



Points to consider about moving into facilities management

MANY SPORTS TURF MANAGERS that pick up this magazine every month are perfectly content with managing the playing surfaces they do presently. Another segment aspires to see if the neighbor's grass is greener. Some of us work toward the dream of being "in the big leagues," which may mean something completely different to you than to me! Others set a goal of moving into a higher level of administration. This move could mean many different things depending upon what your organization looks like. The turf management industry contains so many different job titles and opportunities it can make you dizzy!

During the fall of 2008 senior administration at Iowa State University Athletics asked me to consider expanding my role from that of the turf manager to that of Facilities and Grounds Manager and soon thereafter, Director of F&G. Primary in their focus was a planned two phase renovation for Jack Trice Stadium, a 50,000 seat on-campus stadium. During this same timeframe Athletics was also scheduled to assume management of the 14,000-seat arena, Hilton Coliseum, which

was then being managed by a third-party management company.

Even today I'm not sure if I was offered the opportunity or if it was forced on me. Bottom line is I was ready for a new challenge and had felt that way for a while. Thoughts of managing fields at a different facility had been coming daily. My expertise was in managing athletic fields so—honestly—the thought of moving into or absorbing facilities management hadn't occurred to me, let alone doing it for my present employer. As we often times do, I took the path of least resistance and started almost from scratch learning a new industry: facilities management.

In our profession, maybe more so at the college and high school levels, this transition to facilities management is fairly common. As sports turf managers we work extremely hard to be in position of influence with administrators. We know watching countless events hosting countless fans have taught us a few things about "what works and what doesn't" when discussing operations. The daily grind of field and facility preparation has taught us soft

>> **MIKE ANDRESEN, CSFM**, handed over the reins to Jack Trice Stadium's field to Tim VanLooy, CSFM.

skills important to position us to be influential in our work micro-environment. Many sports turf managers wind up walking the path I'm on. Some are very good friends and I've watched from a distance for years at how your transition played out and is playing out. Please let me say "you make it look much easier than I've found it to be!"

To be clear, by most accounts I'm doing OK but every day brings new challenges. I'm also caught thinking, "I have no idea what those people are talking about" more often than is comfortable. There are six points I'd like to make to those in position to, or who might be considering a move to directing facilities as well as the grounds departments at school or university or other entity.

Close your mouth and open your ears. I believe it was STMA giant, the late Dr. Henry Indyk, that spoke the following quote at a long ago National Conference and I never forgot it: "The more you talk, the dumber you get." Not sure if it was a general statement or specific to me, but as long as I live it'll be locked down to memory. I just wish it was easier to do!

My expertise is not in knowledge of the fine aspects of plumbing, electrical or mechanical systems. Knowing this, I rely on people having a basic need to help others. STMA members do it collectively better than any group in the world. Take advantage of employees, peers, commercial friends and any other quality resource to help you learn what you don't know. It sometimes takes a few times knocking on my brain before it opens up and the light of understanding turns on.

As sports turf managers know there are many ways to accomplish the same task. Since many times I don't even know one way to accomplish some of these tasks, it's in my best interest to turn the exercise of learning into multiple choice by asking numerous folks their opinion and then picking the most reasonable one. I also know that just because someone thinks they have the answer to my

problem, they may be as clueless as me. I try to be the one that doesn't claim to have all the answers.

Know your maintenance team's role. As the sports turf manager at ISU I understood what the job focus was. As Director of Facilities and Grounds I've been blind-sided a few days with numerous duties I didn't realize fell under our team's sphere. I have come to understand much more globally how the athletics department is put together. The politics are clearer. Our responsibilities are critical to intercollegiate team successes, fan enjoyment and customer service. Your department depends on you to "polish the crown jewels" and put the best face on your facilities and leave meaningful impressions on guests. Also, as important as I knew the recruiting process was for teams, I still had it underestimated.

Talk to your coaches. Coaches travel nationally and see athletics facilities at many levels during recruiting and competition seasons. They know what they like and dislike. They also know what they want. You normally don't have to ask them that! Hopefully your coaches also clearly know what they need to flourish and what they can live without.

In my new role I have a different relationship with coaches. Relationships are not necessarily fostered through daily discussions and casual chats on their fields anymore but are in more formal meeting environments. Trust between you and coaches is just as critical as ever and I'm grateful to have developed good trust with those coaches over the years. They have to trust that you and your team are as committed to their team's success as even they are. In this regard I am extremely fortunate by now working with a sports turf manager (Tim VanLoo, CSFM), facilities managers (Brett Weiland and Brian Lamb) and a key program assistant (Allison Taylor) that each understand and carry out communications better than I probably do or ever did. I honestly feel like all parts of this puzzle are heading in the same direction and we trust each other better than at any time since I've worked here. Hire smart and manage easy.

I must be honest, though. Going from being the sports turf manager to being the supervisor of the sports turf manager was a transition I was kind of nervous about. We limped for more than a year with folks doing double-duty around here in anticipation of hiring the new sports turf manager. When we posted the position it was obviously critical that a special person was needed to fill the position. Iowa State offers opportunities that are found very few other places, such as there being only one full-time turf manager on staff, a student pool that is as good as anywhere, and the opportunity to be an integral part of the university's academic mission.

