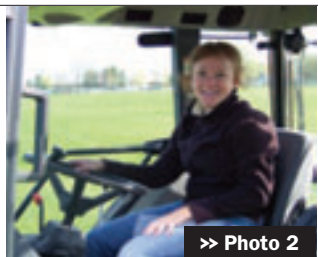
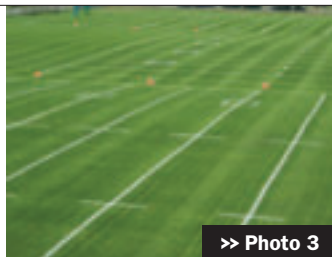


>> Photo 1



>> Photo 2



>> Photo 3



>> Photo 4



>> Photo 5

Managing natural turf football fields “on a dime”

NOT REALLY, come on, a dime? That title came about as a creative marketing urge hit me—and hopefully it will get you to read this article and not be too upset with the fact that I was able to wring a modicum of money from administration with the volunteer support I was able to round up.

First, a little history to put everything in proper perspective. In 1990, North Dakota State University contracted to have old World War II housing razed and converted into a natural turfgrass field. The contractor came in and did an excellent job of crowning the three fields and hydro-mulched an excellent blend of athletic field Kentucky bluegrass cultivars. The seeding operation was carried out in late August and by freeze-up and snow cover, a nice mat of green was showing up all over.

The following spring, was another story. The wipe out of the fields was almost complete (**Photo 1**).

It was at this point I was called in by the athletic director, football coach, and the head of campus landscape coordination, Wayne Larson. After a pretty detailed analysis and lab tests, we determined that the problem was not disease, but seedling juvenility and density. Like any good contractor, they made sure the operation was not going to come up short on seedlings showing up, as payment was contingent on complete coverage. Our North Dakota winters had simply wiped out the overcrowded and juvenile seedlings.

At the flattering request of the AD and coach, I was conscripted into helping to get the field into playable shape by fall semester. Of course, when a distinguished panel of folks like that ask for help, what else can you say but “yes!”

Going to work on literally a non-budget project, and belonging to the North Central Turfgrass Association (NCTGA) at the time, I surveyed the members to see if I

could ask for volunteer assistance in getting these fields resurrected. Fortunately, the vendor membership came through with donations of equipment, including a GA 60 core aerator, power rake (slicer), and topdresser with fresh topsoil. Seeding with an athletic field seed mixture (50/50 Kentucky bluegrass cultivars and perennial ryegrass cultivars), irrigation, good mowing practices that alternated the patterns, and keeping the height at 3.5 inches, along with a final touch up with a nitrogen and chelated iron solution tank mixed together, yielded results that everyone was happy with.

The Jacobson tractor athletic field mower (**Photo 2**) was also donated once the grass began to thicken beyond the capabilities of the campus machinery; being a powerful diesel, it made the job easy to do. The soil topdresser was donated by the Fargo Country Club, and I had hourly paid students assisting me at every turn (**Photo 3**).

Costs incurred were the fertilizers, student labor, striping the fields by landscape grounds personnel, and the grass seed.

The final touch was when Wayne Larson showed up about a week before the first practice sessions were to begin on the field and made his “magic” application of the tank mix of nitrogen and chelated iron. We followed that up with continued strip mowing, and the fields couldn’t have looked any better for the first day of practice (**Photo 4**).

The day the players arrived, the fields were ready for the 300 pound-plus linemen to work on undoing everything I accomplished (**Photo 5**).

Costs incurred were the fertilizers, student labor, striping the fields by landscape grounds personnel, and the grass seed.

Maintenance of the fields had to be scheduled around the twice a day practice sessions. Mowing was done during their lunch and afternoon breaks, irrigation was carried out during the evening hours, fertilization, overseeding, and repairs when they were on the road for an away game, and continued mowing at the 3+ inch height.

The way to get something done when there is a budget crunch – and I know, when isn’t there a budget crunch? Don’t be afraid to ask for volunteers (students, Master Gardeners), vendors, and workers as well. Belonging to state and local turfgrass/sports field organizations all helped in achieving this objective of getting the football fields into playable shape. I was fortunate to get the job done, and “employed” myself (as a volunteer) for the following 12 years to take care of these fields. It also involved my wife and two children, and part-time student help. The pay-off was season tickets for all the home games and that’s it.

Being required to “root hog, or die” I found myself being more resourceful than ever before in my life, and was very fortunate to have the support of my colleagues in the turfgrass industry, from surrounding golf course superintendents, to grounds keepers at other high schools, and colleges, to the vendors who serve the rank and file in this dynamic industry.

Ron Smith, PhD, is North Dakota State University’s Extension Specialist in Horticulture and Turf. ■