

# Transitioning from student to assistant sports turf manager

**M**ANY STUDENTS working on sports fields while in college are often preparing themselves for work as a professional sports turf manager once they graduate. Some of these individuals will transition from student to assistant sports field manager right out of school.

Making a smooth transition will be determined by the individual's knowledge of subjects such as basic turfgrass management, soils, all aspects of pest identification and control and basic turfgrass mathematics to name a few. Also, experience as a student worker on sports fields, intramural fields or summer internships on sports fields will provide invaluable experience that will aid in making successful transition from college student to an assistant sports turf manager.

A frequent comment I often hear from sports turf managers is the lack of basic mathematic skills by some of the young students entering the profession [Editor's note: see "Math 101 for sports turf managers" on p. 16 in our Feb. 2009 issue]. I should note that this problem is not unique to sports field management. Assistant sports turf managers are often in charge of applying fertilizers/pesticides on the fields or they are in charge of supervising the application of these products. It is critical that this person be able to accurately calculate the amount of material needed for each application. Under application of fertilizers generally results in poor color, growth and recovery, while under application of a pesticide usually means poor control.

On the other hand, over application of these materials can result in severe injury to the turfgrass and in some cases loss of turfgrass on the field. We have all heard the horror stories of turfgrass managers being fired due to the misapplication of either fertilizers or pesticides. Along with being able to calculate proper rates, being able to correctly calibrate sprayers and spreaders requires basic mathematic skills. In many cases, the misapplication is due to improper sprayer or spreader calibration and not miscalculation of amount of product required.

It is very important that students graduating and entering the profession have a good understanding of mathematics and especially the basic mathematics of turfgrass. To find information on turfgrass mathematics, just Google basic turfgrass mathematics and you can find some very good books on basic turfgrass mathematics as well as Extension bulletins dealing with the subject.

A comment often heard by new employees in the sports field profession is, "I wish I had majored in sports field management while in college." While having a degree in basic turfgrass management doesn't automatically mean success, not having a degree in turfgrass management doesn't mean you can't become a successful assistant sports field manager.

Some of today's most successful sports field managers did not major in turfgrass management while in college and in some cases, never attended college. However, most of these individuals will tell a young college student entering the profession that the more basic turfgrass maintenance knowledge they obtain while in school and the more turfgrass work experience they obtain while in college, the easier the tran-



» STUDENT WORKERS preparing skinned area for college baseball game.



➤ **STUDENT WORKERS** preparing football field for game day.

sition will be from college student to assistant sports field manager.

As mentioned above, gaining work experience on sports fields while in college is a very important part of successful transition from student to an assistant sports turf manager. While attending school, try to secure employment on the sports turf maintenance staff, intramural staff or even on the grounds/landscape staff. These jobs will provide invaluable experience for future work in the profession.

Most schools with a turfgrass management curriculum will assist their students in obtaining summer employment as an intern. My recommendation would be to sign up for as many internships as possible while in school. If possible, vary the type of sports fields you work on as an intern. While your goal may be to become a sports turf manager in baseball, you never know what the future will bring. Again, the more varied work experience background you obtain while in school, the greater chance you will have in becoming successful. While working as an intern, don't be afraid to ask questions. As interns, you will be working with some of the more knowledgeable and experienced individuals in sports turf management, so this will be a great opportunity to learn from the experts.

### **“Soft” skills important**

Good communication and personal management are some more key skills needed for making the transition from student to assistant sports turf manager. A key trait found in most successful managers is their ability to effectively communicate with their crews as

well as with their owners or bosses, players and in some cases the general public. Managers that can effectively communicate their needs to produce a healthy, safe sports field for the team is more likely to get the staff, equipment and supplies needed to produce the desired product.

Managers who cannot effectively communicate are generally going to have trouble obtaining the staff, equipment and supplies needed to be successful. Another problem some new assistant sports turf managers face is getting older, more experienced employees to listen to them or to respect their knowledge and experience. Again, effective communications will allow the new assistant manager to obtain the respect of these older, experienced employees in a much shorter period of time.

A new assistant sports field manager should have the basic understanding of how to develop a budget for their facility. I have listened to several sports turf managers discuss the tremendous problems they had the first time their boss/owner asked for next year's budget. Some of the more basic information required for developing a sports field budget include; total salary/benefits for all employees, equipment maintenance and repairs, fuel, fertilizers/pesticides, paint for logos and striping fields, irrigation costs such as cost of water, electricity and irrigation equipment repairs, cost for seed and/or sod to renovate fields and overhead costs such as buildings and utilities. While in school, be sure and take the basic business management courses that generally offered by most col-

leges. Also, some schools offer turfgrass business management classes as part of their turfgrass programs. These courses will provide valuable information on how to develop a budget.

Possessing a good work ethic is another key trait individuals hiring assistants look for in college graduates entering the profession. Managing sports fields not only requires long hours, but often can require 7-day work weeks. Owners or managers hiring new assistants are going to be looking for individuals who are willing to put in the long hours required to produce a healthy, safe playing surface for the players. Individuals lacking a good work ethic are probably going to struggle with becoming successful in this industry.

New assistant sports turf managers are often overwhelmed with everything they need to know to get the job accomplished and in some cases lack the knowledge to know where to get help. When needing assistance, don't be afraid to call other sports field managers. One of the things that has always impressed me about the sports turf profession is the willingness of professionals to assist fellow managers, particularly new managers.

Other means of getting help is to join professional organizations such as the national Sports Turf Managers Association, state chapters if available and state turfgrass associations. Also, many state colleges and universities have turfgrass teaching, research and Extension personnel on staff. These individuals can provide valuable help. Most young people today are very knowledgeable in the use of computers; new managers can go online and find some great university turfgrass websites as well as commercial websites dealing with sports turf management.

Transitioning from a college student to an assistant sports field manager can be a very rewarding experience. The more educational experience you have in turfgrass management and the more work experience you have in sports turf management while in college, the easier it will be to make this transition. ■

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