



12 ways

a turf manager can help to elevate baseball team defense

IN PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL, the players are the product, without question. As turf managers, we provide the context for the game itself. Our daily goal is to enable the players to play the game to their maximum potential. The modern groundskeeper at the professional level generally does not doctor the field drastically for the home team daily, as may have been done in decades past. However, he can make subtle adjustments to the field that over time should advance the progress of the team. Much of what I will discuss does not necessarily lead to favoring one team over another. The key is to focus on providing the best possible environment for players to perform.

Players play, it's their game. All we can do is promote quality play by providing a consistent surface. Think of your field and how it appears as the managers exchange lineup cards with the umpires at home plate. Essentially, you have given the players a blank canvas. One of the beautiful moments in baseball is the top of the first inning. Not knowing what the next nine innings will offer is part of the daily excitement that motivates me to work on the field year after year. It could be a good day for the hitters, maybe some spectacular defense, or perhaps a no-hitter. These are the

things a fan comes to see. Our job is to provide a field that facilitates both routine and outstanding play.

Think about that blank canvas for a minute. Ask yourself what you can do as a professional turf manager to provide a consistent surface for 70 or more home games per year. Turf cut at the same height daily, crisp and smooth edges, even and predictable hops throughout the infield skin area. There are different ways to achieve things with infield maintenance, so I tend to focus on two words as we work: **emphasize results**. The results of your work are

what players see every day. Most of them have no concept of what your processes and routines are each day, and most do not care either. It is all about results with footing, ball roll and ball bounce. Here are 12 ways you can help to elevate your team's defense.

1. THE CATCHER'S AREA

Providing your catcher with footing that is firm, moist and comfortable will help him handle the pitches and throw competitively. It is critical to keep this area level with home plate so your catcher is able to transfer his weight effectively and stay on top of his throws to the bases. Another consideration is the dirt behind home plate, directly in front of the catcher. These areas have a tendency to get hard and baked, as they are not worked up by spikes. The key point here is that most of the short hops on pitches in front of the catcher land in this area. Proper appli-

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cation of moisture to this area and daily work with a hard, steel rake is essential. Use a controlled, fine-mist nozzle here; to test this spot, bounce a baseball to check the compaction. Grooming this area will allow the catcher to cleanly block balls with his body.

2. DIRT IN FRONT OF HOME PLATE

Visualize a pitcher making a quality pitch, getting the hitter to hit the ball at a downward angle, with the ball striking dirt out in front of home plate first. As long as I watch baseball, my view will be that this circumstance should produce an out. By keeping this area moist and a bit softer than the infield dirt, you can slow down the speed of the ball. This helps infielders be a little quicker with their first step. It also gives the pitcher a chance on comebackers. Balls that hit hard, compacted dirt on their way up the middle tend to not only get by the pitcher but by middle infielders as well.

Keep in mind how little reaction time your 3rd baseman has, especially on balls hit down the line. Slowing down the ball a bit will give him a chance on backhand plays that may otherwise have been doubles. While extra moisture is a plus in this area, keep in mind that your catcher needs to field bunts there, and hitters coming out of the batter's box need firm footing. By rototilling a high percentage of calcined clay here (keeping it away from batter/runner take-off area), you will hold more moisture and reduce compaction, thus improving playability.

3. TURF EDGE IN FRONT OF HOME PLATE

Professional teams may only take infield practice once per homestand, if at all. One part of infield practice for the catcher is taking throws from the outfield. Getting a read on the difficult short hops on these throws is not easy. It is necessary here to keep a smooth and level edge, so the catcher gets a clean bounce. Another point here is that the turf edge needs to be flush with the dirt, so that bunts can roll consistently to the infield turf.

4. BASELINE WIDTH

Historically, baselines were 6 feet in width, with the foul line directly in the center. Today we see a great deal of variation in this area. Growing the turf in fair territory closer to, or in some cases right against the foul line, can help slow down balls that may have rocketed past your 1st or 3rd baseman for extra-base hits.

5. PITCHER'S DEFENSE

Fielding by the pitcher is usually not very pretty. Usually, it consists of a reflex by a guy teetering on one leg after hurling a ball downhill. The last thing he needs is a wicked hop at the last instant off of a clay-baked patch of dying turf. We all battle the ongoing problem of wear and stress on the turf in front of the mound. Keep the pitcher in mind as you plan how often you will need to bring thick-cut sod into this spot during the season. Pitchers also have to charge off the mound to field bunts. They may plant and throw or do the pivot, spin and fire move to get an out. I am conscious of this when irrigating the infield during a homestand. My goal is to dry down the turf ahead of the game as much as I can, as the schedule allows. Doing so will help with footing in the infield.



6. TURF MANAGEMENT

My goal during the course of a baseball season is to maintain a consistent height of cut for every game day. We mow each day we have a game, so that the players know what to expect. All professional players have their own internal “game clock” that enables them to know how much time they have to make a throw or complete a play. Keeping the speed of the ball consistent allows both the infielders and outfielders to have a comfort level with the field conditions.

