



Transitioning infield skin from turf to dirt and back

FROM THE TIME the Little League Softball World Series Major Division moved from Kalamazoo, MI to Portland, OR in 1992 the tournament has been played on conventional 60-foot bases with a grass infield. This wouldn't typically be the norm for competitive fast pitch softball where one bad hop or errant throw could mean the outcome of the game.

With Little League International getting more involved with the Portland venue it was requested that the Main and East infields be skinned for the week-long tournament held in mid-August. Since most of the league play during the season for District 4 involves both boys baseball and girls softball the infields are left as grass, the mound circle is measured at 40-feet with an 8-foot radius, and the baseball pitching rubber is at the back at 46 feet. Twice the infield of the Main Stadium Field was stripped, regraded and big roll sodded with play 7 days later.

There are typically 10-14 days before the World Series starts after the last District Tournament for the host team to qualify. Then the preparation begins for the fields for

live television coverage by ESPN 2 for the semifinals and finals. Aeration, slice seeding, topdressing and fertilizing starts the day following the last tournament game, which can pose challenges to achieve great results before the tournament starts. However the field gets better every day and, interestingly, looks its best about 2 weeks after everything is over. The decision to go with a skin infield not only frees up some renovation time, but gets the field ready for traditional softball play.

On the first available day the sprinkler heads are marked and the two in front of the shortstop and second base positions are measured and capped. Then the infield grass is sod-cut at about 1 inch and quickly removed by a

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rubber track ASV skid steer and discarded. The existing soil is lightly tilled with a tow-behind Aerovater, breaking up the hard compacted soil and getting the dirt at a consistent mixture. Then 25 yards of Astoria Sandstone is added to bring the infield level up since almost 1 inch of 3,000 square feet of sod was removed. Then laser grading begins with a slight fall to 2nd and a ½% cone from the mound. Finally, two tons of Turface MVP are added, nail dragged in, and leveled.

This year's tournament featured a new look for the infield skin portion. By measuring every 4 feet down each baseline and the opposite grass edge area of a conventional 60-foot base infield, a string was strung out and, with the use of a Scotts drop spreader, Turface's new infield conditioner (Pro League Heritage Red) was spread in straight lines. Pulling the drop spreaders backwards allows for the product to come out faster and uniform. With practice, the application was done faster and more precisely.

Softball needs to have a white line to indicate the 8-foot radius where the pitcher can receive the ball. After the pitch the runners have to immediately return or advance to the next base. Inside the circle was completely filled in with a couple of passes of the drop spreader. The patterns were laid

out so that they had a continuous appearance all the way around. The tartan pattern was originally done for the opening ceremonies and only after the acceptance from the tournament director, Bob Hudlow, and ESPN 2 was it decided to repeat the pattern for the championship game. The Championship game went on without a hitch and the patterns easily made it through the 6-inning contest.

After the tournament is over the sprinkler heads are located. Then the infield is quickly regraded for a grass infield. Seeding was done in both directions with a Lesco slice seeder. The fixed spinning blades of the slicer act as a power planer and shave any high dirt and gradually smoothes the loose dirt over the seed. Since the seeding or sodding of grass will raise the height of the infield, the grading of the grass portion of the infield is lowered ¾ of an inch to prevent starting with a lip.

Grass lines are established by running a gas edger backwards to create a clean groove in the dirt. Using a landscape rake the inside of the groove is shaved down, allowing the grass to grow even with the infield dirt. This year the baselines were seeded as well to try to limit the maintenance for the unpredictable fall Oregon rain. With tarps for both the mound and homeplate available and the infield graded with a slight slope to

the back edge of the infield, rains can effectively be managed.

A starter fertilizer is applied with a broadcast spreader in both directions to give uniform coverage. A light raking can help spread out heavy or light seeded areas. Then grass straw mulch is applied at 100 lbs per 1000 square feet with a screen roller, much like a peat moss spreader. A light watering before the straw mulch is applied will help with the mulch to stick to the soil and not be so dusty. The grass straw mulch helps to hold moisture in as well as give the newly seeded infield a tint of green.

After a couple of weeks the sun bleaches out the color and the newly planted grass seed starts to emerge from the soil. Since a higher percentage of grass seed falls into the cut grass line edges they are more pronounced. If the ground is firm enough a quick light mowing with a push reel mower cuts the first shoot of grass blades allowing it to tiller more quickly and fill in. After a month another application of fertilizer will boost the top growth of the grass. With frequent watering and mowing the infield is ready in 4-6 weeks for the fall Little League baseball program. ■

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