



Allen overcomes drainage issues, wins College Softball award

MICHIGAN STATE TURF GRADUATE KARI ALLEN, CSFM, working with just a seasonal crew, won two 2010 Sports Turf Managers Association Field of the Year Awards, one for her work on the Village of Lisle (IL) Sports Complex at Benedictine University softball field and another for the baseball field. This month we highlight her winning the College Softball award.

Benedictine University, in a suburb 25 miles west of downtown Chicago, is a Catholic university in the Benedictine tradition that offers 19 athletic programs and competes in the Northern Athletics Conference in Division III. Their softball field (Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass and annual bluegrass) was built in 2004, has never been renovated, and sees about 850 hours of action a year. Allen reports she overseeds selected areas with both 100% perennial ryegrass and a 70/30 Kentucky bluegrass/perennial rye mix. The soil is native loam with no sand.

“Within the sports complex I am responsible for 28 acres in addition to the softball field,” Allen said in her award entry. “This includes three other grass fields, one synthetic field, and seven common landscaped and grass areas. Outside the complex I am

responsible for laying out and painting whatever type of field necessary on an open area which is rented out. I also have to help lay-out and paint logos when needed around campus.”

DRAINAGE CHALLENGES

“The greatest challenge I face on the softball field is drainage. Games are commonly played with kids sloshing around on a wet outfield. There is no subsurface drainage system, and the field was not properly graded during construction. There are areas of the field where the grade noticeably allows for water to run toward the skin rather than away from it.

“The skinned area, however, is graded for excellent positive runoff. The incorrect slope, along with high and low areas, is so vast, the only way to really fix it would be a total renovation. With that option being out of the question, I find other, inexpensive ways to deal with the inconsistent runoff and outfield drainage.

“We had the field DryJected a couple of years ago and I did notice some improvement from that. That is also when I began topdressing areas that hold water with calcined clay, several



times throughout the year. I have noticed that these areas are more playable after a rain event than they were before implementing this strategy.

“While more expensive per ton than sand, my ordering calcined clay doesn’t raise an eyebrow. Furthermore, I know we would not be able to make the commitment necessary to begin a sand topdressing program on this field, and would likely add to the problem at hand with potential layering issues.

“I also try to combat drainage issues by at least swinging by the softball field and hitting the trouble areas whenever I have the aerator hooked up for any other reason. I am unable to aerate as aggressively as I would like throughout the year due to field use and access to equipment, but I try to make up for it come fall. I also try to stick with the light and frequent irrigation philosophy so that water doesn’t end up running from higher areas to lower areas. If need be, I hand water an area as well.”

“This softball field gets a high amount of use. After the college season, there are generally two youth baseball or softball games played each weeknight, and a tournament every weekend, consisting of approximately 14-15 games plus a skills competition.

“Depending on the level of play, bases can be set at 60, 65 or 70 feet, and the mound is moved anywhere from 35 feet to 50 feet. For this reason, the wear tends to be spread, and we can usually stay on top of repairing it before a hole gets made. Wear is spread in the outfield as well, and tends to not become noticeable. We have kids stand on the warning track when swinging bats and hitting wiffle balls before games and try to get them to move off the foul line to play catch as well.

“Another challenge is the small amount of manpower available. To combat this, I use time-saving measures whenever I can. For example, I spray pre-emergent herbicides on the warning tracks because there tends to be annual bluegrass and some crabgrass that pop up there.”

Allen works for Sodexo, which manages 35 college facilities throughout the country; the company’s team at Benedictine also includes Peter Charcut, who has more than 35 years grounds experience.

SportsTurf: What changes are you planning to make to your maintenance plan for 2011, if any?

Monthly maintenance plan

March

- ✓ Spray herbicide (pendimethalin) on warning track only for preventative control of annual bluegrass and crabgrass

April

- ✓ Aerate with 5/8-inch solid tines
- ✓ Fertilize with ammonium sulfate 0.5 lb. N/M
- ✓ Take and submit soil samples for testing
- ✓ Mow 3x/week
- ✓ Spray herbicide on warning track only for control/preventative control of broadleaf weeds

May

- ✓ Fertilize with 25-5-15 0.5 lb. N/M
- ✓ Spot topdress with calcined clay
- ✓ Mow 3x/week
- ✓ Spray herbicide (glyphosate) along outfield fence on warning track as needed

June

- ✓ Fertilize with 25-5-15 0.5 lb. N/M
- ✓ Spot overseed areas

showing wear and areas prone to wear

- ✓ Mow 2-3x/week

July

- ✓ Aerate with solid tines
- ✓ Fertilize with 25-5-15 0.5 lb. N/M
- ✓ Spot overseed areas showing wear and areas prone to wear
- ✓ Spot topdress with calcined clay
- ✓ Mow 2-3x/week
- ✓ Spray herbicide (glyphosate) along outfield fence on warning track as needed
- ✓ Add warning track material as needed

August

- ✓ Fertilize with 18-3-18 0.5 lb. N/M
- ✓ Mow 2x/week
- ✓ Spray fungicide (curative application)

September

- ✓ Aerate entire field in two directions with solid tines
- ✓ Fertilize with 18-3-18 1.0 lb. N/M

