



Lone Star turf: Texans share their grass management experience

Editor's note: This article was written by Adam Slick, who works for Jacobsen. We appreciate his sending us a report from his trip to Texas.

» **Above:** CHRIS MORROW, field supervisor for the Dallas Cowboys' practice facility in Valley Ranch, TX oversees 4 acres of TifSport bermudagrass.

» **Below:** CHRIS MORROW uses a penetrometer to measure compaction on his turf. The ground pressure from linemen can push readings to 700-800 psi.

TEXAS TURF has always been a battleground. In fact, the state has been under six different flags during its storied history. For sports turf managers in the Lone Star state, the battle rages on. We recently visited four professional sports fields in Texas to learn how they handle the daily rigors of managing turfgrass in one of the most challenging climates in the transition zone. We learned that they're fighting much more than just Mother Nature.

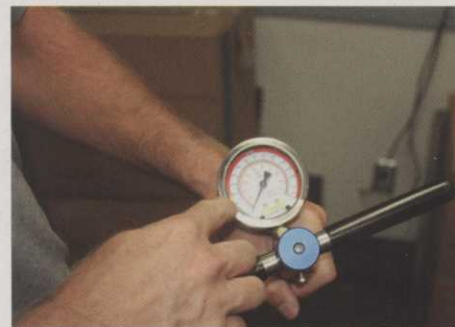
COWBOY COMPACTION

Chris Morrow is the field supervisor for the Dallas Cowboys practice facility in Valley Ranch. He's a one-man show, playing several positions on the Cowboys' squad including spray technician, mechanic, field painter and grounds manager for 4 acres of turfgrass.

Before coming to the Cowboys, Morrow helped manage the turfgrass for the Carolina Panthers at Bank of America Stadium. In Dallas, Morrow maintains TifSport, a cousin of 419 bermudagrass. The breed gives him a thick rhizome mat, which holds up better to the 300+ pound linemen that wage war between the hashes on his field.

"The compaction from the players is probably my biggest challenge," says Morrow. To monitor the compaction, Morrow uses a penetrometer. "A reading above 300 psi tells me I've got compaction out there. By mid-season, it might be 700-800 psi in the middle of the field."

To open up the soil, Morrow uses a variety of different applications including high-pressure water, core aeration, verticutting and his newest toy, a linear de-



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— Chris Morrow

compactor called the Shockwave that penetrates the soil with large, rotating metal blades.

Morrow also uses reel mowers to trim the playing turf to 3/8 inch and the surrounding field grass at 5/8 inch. He raises that to 7/16 or 1/2 inch when overseeding with perennial rye in October.

"In my experience, bermudagrass does its best below 1/2 inch. I think you get better stolon coverage at that height," says Morrow. To stay on top of it, Morrow will mow all 4 acres himself, six times a week, which doesn't leave much time for maintenance. He leans on local Jacobsen dealer Luber Bros. to keep him up and running.

"If I need anything at all, the guys are out here the next day, which is great," says Morrow. "With just me out here running the show, I can't afford any downtime."

STANDING TALL IN ARLINGTON

While Morrow likes his grass on the low side, down the road in Arlington the Texas Rangers are playing a whole different ball game when it comes to turf height, as director of grounds Dennis Klein explains.

"As you would expect, Nolan Ryan, our owner, president and CEO is big on defense and pitching. He asked me how we could slow things down and I suggested growing out the infield," says Klein.

And grow it out they did. Klein and his team keep their Y2 zoysia grass as long as 1 3/4 inch during the season. It's too long for a reel mower, so the crew uses a rotary mower with a roller on the infield.

"Of course, the hitters don't like the tall grass but the pitchers love it," says Klein. "Also, unlike a lot of infields you see, we don't stripe it. Some players can lose the ball in the patterns and we don't want to make the game any harder than it already is."

» **THE TEXAS RANGERS** practice solid tine aerification twice a month and pull cores once a month.



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» A MAINTENANCE CREW MEMBER for the Texas Rangers mows a walk-out. In the background, another worker rakes thatch from the infield, which is kept at 1¾ inch to slow down the infield.

The outfields and walk-outs, both 419 bermuda, are maintained with reel mowers. “We like the groomers on the Jake ECLIPSE walk mowers, they stand the grass up better,” says Klein. “You can tell the difference, especially on the walk-outs, which typically see a lot of traffic.”

Klein uses solid tines twice a month and core aerifies once a month. If the Rangers make it deep into the playoffs, like they have the past 2 years, fall temps are warm enough for Klein to stay with bermuda. By December, temperatures drop dramatically and the team uses grow blankets to keep the soil temps up to 15% higher. They only overseed with perennial rye in the spring.

GOING GLOBAL IN THE COTTON BOWL

When it comes to turf traffic, no one sees more in Texas than the Cotton Bowl. The turfgrass at the legendary 93,000-seat municipal stadium, first built in 1929, is managed by Roland Rainey. Although it plays host to college football games, including the annual Texas/Oklahoma matchup, it’s also become one of the top soccer fields in the world. During the 1994 World Cup, the Cotton Bowl was ranked the number one field and was once ranked the number two soccer field in the world.

