

LABOR OF LOVE: running a soccer complex is hard work

WE ASKED two veteran soccer complex managers some questions about managing large, soccer-based facilities. Mark Vessell, Sr., is the executive director of St. Louis Youth Soccer Association; Jerad Minnick is Sports Turf Manager for the Maryland Soccerplex/Discovery Sports Center at the Maryland Soccer Foundation, Boyds, MD.

1. What is your role in security at your facility? If you're involved, what are biggest challenges?

Vessell: Three of us fill the role of Manager on Duty (MOD) every day/night we have play at the facility. The park is divided in to four sections and we use seasonal staff to cover these areas. The seasonal staff uses our park rules that are posted on three large signs in the park and our website for guidance of acceptable behavior of our guests. They should ask for cooperation with a smile; however should they encounter someone aggressive or uncooperative they are to radio the MOD for assistance. We will ask for cooperation or in very few cases call the police for assistance. The Manager on Duty also handles safety in case of weather issues, lost children, assistance to medical staff, restrooms, and lost and found.

Minnick: Security for 162 acres of the Maryland SoccerPlex and users groups ranging from 3 year olds to professional athletes is littered with challenges. SoccerPlex was built as a public/ private partnership, so we are just a piece of South Germantown Park, a Montgomery County Park. Thus at all times, we fall under the jurisdiction of Maryland Park and Planning Commission's Park Police. For night time and/or non-event times, Park Police and the Park Manager for South Germantown Park manage a majority of the security for the

park. For events, security is coordinated by our Director of Operations and our Senior Management Staff (Executive Director, Director of Business and Program Development, and myself). The operations managers for the professional teams that play their matches at SoccerPlex play a major role in the coordination of security for professional events in conjunction with our staff and Park Police also being involved.

2. What is your role in purchasing at your facility? If you're involved, what are biggest challenges?

Minnick: I am solely responsible for all the purchasing for field management and several components of our outdoor facility maintenance. The biggest challenge I run into is keeping far enough ahead of my work crews to keep them supplied. The sheer volume of material that we go through for a 162-acre, 22-field facility is astounding. For example, I buy paint in 225-gallon totes. Yet it only takes us 4 weeks to go through one tote. Another challenge is storage space. To fertilize or seed, I will buy a minimum of four pallets of each type of material. That takes up a tremendous amount of space. The trick becomes ordering far enough in advance that I stay ahead of the crews, but yet not too far ahead to where we are sitting on a large amount of material and have equipment sitting outside in the weather.

Vessell: We keep track of normal daily operation purchases with a purchase order system. This system tracks what department the cost is applied to allowing us to track expenses and not exceed the set budget for that department. Larger equipment purchases or other capital investments will require proof of need. Needs can include replacement of old equipment, investments in labor

efficiency, improvements of safety issues, etc. These capital improvements and investments will be brought to the board along with the explanation of the cost savings and advantages of the purchase or investment.

3. How do you keep the board/supervisor informed re turf maintenance, and what would you recommend for good relations with management?

Vessell: I attend every board meeting and club director meeting. Communications is vital in getting information out to your supporters. This is a great opportunity to hear from your most important and influential groups, the chance to explain the reasoning behind some of your decisions, and show that the communities best interest were involved in the decision process. This interaction also keeps you on tract with their needs and the needs of the sport.

Minnick: I am in a good situation where all of our Senior Management Staff and our Board are extremely well educated on turf management challenges. SoccerPlex was constructed on the vision of providing the DC area and the East Coast with the most high quality fields possible. Thus every one involved did their homework and have continued to learn over the 10 years the facility has been open. That makes it much easier for me communicate challenges and issues that we might be experiencing with turf maintenance. The age of email and text messaging has revolutionized the ability to give updates and reports, and we have a re-occurring weekly meeting to keep the personal interaction and face to face time.

Be direct and honest in communication with your superiors. This will eliminate any and all surprises. Leave out all un-needed pieces and focus on the issues at hand so that every person is on the same page. If there is a problem, do not leave it hanging out there or try to hide it. Communicate it, problem solve it, and move on.

4. What are the biggest challenges maintaining your turf?

Minnick: The biggest challenge I face with maintaining our turf is managing Mother Nature in order to complete our maintenance practices. The amount of time that any one task takes requires dodging a wide array of weather conditions to complete the task. For example, an aeration cycle takes 2 weeks with the deep tine aerator. For 4 months last fall, we never went more than 5 days between rainfalls. So as soon as the fields would begin to dry enough to for the aerator to run again, we would get 2-3 fields done and then it would rain and stop us.

This spring wind has been the factor. We have had sustained high winds 2-3 days every week. So spraying fertilizing has been a challenge, as we need 3 days to complete a full application cycle. When I managed just three fields, I could come in early or stay late when the winds were lighter to get the applications made. With 22 fields, that approach won't work! Mother Nature can provide absolute beauty,

but she also provides the biggest challenge for us day in and day out.

Vessell: The greatest three are; Mother Nature, field moisture levels, and controlling the hours of use on the field.

5. What are your biggest challenges with end users and how to you handle them?

Vessell: The greatest challenges are communication and getting information out in a speedy manner. There are so many different ways in which people today can interact with each other. We try to use many forms of the media to stay in touch; phone hot-lines, website, mass text messages, and e-mail blasts. We are even looking into Twitter and Facebook as the next avenues of keeping in touch. We have become consumers of communication technology.

Minnick: Our biggest challenge with our end users is to communicate our message on our operational protocols. SoccerPlex users

make up people from all 50 states and even other countries representing soccer, lacrosse, rugby, field hockey, and football. Thus getting the word out is a challenge, even with Internet. We enforce policies like no warm-ups inside the 6-yd box for soccer or no warm up in our lax creases. To users, sometimes our policies seem "harsh" or "impractical." So we communicate positively and tell them it's important to us because we want every single person that plays here to have a wonderful experience.

Our local user groups understand our policies and are 100% behind them, as then understand the reasons behind it all. And once new users are communicated with they understand much more clearly why and how we do things differently. Our fields are why we are all here and we want to get the most matches on each field as possible. I can always tell when a group has visited before, as they are the ones reminding the new groups! ■

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