs that the crew made for each baseball and softball field, metal storage boxes we had made to hold materials, hoses, quick dry materials, and many other minor things for them to maintain the fields at no cost to them. Ironically some of the groups have bought extra rakes, booms, hoses, tank sprayers for wetting down the mounds, bags for trash and taken ownership toward our facilities. A win-win for all involved.

So when your frustration level reaches an all time high, look around at the resources available and don't turn the help away but turn them into teammates. In the end the children and the athletes are winners no matter what the outcome of the game.

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