- ✓ Spot overseed areas showing wear and areas prone to wear

- ✓ Spot topdress with calcined clay
- ✓ Mow 2x/week
- ✓ Spray herbicide (glyphosate) along outfield fence on warning track as needed

October

- ✓ Re-sod badly worn areas
- ✓ Aerate entire field in two directions with hollow tines & remove cores
- ✓ Fertilize with 18-3-18 0.5 lb. N/M
- ✓ Spot topdress with calcined clay
- ✓ Mow 2x/week
- ✓ Edge entire infield
- ✓ Have skin re-graded
- ✓ Add warning track material where needed

November

- ✓ Fertilize with 15-0-30 1.0 lb. N/M (dormant fertility application)
- ✓ Spray fungicide on entire field for snow mold prevention





Allen: I'm kicking around the idea of using some vitrified clay on the skin to aid in moisture management this year. There are pros and cons to that in my situation here, but I think the pros may outweigh the cons. I actually made several changes to my maintenance plan for 2010, and hope to continue the implementation of those practices this season.

The main tasks I am speaking of are increased aerification, spot topdressing troublesome areas with calcined clay, and seed banking in common wear areas. One change I will be making is delegating all responsibility for carrying those 50-pound bags to my young, strong student workers, and having my boss, Peter Charcut, make all chemical applications. No, I have neither gotten lazy nor acquired a larger crew—if all continues to go well, my husband, Jay, and I will be having a baby in September!

ST: What's the best piece of turf management advice you have ever received?

Allen: As my greatest sports turf mentor, Raechal Volkening has given me tons of useful advice, whether she's realized it or not. One thing she stressed to me 10 years ago, when she was more confident in my ability to be a head groundskeeper than I was, is "If you're faced with a situation you've never dealt with before, pick up the phone. Chances are, a fellow STMA member has been there, or knows someone who has conquered the challenge you're experiencing."

An equally effective piece of advice that I now think of often is, "Remember, it's just grass. In the grand scheme of life, it's just grass. It isn't really, but it is." I can't remember exactly who told me that, although a couple people are coming to mind. We can so easily and unintentionally make our fields the first priority in our lives, or get worked up over details that are out of our control, especially for those at high profile facilities. While there are very important aspects to our jobs, we need to make a conscious effort to keep our priorities straight.

ST: Speaking of which, how do you balance your work and personal time?

Allen: Work/life balance is not a big issue for me in my current position. I punch a clock and work a standard 40-hour week. The weekly daytime hours are when the fields are experiencing the least amount of use and I am able to perform necessary maintenance. Student workers are scheduled to cover the evening and weekend events.

Having said that, I do understand that many turf managers are working 80-100+ hrs per week in season. I've been there and am very fortunate to have a husband who, in addition to helping out around the house, is a sports fan and sometimes comes to the ballpark to hang out with me during games. I used to bring my dogs to work too, where they got lots of attention and playtime (and had the job of chasing seagulls off the field). Whether you're working 30 or 130 hours a week, I've found that it's very necessary to take your vacations and holidays and spend time with your family away from it all. Make sure the people you value know they're a priority in your life.

ST: What's your most valued piece of equipment and why?

Allen: I would have to say my mower is my most valued piece of equipment. I'm tempted to say the aerator, but people aren't going to complain to me if the field's not aerated. The grass on our softball field grows the most consistently throughout the season, compared with our other fields. The soil is a native loam and holds nutrients better than our sand-based baseball field, and the soil's not nearly as compacted as that on our practice fields. If I didn't have the other pieces of equipment we use regularly on this field, I could get by. I don't know what I would do without our mower, though. Even though they're not pieces of equipment, I also value my student labor tremendously. I would not be able to produce a quality surface without them.

ST: Are you yet involved in "sustainable" management practices? If so, what are you doing?

Allen: I do not use any of the latest technology/equipment that is available, or methods that would require any sort of renovation to implement. However, I believe responsible turf managers have been practicing "sustainable" management at least as long as I've been in the business, longer I assume.

First and foremost, we implement good cultural practices to keep the turf as full and healthy as possible, which also limits pest infestation. We build a fertility program based on soil test results and plant needs, rather than blindly applying fertilizer. We irrigate based on turf needs and the weather forecast, particularly considering evapotranspiration rates, which means there are weeks I'm adjusting irrigation run times almost daily. Integrated Pest Management is a form of sustainable management. We identify pests and make more spot treatments than blanket applications of pesticides. We scout for insects; I have found a few grubs but not in quantities meeting thresholds to require insecticides, so I have not treated for grubs.

Sometimes we use a backpack sprayer with herbicide to spot-treat weeds, and I'll also mix herbicide in a spray bottle to carry with me on the mower and hit weeds when I see them. Our fungicide applications are more curative than preventative, and we always use the lowest rate that will work in our situation. We monitor weather conditions and make applications accordingly, insuring the greatest efficacy, and limiting things such as leaching, runoff, and volatilization. I do not believe 100% "organic" for example, is the way to achieve sustainability. Rather, educated and responsible turf managers can be counted on to be environmental stewards. ■