



◀ **GREEN**, unadorned open space is the soccer field at UWisconsin.

Golf to sports turf management: not always smooth transition

Editor's note: Hal Phillips, a writer for Mandarin Media, wrote this article for his client, Lohmann Sports Fields.

JERRY KERSHASKY left Westmoor Country Club in 2011, after decades as a golf course superintendent, to assume stewardship of all the sports fields at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. It was a natural hire, as part of his job involves overseeing the maintenance of University Ridge Golf Club, the 18-hole course owned, operated and maintained by the state's largest university.

Not long after he arrived in Madison, Kershasky presided over a renovation of

the UW football practice field. It was then he got a healthy taste of the differences between work in the golf world vs. work in the sports field world.

"I was called in after the whole thing was let out to bid," Kershasky recalls. "But I could see right away the sand particle size wasn't going to work. The specs were all wrong. The contractor was a landscape guy who didn't understand these things"—specifically, the field wouldn't drain properly if the sand materials specified for the renovation don't match the

sand in the existing subsoil, so far as particle size is concerned."

The way Kershasky tells it, the contractor who had secured the bid was none too pleased, and part of his distaste stemmed from the idea that some former golf course superintendent was lecturing him, condescending to him, actually, on the "basics" of turf drainage.

"We get a bit of that, but generally we see acceptance of new practices when the desired results are achieved, which is how it should be," says Jim Lohmann of Lohmann Sports Fields (LSF), a division of the Illinois-based Lohmann Companies, which includes both a course architecture division (Lohmann Golf Designs) and a course construction division (Golf Creations).

While golf business has bottomed out and looks to have begun a slow recovery, the 20-year course-building boom that started in 1985 created a glut of course superintendents and course contractors. The golf industry declined when the national economy declined, circa 2008, and many of those superintendents and contractors have migrated into the sports turf management and construction industries.

"We got into the sports field business in 2003, when it was already catching up to golf in terms of agronomic sophistication, technology and professionalism—and by that I mean the prequalification of contractors and such," Lohmann says. "There's still a gap, but the more firms with golf backgrounds get into sports turf, and the more those techniques are adopted and/or adapted, the more that gap is closing."

Most agree that golf industry training is a plus with its emphasis on promoting subsurface drainage and overall plant health, and that sports turf management is generally better for this injection of agronomic and drainage expertise.

"I never think it's a bad thing to see a well educated group descend on another area of the turfgrass industry," says Sports Turf Managers Association President Michael Goatley, PhD, a professor and extension turfgrass specialist at Virginia Tech University. "There are



▲ **Top: THE STRATEGY PLAN** for the Lakes Community HS football field. **Bottom: INSTALLED DRAINAGE** at Fifth Third Stadium, home of the West Michigan Whitecaps.

several former golf superintendents that I work with, here in Virginia, who switched careers into sports turf management long before the economic downturn. They are all very successful sports turf managers.”

But there are tensions and sport-specific nuances to be managed, as sports turf managers and sports turf contractors deal with what many golf-educated superintendents and contractors see as a new, higher standard of expertise.

Amy Fouty, the sports turf manager at Michigan State University since 2003, spent 17 years in the golf business before moving over to sports turf. (In fact, she’s married to a course superintendent.) “When I started on this side of the business, I thought ‘This is gonna be really easy’ having come from a golf background. But it’s not been that way at all. It’s different. Different conditions, different challenges.”

Fouty noted that over the past 20 years, golf courses have moved strongly toward

drainage systems that rely largely on sand. “And we went kind of crazy-overboard with drainage on athletic fields for a while,” she said. “But you can’t play football on a beach. You’re not going to maintain a good football field in 100 percent sand.”

Dr. Goatley concurred: “I think that many of the golf turf managers have probably been a little more in tune with spoon-feeding fertilization programs and attention to detail in irrigation management,” he said. “However, they will have to gain experience in the different types of traffic between the different types of players and equipment on the turf, as there is great disparity between the traffic imparted on a golf green vs. that of a heavily trafficked athletic field. And probably the biggest edge trained sports turf managers will have is skin-area management, for baseball and softball fields. There are equal parts art and science in this area of sports turf management, and the ‘art’ must be gained by ex-

perience and by training with a skilled dirt manager.

“Many of the principles in construction are the same... some of the soil mediums change due to the necessity for varying soil strengths, drainage, etc., but I think contractors who know their business will apply their knowledge equally well in both areas. It’s no surprise that a constant theme for success in both areas is drainage, drainage, and drainage.”

RESOURCES ARE KEY

Jim Lohmann would add three more key words: resources, resources, resources.

