

Better fields in spring come from work in the fall

Editor's note: Some readers no doubt have had a rough spring due to the rough winter. This article points out some things you can do this fall to make next spring easier no matter the weather.

ATHLETIC GROUNDS PERSONNEL across the nation know how important post-season field maintenance is to survive and get a jump on the next season. In the Northeast we experienced a winter season that most have not seen. Mother Nature dealt us not only one Nor'easter but three, one in December followed by two only days apart in February. Since spring sports start the first week of March, we were looking at more than 30 inches of snow on the grounds with multiple piles and drifts throughout.

We questioned when the fields would come around to get the athletes out—would the fields not only be safe but would they hold up due to the extreme amount of moisture they were holding? During the February storms we knew that the ground was insulated well and ironically the frost level was minimal at most since once the plow trucks left the hard surfaces they became swamp



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buggies at best. The last week of February warmed during the day to above freezing and of course the synthetic turf fields started to show through with the exception of where the snow drifts had formed. Ironically we found ourselves considering whether to plow them or not (we have always stuck to our guns in not plowing them due to the damages that can occur).

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the infields, aerations of the natural turf and all the goalmouth repairs had survived the winter season well. Now the waiting game was on waiting for the fields to dry. Surprisingly, within 3 days of the snow melting the fields started to come around to where we could aid in the drying process. Our most prominent tool (a new Smithco battery-powered infield groomer) had yet been on any fields since we bought it in December and never had the chance to test it.

Using the center bar tines to scarify the infield and making small adjustments to any grading issues we were able to open 15 baseball/softball fields in the first week of the season. Some may say this is luck, some may say so what, but the bottom line is learning that the post-season, fall field preparation is probably the most valuable thing we can do. Put the fields to bed at the end of the season in a condition that is better than when the season starts is the most valuable thing one can do.

We accomplish this in many different ways. We limit the outside users on the number of events that a field can withstand, we have changed our season ending dates for outside users to work our schedule (the season ending date on the middle school fields is 3-4 weeks before the high schools) this allows us to work the fields, rebuild the mounds and plate areas, correct any major lip area although by teaching the outside users this is minimal, add material where needed, topdress the fields, aerate and heavi-

ly seed as well as apply a late fall fertilizer.

We identify any/all fencing repairs, scoreboard issues, benches, bleachers and pathway repairs that we can do during the slower winter months with or without snowfall. By staggering the dates we shut fields down we allow the outside users to schedule accordingly, allowing them the most time our fields will support. Having all baseball and softball fields to bed by Thanksgiving is always our goal and then we concentrate on the multipurpose fields with a deadline of December 7.

We have learned over the years that the more we work with our users, from the Pee Wee leagues to the Senior Adult leagues and all those in between, whether outside permitted user or our own athletic teams, in how to care, manage and make daily repairs allows our end of season bedding of the fields much more manageable and the cost is minimal compared to total renovations. With budgets being cut we have already placed ourselves in a position to hopefully survive the cuts and

restrictions that are still to come.

Do yourself a favor, talk to users, listen to their concerns and make a willing effort to work with them. Many of them have resources available that we may not know about, many are willing to spend time working for a common goal; many can raise funds that the school district cannot match by increasing taxes. Funny how residents will scream, kick and fight over raising taxes but will turn around and hand over money to children when they come knocking on the door or hold fund raisers to support a good cause.

I guess my grandmother was right when she said \$1 was too much to spend but when sold for 99¢ you made a killing. Give up your penny to earn a dollar, you may find yourself on the winning end. ■

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