In addition to soccer and football, Rainey also hosts the Texas State Fair, large concerts and various other events throughout the year. Luxury retailer Neiman Marcus recently held an event at the Cotton

Bowl that required a 120-foot tent installed on the field. Managing the field within extremely tight deadlines is Rainey’s biggest challenge.

“One week we have to paint the end zones purple and black for Grambling vs. Prairie View and the next week we go orange and red for Texas vs. Oklahoma,” says Rainey. “To prepare for that, I’ll grow the grass 1/8 inch higher in the end zones, and then mow that out after the first game. We then put down a white base and put on the red and orange the next week.”

The wide variety of events also includes a wide variety of turf demands, as Rainey explains.

“It’s disrespectful for us to have American football lines on the grass for international soccer games, so we grow them out before a match, which can take up to 3 weeks,” says Rainey.

Rainey also has to deal with varying demands within each sport. “The Mexican and Latin American soccer teams like shorter grass for finesse play and we’ll cut it at ½ inch for them,” says Rainey. “But the Europeans play a more physical game, so when we host teams like Germany, we raise it up to ¾ or more.”

After the Texas/Oklahoma game, he will oversee with perennial ryegrass. One year, they let the bermudagrass go dormant and painted it for their bowl game in January. “The Arkansas coach said the field played better than when they were on it in September. I think that’s because they won the game,” Rainey says with a wink.

The Cotton Bowl is one of just a handful of municipal stadiums left, including the L.A. Coliseum, the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, RFK in Washington and the Liberty Bowl in Memphis. Of all the municipal and professional stadiums, the Cotton Bowl has the smallest staff and budget.

“With such a tight budget, we don’t have a lot of money for maintenance equipment. We’ve been using the same Greens King IVs for years because they fit into our budget and they’re very easy to work on,” says Rainey. “They do a great job for us.”

» THE COTTON BOWL IN ARLINGTON, managed by Roland Rainey, plays host to NCAA college football regular season and bowl games, international soccer matches, concerts and various other events. The Cotton Bowl is one of just a handful of municipal stadiums left in the United States.





>> A COTTON BOWL maintenance crew member prepares the field for a soccer match between Cruz Azul and Club America, two top teams from Mexico.

A MOVING EXPERIENCE IN HOUSTON

When plans for Reliant Stadium in Houston were first developed in the late 1990s, designers developed an ingenious turf system that allows the grounds maintenance crew to move natural grass in and out of the stadium to accommodate a wide variety of events. The mobile turf system makes Reliant Stadium one of the most versatile venues in the country and allows the turf to recover faster, providing a world-class playing surface for the NFL's Houston Texans.

Sports fields & grounds manager Brandon Smith and his team work with 8 x 8-foot puzzle pieces of turf that reside in 2,700 trays. The 173,000 square feet of turf spends most of its time outside in the Reliant Stadium parking lot. Each tray has an 8-inch sand profile, a layer of geotextiles, plastic and burlap on the bottom for circulation and water filtration. The trays are also equipped with forklift channels on the bottom, which promote air circulation.

Brandon grows more than two full fields outside so he can rotate in fresh grass as the

season wears on. He uses a color coding system to keep track of the turf sections.

"The goal is to give our players fresh grass every week. Ninety percent of football is played between the hashes," says Smith. "With this system, I can easily rotate out the middle when it sees too much wear. It's one of the reasons NFL players consistently rank us as one of the top fields."

Moving the trays into the stadium is an 8-10 hour process that uses five flatbed trucks and a fleet of forklifts. Once inside, the venue serves as a micro-climate that gives Brandon some unique options.

"When we're inside, I can close the roof if we see rain coming or turn up the air conditioning to condition the air and dry the surface," says Brandon. "We water, roll and mow inside the stadium. I can pretty much do everything except aerify and verticut inside the stadium. I actually prefer to oversee inside because there's no wind and I get better seed distribution."

"These sports field managers are truly unsung heroes of the game," says Ron Lubber, vice president at Lubber Bros., the Jacobsen dealer based in Dallas. "They put so much hard work, creativity and dedication into managing professional turfgrass in one of the harshest climates in the country. We're proud to support these customers who present some of the greatest playing surfaces in the world." ■

>> Below left: A MAINTENANCE CREW MEMBER for the Houston Texans mows the playing surface in the parking lot outside of Reliant Stadium, where the field spends most its time. Behind the field is the Houston Astrodome. >> Below right: A fleet of forklifts position trays of turf to prepare for a Houston Texans home game. Brandon Smith, Sports Fields & Ground Manager for Reliant Stadium, manages a total of 2,700 8 x 8-foot squares of TifSport. After the game, the squares return to the parking lot where they are maintained until the next home game.

