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Synthetic turf maintenance advice from STMA Conference

WEBB COOK, Executive Vice President of Liberty Sports, LLC, has helped develop a number of infill synthetic turf systems and helped form A-Turf, Inc., in 2002. He has been the chairman of the Synthetic Turf Council’s Membership Committee and co-chairman of the Business Practices Task Force. Cook has been responsible for the sale and installation of more than 150 synthetic turf fields in the US.

Cook spoke on synthetic turf maintenance at this year’s Sports Turf Managers Association Conference in Orlando. Here are some notes from the discussion.

- Cook said you need to let the infill settle in on a new synthetic field—don’t start

brushing it right away. It takes 4-5 weeks to settle. You can’t water the field to accelerate this settlement!

- He also said big topdresser machines move the carpet around; better to use a utility vehicle with a spreader attachment, which is smaller and better for synthetic turf.

- For field hockey, the first year playing on the carpet is the worst, Cook said. To re-level infill in spots, drag another piece of the synthetic carpet, fiber-side down. This helped settle infill for one audience member, who added that this method did not create any static, which of course just brings the rubber back to the top.



- Cook said standard practice includes drag brushing once every 3 weeks; the idea is to get the infill material settled and staying settled rather than moving it around all the time.

- Cook is not 100% sold that brushing helps keep carpet fibers upright. "Perhaps, but it's possible these installations could use more infill material," he said. "Manufacturers don't like too much brushing; they view it as additional wear."

- Tines are too aggressive, he said in response to a question about a specific piece of equipment. "[They] have made some changes but I say one tine is better than three tines; you want to keep from getting the drag too deep into the carpet," Cook said. You now can adjust that machine to groom before games, he said.

- Cook stressed the importance of removing debris from synthetic surfaces. "Don't let it build up," he said. "It's imperative to get leaves off the field as soon as possible."

- Keep all contaminants off the field. He

recommends using a pull-behind rotary brush that picks up some infill but then screens it back into the field.

Ted Stavropoulos from the University of Hartford said he runs a GroomAll four times a year, twice in the fall and twice in the spring. He said it has hydraulics and some guys don't like that, plus it takes a larger unit to pull it than a utility vehicle. [The GroomAll is designed specifically for maintaining infilled synthetic turf surfaces.]

Cook said forced air field blowers are great tools to clean fields as long as you're blowing parallel to the ground so you don't blow off the infill. But these blowers can help keep debris off your field.

Regarding brushing or cleaning and the field's seams, Cook said regardless if your seams are glued or sewn, you shouldn't see damage unless you go directly along the seams. Pine needles are particularly difficult to remove and will contaminate the surface if they are not removed, Cook said. Use a rotary brush machine to help keep them out.

In-laid field markings: Cook said the more markings you have, the better chance of a problem occurring. "If you use a product that will remove paint and you paint and remove, paint and remove, too often you are wearing the fiber," he said. "In-lay for sports you know you are going to play and don't put in more than three sports."

Cook suggested in-laying center of the field logos, saying the paint will build up otherwise.

For high-wear areas, such as the "short corner" in field hockey, you must keep infill levels up; these areas can become completely devoid of infill if they aren't tended well.

It is still important to convince coaches to rotate practice areas just as you would on natural turf, Cook said. For example, in lacrosse goal areas, infill must be added regularly or brushed back into place, he said. Otherwise the goalies could wear the fibers down to the base.

Sliding into bases will move infill and make a hole if not re-filled as well.