Lohmann Sports Fields cut its teeth in the sports turf business by handling high school

and park district projects. It has grown to the point where it works with large universities, including a renovation of the new varsity soccer field at Wisconsin-Madison, for Kershasky, and resodding the famed gridiron at Notre Dame Stadium. LSF has also built minor league baseball diamonds across the Midwest.

But the firm still handles school and park district projects, and it’s here that Lohmann feels the golf background is even more applicable because it often brings with it cost efficiencies, and ongoing agronomic consultation.

“These schools don’t have a lot of resources, so if the job isn’t done properly, it ends up costing them a fortune,” he says. “People will call me and say, ‘We have 3-year-old field and it’s not draining.’ First thing I’ll say is, ‘Are you aerifying?’”

A good example is Lakes Community High School in Lake Villa, IL where the school, through a local contractor, built a brand new football field that experienced serious drainage and settling issues before its first season had even finished. It had a huge crown on it, which, according to Lohmann, is usually a good sign that whoever built it was relying on surface drainage—which means the contractor probably didn’t equip it with enough sub-surface drainage.

“We came in and stripped between hash marks and incorporated 500 tons of sand, rototilled it in and herringbone-drained the middle of the field,” he says. “We mellowed out the crown and it’s been great. They love it but they spent money with us they didn’t need to spend, if the build had been done properly the first time. A big university might be able to take a hit like that, but high schools can’t.”

LSF revisits Lakes Community every year to aerify and topdress the field, a mainstay of every golf maintenance regimen. “You can effectively enhance drainage in a topsoil field but if you don’t aerify, it will get hard and create a layer that water won’t get through,” Lohmann says. “You’ve got to break up that

You can run into all sorts of problems if you’re dealing with a landscape company that hasn’t properly built a field before

material and fill in the holes with sand to maintain a porous soil profile.

"But that costs money, too, and school districts may not have the money, equipment or manpower to do this sort of thing. We've encouraged quite a few to share [aerification] equipment. Park districts, too. It's also pretty common for us to help school and park district clients with ongoing fertilization programs. Without huge resources, you've got to get creative sometimes."

Kershasky is an unabashed proponent of using golf contractors in sports field construction. LSF rebuilt the new soccer field in Madison and Nebraska-based Landscapes Unlimited, another course builder that has expanded into sports fields, rebuilt Wisconsin's new softball field. Kershasky is confident his staff of turf managers can manage "finished" turf just fine going forward. But contractors? He wants someone with golf expertise involved, and the earlier the better.

"Having a Lohmann or Landscapes there merely to help write the specs is a big advantage from the get-go. They know and understand what they're bidding on," Kershasky says. "You can run into all sorts of problems if you're dealing with a landscape company that hasn't properly built a field before. That's what happened on our football practice field."

"Basically, people who've been trained in golf course management, if they've gone to Penn State or an ag school, for example, they understand all those basics, even if they're working in construction. Contractors like Lohmann push all those things. They understand it. They understand all sands and soils are not created equals. They understand if you just spec 'sand,' for example, you can really screw the thing up."

Kershasky returned to the sand issue: What if you can't get the right sand locally? "Well, it changes the price. As a state system, we have many hoops to jump through in the bidding process. It just emphasizes why you have to do it properly."

This sort of attitude surely stirs resentment in those contractors who don't bring golf cred to the table.

"Some of them are resentful," Kershasky says. "But if you can prove a

method is better, that what you say is true, they come around. If you go and take a core and you see the roots are all in the top quarter inch, and you squeeze it and the water is just dripping out rather than passing through the profile, then they get it. But yeah, initially, they say 'What the heck! They're just talking big'."

Fouty agrees with Kershasky that the biggest gap persists in the area of construction: Your typical golf contractors continue to bring more to the table when compared to your typical sports field contractors, many of whom have landscape backgrounds. However, she thinks the difference between sports field managers and golf course superintendents is overplayed and is fading away due to an uptick in sports turf education.

"Time management, organization and communication skills—those are the big things that I brought with me from golf to this job. A better working knowledge of chemicals, types of fertilizer... you just deal with more products in golf," she says.

"But today, sports turf management kids are far better educated at the college level. You used to be considered a sort of outdoor janitor at a stadium. Of course, a long time ago, you just mowed the grass and you were considered a superintendent. Things evolve."

Dr. Goatley said that collegiate golf-turf programs were, for a very long time, far more popular and prevalent. So it's no surprise there has been a migration of personnel from golf to sports turf.

"But student interest has changed over my career as an educator, with golf still attracting the larger number of students, but with an increasing interest in sports turf management training," he said. "And for those who are moving from golf turf into sports turf, getting involved in their local STMA chapters and getting to know their fellow sports turf managers will benefit everyone. Both groups have expertise that will benefit their peers. But one group needs to reach out and another needs to be receptive." ■

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