Besides managing fields this person would be very much an instructor and mentor. Aside from all of this, the new sports turf manager was going to manage the baggage of being supervised by the person that held the position for 15 years before his or her coming on staff! Great candidates were interviewed but Tim VanLoo, CSFM has been a perfect fit for Iowa State. Tim's had great patience in allowing me to figure out my new role relative to field management. Honestly—and I'm not so proud of this—it was difficult at first to turn away from doing the work I'd done for 15 years and watch someone else take over that role. My hands were definitely full of other responsibilities and I knew the guy we hired could do the job better than I could but it was still challenging to find a bal-

ance that was healthy and rewarding for us both. Tim knew this would be a learning curve for me and had the utmost consideration for easing the transition with me. We checked with each other consistently to make sure one of us didn't feel like the other was feeling displaced or having difficulty. From day one, we threw that "elephant in the room" out into the open and discussed it.

I've tried to error on the side of "these are Tim's fields now" and have stayed out of the way; in hindsight possibly to a fault. There is a fine balance between my staying far enough away so that people know Tim is the sports turf manager and staying so far away from his work that Tim might feel alienated or possibly that I'm not 100% supportive. I'm being very honest that nurturing this fine dynamic is critical to each of us feeling completely comfortable with each of our new positions.

I had a year or more to plan for a new sports turf manager hire and this very crucial dynamic was one I hadn't prepared properly for—and it may be the most important chemistry element of all! After a full year I can honestly say Tim and of course the others I work with have been supportive of our vision and patient with the transition. The benefit to our employer is obvious; we have the employee with history of our fields and resources and we have an exceptionally gifted young sports turf manager to take the whole program up a notch. Believe me, I could not be prouder and it's going to be a fun ride!

Know the department's vision. Know your role in helping carry out or determining the department vision. Athletic directors and senior administrators have their visions. If whoever is in that role at your facility hasn't conveyed it to the facilities and grounds team, ask them to. When you go on a trip you don't just start driving and trust you'll end up somewhere nice! You define it, you map it out and you set off on the most efficient way to successfully reach the target.

Our university is not one of the "big boys" in the arms race of college athletics. We are forced to maximize budgets and often times left to do repairs or renovations in phases or settle for the Chevy fix instead of the Cadillac fix. Clearly seeing the boss's vision helps each of us understand in a nutshell that we may not have the fanciest things but we should be the hardest working or the "craftiest" at what we do.

Know what makes people tick. In our profession we feel as though we're climbing uphill every day of our career. Some turf managers work in facilities where it seems they're starting from scratch each day of the growing season and just the basic tasks are a challenge to accomplish in a long day. Others are able to spend adequate time working on the fine details as well as the basics of what our user groups or employers need. One might fit my style and one would probably be very challenging.

As I now serve as more of a coach than ever before, it's important to have the players put in positions where they will succeed. Our staff has dramatically changed the past 5 years. The folks I work with now have different strengths and interests than the folks before. Know what is important in the lives of your staff and ensure their batteries get recharged by getting to do them. This may mean I cover a manager's duties on the first day of deer season in exchange for his covering me on opening day of trout season. We're all more enjoyable to be around when our focus is on work and not

“wishing we were somewhere else.” Mental health sick days are allowed at our place.

When your staff is small, empower and allow each member of the staff to make decisions and then “have their back.” It’s cliché but true: we learn more by our mistakes than we do by our successes. Challenge your staff and acknowledge their value. Allow each person the opportunity for growth.

Learn and understand the capital project process and your role in that process. A very gratifying part of my transition is being part of the capital projects team. Since many or most capital needs are field or facility related in one way or another it’s natural that the position I serve be a player on that team. Our athletic director understands the value of deferred maintenance. His stance is that money is precious around here so it’s imperative we take care of what we do invest in.

As turf managers we always aspire to be a bigger player in the decision making process of project design. We toil on our fields and analyze many things while on the seat of those mowers and machines! We’re fortunate to see other facilities while traveling with teams or through chapter workshops or National Conference Tour on Wheels events. Through networking we learn many do’s-and-don’ts from our colleagues, practitioner and commercial, around the country. Develop a good mental filing system of things you’ve heard about or seen first-hand and roll the best of those into your facilities. Better yet, take pictures! When you’re asked to step to the plate and represent your department in the design phase rather than after the fact during the maintenance phase, swing the bat! We’re able to bring to the table all those opinions and comments we’ve heard or spoken throughout the years of managing fields and facilities. Some properly get shot down but even more of them have validity and end up improving the project.

Know that there are days that my new position is a great struggle. I was looking for a new challenge when this one was set in front of me and it certainly has been and still is a formidable challenge. I make mistakes every day but I think I’m learning from those mistakes and thank goodness my employer and the great people I work with keep showing patience.

On the other hand this has been a very gratifying journey in many ways. For years as a sports turf manager I heard about and then professed the “soft skills are critical to success” philosophy of management. I’m certainly a work-in-progress (aren’t we all?) and struggle every day to feel worthy of leading a department. Skills I learned from fellow sports turf managers are the skills I rely on every day. It doesn’t matter what the environment is, we succeed or fail based very much on communication and soft skills; with customers, contractors, designers and certainly with fellow employees. If you’re offered an opportunity to expand your position jump in with both feet! Know that the skills you learned as a sports turf manager and as a member of STMA will be the ones you can lean on throughout your career. I’m still a sports turf manager, now just from a different perspective. ■

Mike Andresen, CSFM is Facilities & Ground Director at Iowa State University in Ames. He is a past president of the Sports Turf Managers Association and one helluva fisherman.



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