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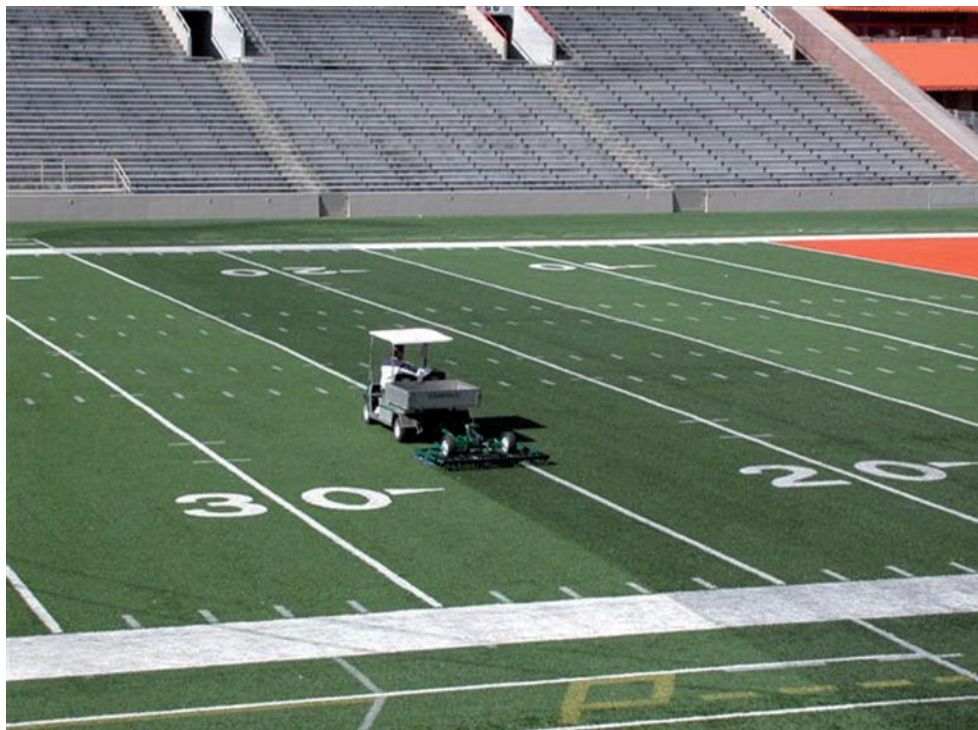


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Clay from infields mixing into the synthetic surface is a dilemma, too, said Cook. "Dirt gets into the carpet and you just have to stay on top of getting it out," he said. "If you let it get wet then it's really tough to get out."

Cook recommended having your synthetic field deep cleaned every 3-4 years, at a cost of \$3,000-\$5,000. This process, which one audience member said he could do in 6 hours on a football field, includes de-compacting the infill, freshening the carpet fibers, and cleaning out dirt and other contaminants. The audience member said the current trend is deep cleaning once a year after a field is 3 years old. He added that to keep dust and small particulates out of a field, management should "plug in upfront money" for these deep cleanings that eventually will be needed.

"Dead fiber" is a fact of life on synthetic fields, even on monofilament systems. You may collect 5-10 pounds of fiber in a trash

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“If you use a disinfectant once a year for a few thousand dollars, any thing living will be killed and it can help clean the carpet,” said Cook.

can—this is normal, Cook said. Right now it is legal to put them in regular trash for landfills now, though he says the industry is working on other answers.

Please don’t drag soccer or other goals on the synthetic turf—pick them up. They can catch seams so they need to be lifted. Work with coaches to rotate, rotate, rotate.



Cook said he is not a fan of anti-microbial disinfectants that coat the carpet fibers and pointed to Dr. Andy McNitt’s study at Penn State showing staph doesn’t originate or live on synthetic fields. “If you use a disinfectant once a year for a few thousand dollars, any thing living will be killed and it can help clean the carpet,” said Cook.

Or, an audience member suggested managers could buy enzymes, which he recommended.

If you want a two-toned field, have alternate panels put in rather than relying on striping the field, which can wear the fibers and move too much infill around, said Cook.

Cook said gluing gives a flatter seam and a wider bond. He doesn’t see any benefit to gluing and sewing seams. In-lays are always glued and this is where you see problems with pieces coming loose. To repair, make sure and clean the area with a vacuum, use contact cement, and get weight on it as it dries.

When using a Terraplas or similar system to cover the field, watch how much weight you put on the field, you can still damage the fibers or the base.

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