

Managing a large soccer facility

THE ST. LOUIS YOUTH SOCCER ASSOCIATION (SLYSA) LEAGUE owns and operates a 104-acre, all-soccer facility, consisting of 16 11 v 11 full-sized fields and one small-sided 8 v 8 field. We also lease 24 acres next to our complex and have three 11 v 11 and four 8 v 8 fields at this location. Along with these fields we still rent a number of fields from eight other facilities in the St. Louis area.



>> ABOVE: Mark Vessell, Sr., executive director of the St. Louis Youth Soccer Association and STMA member.
BELOW: Larry Hull, working with a smile.

Our organization structure is composed of teams that play in our league, each of which has a vote that are reported by the Club Director for whom they play. The Club Directors then elect a group of five volunteer Board Members, and as a group the directors and Board give us the direction for the organization. We have eight full time staff members. These positions include: an Accounts Payable/Receivable, Secretary, Scheduler, Referee Assigner, Complex Superintendent, Complex Security/Maintenance Manager, Concessions Manager, and Executive Director. We hire two seasonal employees at the complex as needed. As with any position at any company, it is only work if you do not enjoy what you do. I am blessed to do something I enjoy every day; solving problems for the most part and getting others on board to help with the rest.

Managing sports facilities is never dull and is quite an interesting challenge. The reward is seeing the excitement of children of all ages just having fun on a quality, safe sports field. It is more than just about wins and losses; it's about the child's development and safety. With a quality field, you can see their skills develop both on and off the field that contribute to the child's self confidence, teamwork, and socialization. These skills develop tomorrow's leaders. High quality, safe fields is where SLYSA comes into play.

SLYSA provides a competitive soccer league. We are self-funded through league fees and a small amount of advertising dollars. The key to any business is knowing your target audience



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» **SLYSA COMPLEX** encompasses 104 acres.

and providing the best products and tools possible for that audience. Our constituents value quality fields, competitive age brackets, schedules at the start of the season, education, and communications so they know where and at what times games will take place. On average we schedule 250 to

300 games a week. To make this all happen I have a great staff of key people who care about what they do to and how it relates to make the total picture of success.

FULL PLATE AT WORK

My responsibilities include communica-

We explain the reasons why we cancel for rainouts and show the cost savings of what it would take to repair a damaged field, plus the time the field is out of service to heal.

» The complex underwater in June 2008.



» **ABOVE:** Sign of the future: 1st solar-paneled scoreboard in the USA. **BELOW:** Being proactive to protect the complex's turf.



tions, turf equipment, budget management, medical staff, concessions, irrigation controls, security, referees, radar monitoring, lighting detectors, net checks, painting lines, trash pick up, rescheduling, notification when rain outs occur, dust control of parking lots when to dry, computers, website support, phone hotlines—every week. Of course I rely on dedicated people who care and make it all happen every week. This list can be endless, and much more that one person can do himself, however with a great support staff and the “and then some” attitude espoused by George Toma, we get it done and make it happen, even when Mother Nature requires that we need to do 4 days of work in 2 days.

You must look at your facility from all perspectives. If you look at your facility through the eyes of a coach, parent, player, first-time visitor (who may have never played soccer), turf manager, security, insurance adjuster, an emergency personal responder, etc, it will make for a better facility. Make



list of things to do and work at getting the funds set aside to improve the facility. Most of all encourage and work with your staff. Help fix an irrigation break, mow a field, work with the security staff at an event, help in the concessions, etc.

I think one of the best shows on TV is "Undercover Boss." I work with my staff and see what they do and together we look at what changes could be made to make their job easier and more efficient. If you do not like to perform some task in your organization, chances are your staff does not like that same task either. Work together and find an easier way to get it completed. Less frustration saves time, makes for happier employees, and the time saved can be devoted to getting other things done. Times change and so must we.

AS ALWAYS, COMMUNICATION KEY TO SUCCESS

Communication with others is the key to success. There are so many different

mediums today and you must use them all or you will lose touch with your target group. Staying on top of new innovations in computer programs and web design, phone systems, text messages, e-blast, weather information systems, turf equipment, etc, all affect your budget and bottom line. Time saved and efficiency is money back into your budget for something else.

Communication and education to your user groups is vital in success. We try to explain to our Club Directors the cost of field repairs, irrigation repairs, trash collection, and so on because it is their money we are spending. If we spend half the time on trash we can spend time on other things to improve the complex. We have a policy of no warm ups in the goal boxes, for example; if we do not need to rebuild our goal boxes every season then we can spend that money to improve something else.

We explain the reasons why we cancel for rainouts and show the cost savings of

what it would take to repair a damaged field, plus the time the field is out of service to heal. We take opportunities to tell how our scheduler and grounds superintendent work together to not overuse fields; we keep track of age groups using the field, soil moisture, and number of hours of use on each field. We do not even allow warm ups in the goal boxes before games to help cut down on wear. We work with the Referee Assigner to run a reverse line in order to reduce wear problems on sidelines. We all want something better for our children than what we had as kids ourselves. Educate your end users. Never miss a board meeting or a Club Director meeting for the chance to get out the information or change a misinformed rumor. ■

Mark Vessell Sr. is the executive director of St. Louis Youth Soccer Association, vessell@slysa.org, www.slysa.org.

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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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COPING

with cutbacks



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YOU'RE DOING A GOOD JOB. But your budget is being cut. And you'll have to get by with fewer employees.

That's the message heard by many when the budget axe falls.

Parks departments, school districts and sports organizations around the country are coping with reduced revenues and the prospect of no quick turnaround any time soon.

"Unfortunately, in the current economy we are dealing with a cutback in supplies and personnel, which means decreased frequency and reduced maintenance at any one site," says Mike Tarantino, director of maintenance and operations for the Poway Unified School District in Poway, CA.

So how do you, as professional sports turf managers, meet your primary expectation—well-tended, safe playing fields—when forced to make do with fewer resources?

Your first priority, suggests Steve Wightman, stadium turf manager for Qualcomm Stadium in San Diego, is to...prioritize.

"Fields that support greater usage or are considered to be high-priority fields should receive the greatest resources," Wightman says.

That doesn't just mean less frequent mowing or less watering for lower-priority fields. It may mean less fertilization or forgoing annual aeration, topdressing or overseeding.

And, "there may be areas other than playing fields where reduced maintenance activities can be implemented, such as landscaping or general common areas that carry a lesser degree of expectations," Wightman says.

Setting those priorities can't be a snap judgment. Take time to carefully review field use and create a rating scale to help allocate your resources.

Clearly, game and main practice fields that get the most use require the most attention and probably should be on a daily maintenance schedule.

For lower-priority surfaces, set up a rotating maintenance schedule with the goal of paying closest attention to safety standards by inspecting them at least once or twice a week.

Budget crimps mean that you and your field users may have to sacrifice some aesthetics to devote your available resources to keeping the fields safe and playable.

Budget cuts also mean that you have already faced or will face tough decisions on labor, facility maintenance and equipment costs.

Based on input from seven turf management professionals nationwide, here are some suggestions for coping with cutbacks in each of those three major areas.

To minimize labor costs:

- Set up nontraditional workweeks to minimize overtime by scheduling workers to work longer hours on your busiest days and less time on the less-busy days.

- Stagger employee schedules to cover more hours of the week without overtime.

- Convert full-time employee jobs to part-time, split shift, or seasonal work.

- Carefully evaluate staff performance to make sure you have the most productive people on the job and that they're assigned to work based on their strengths.

- Explore contracting out some labor or functions rather than keeping them in-house.

- Reduce employee benefits. (No one said this is easy or fun.)

- Research the availability of federal grants, such as money from the economic stimulus package.

- Consider using trained, supervised volunteers from team or community groups to handle some landscaping, cleanup, raking, or fundraising to augment your budget.

To reduce maintenance costs:

- Concentrate on trouble spots instead of entire fields.

- Cut back mowing or topdressing schedules.

- Use cultural practices instead of chemicals if that can adequately fix a problem.

- Use less pesticide and fertilizer, still paying attention to label rates so that you get enough bang for the buck.

- Use slow-release instead of quick-release fertilizer and/or reduce the rate of application in low-traffic areas.

- Shop around for products. You might be

surprised that better deals are available.

- Use field paint that contains a plant growth regulator to reduce re-painting time.

- Restrict high-priority field use to cut down on maintenance needs.

- See if you can get lower-priced two-year contracts instead of one-year contracts from outside vendors.

- Be more efficient with your irrigation. Try soil penetrants, evapotranspiration monitors and scheduled run times.

- Review your electric and water use rates and schedule irrigation at off-peak times to reduce utility costs.

To pare equipment costs:

- Look into borrowing from each other. Some parks departments have found they can share equipment with golf courses, for example.

- Cut down on wear and tear by rotating equipment between crews that put on a lot of hours with crews that don't.

- Keep up with routine maintenance to prolong equipment life.

- Look for advertising tradeoffs.

Connie Rudolph, head groundskeeper at Midway Stadium in St. Paul, MN, arranged a tradeoff with a local equipment company. In exchange for advertising the company, Midway is allowed to use a piece of equipment for the season.

The big challenge in implementing any financial cutback is explaining it to the staff and the facility users. Communication with all "stakeholders" is key.

"Their input is critical in helping to determine how limited resources can best be utilized," notes Wightman. "As part of the communication process it's important to stress the direct relationship between required maintenance and safety and liability issues."

In order to make convincing arguments that you need your slice of the budget, you need to understand the big picture. And you need to have your own facts—what costs are associated with each aspect of your work.

Be prepared to justify why a certain piece of equipment or maintenance practice is essential. And be able to explain what the harm would be if it was cut from the budget.

If cuts are essential, work with rather than against the appropriate budget managers to make sure your priorities are heard.

Keep the lines of communication open with your staff so that they're informed about the cuts and understand why they're necessary.

Hold staff meetings and listen to your staff. The front line often produces the best suggestions.

Try to present the situation honestly but with a positive attitude. Your staff will reflect your optimism or pessimism, and that in turn will be reflected in productivity.

Remember, too, that a network of peers is available to you for consultation through the Sports Turf Managers Association.

Diane Stafford is a business writer and workplace columnist at The Kansas City Star. Read her articles at www.kansascity.com or <http://economy.kansascity.com>. She can be reached at stafford@kcstar.com. ■