Your choice for height of cut will depend on geography, climate and management practices. The manager and players may have a say in that as well. Regardless of choice for height of cut, I have seen good results in the field when the cut is the same each day. Also, be aware of what your mowing patterns can do to the baseball. Take the time when the team is out of town to try and stand up the turf by mowing in alternate directions.

We also have had good results the past few years with the use of trinexapac-ethyl consistently every 15 days. The speed and density of the turf has been very good and the overall quality improved. Seed banking on the infield, particularly in the spring, has been very beneficial as well as we try to maintain dense turf through an entire season.

Finally, with our sand-based field, we have altered our method of aeration slightly. We now topdress first, aerify and clean up the cores, then finish by running a greens roller over the turf. This gives us an extremely smooth finish and helps maintain playability at a high level.

7. THE 1ST BASEMAN

This is a high-traffic area that needs to be micromanaged daily. If your 1st baseman continues to wear out grass in front of the cutout, consider making the cutout larger. There are many options for designs of cutouts that look good and play well. Keep in mind that the cutout in front of the leadoff area can get quite hard if not maintained. Keep a hard, steel rake nearby and monitor moisture.



The area around the base and the leadoff corridor are two spots we spend extra time on. After a game, we will sweep them out just like we do the batter's boxes and then water to establish moisture in the base. The next morning we fill in, grade with a level-board and roll. This process keeps the material fresh and the area firm and level. Both of the leadoff areas at 1st and 2nd base are spots we keep an eye on and will level out and roll when the team is out of town. Another area to watch your grade is where the 1st baseman plays with no runners on. They are the least mobile of all of the infielders, so a low spot may soon appear there after a number of games. Finally, consider the dirt a few feet along the foul line past 1st base. This area can get hard and doesn't get worked too much by your nail drag. It requires a bit more water so that the last hop does not dart up at the fielder.

8. INSIDE EDGES

Batting practice is a great time to evaluate the state of your inside edges. There is more to it than keeping the lip down. You

want the ball to bounce true as it makes the transition from turf to dirt. This means keeping that first few feet of dirt from the edge level with the turf. You must also be conscious of that first few feet of dirt getting too hard, particularly as you turn and pivot your walk-behind mower there. Remember, any spot on the infield skin that gets overly compacted will require a bit more water to get it to ideal playability.

In terms of edging, consider that more frequent edging and hand rolling is a more efficient method of maintenance and will produce better results. During a homestand, walk your edges and be aware of not only lips, but ledges as well. A ledge is when the elevation of your turf soil is higher than that of your skin. When an edge has a ledge, a ball hitting the edge will gain a great deal of topspin. Instead of bouncing true, the ball will quickly roll and scoot, against the expectation of the infielder. This could cost your team a potential double play.

9. MIDDLE INFIELERS

Watching the game in person rather than on TV allows you to learn how your infielders move around in different situations. At the professional level, 2nd basemen have the arm strength to play back on the outfield turf much of the time. The shortstop has a longer throw, so unless he has a very strong arm, he will straddle the edge of the grass or be 2 or 3 feet in front of it. What is double play depth? The simplest explanation is: two full steps up and two steps in toward the bag. This allows the infielder to get to the bag faster to receive a throw to begin a double play.

I find that during the day, as I am nail dragging and working the dirt, it helps me to be able to visualize where the infielders play and what types of plays they will be making in different areas. This also helps with knowing how much water to put on the dirt. One other consideration for middle infielders is the 2nd base cutout. In front of 2nd base, where no one runs through, that cutout can be given a little extra water. Your goal is to give the infielder a true hop off the dirt on throws from the catcher. On a stolen base attempt, the infielder reacts reflexively as he picks the throw from the dirt and applies a tag.

10. BACK EDGES

Professional infielders have range that allows them to field balls in unusual places. They need to have confidence in your back edge. The elevation of the dirt needs to be perfectly even to just slightly higher than the level of the outfield turf soil. Again, I have found life to be easier by edging lightly and often. Because of the many types of shifts teams seem to employ on hitters these days, we make sure to walk and check the entire back edge each game day. Having a walk-behind roller around is vital, and allows us to keep the edge in top condition.

11. THE 3RD BASEMAN

Sitting at field level at a major league game, I still continue to be amazed at how difficult it can be to play 3rd base in the big leagues. The game is so fast and the 3rd baseman must constantly adjust his positioning to suit the situation. We spend quite a

bit of time daily on the 3rd base cutout and the edges in front of the player. We want to be sure the edges are clean, the dirt has enough moisture and the topdressing quantity is consistent. In addition to the calcined clay we use throughout the infield, we will also add some vitrified topdressing before the game in this area. Keep in mind the area along the foul line past 3rd base as well. This area, approximately 3 x 40 feet, needs to be managed so that ground balls stay down. The 3rd baseman has virtually no room for error on backhand plays in this area due to the length of the throw to first base.



12. IT IS YOUR DIRT

To cultivate a quality professional infield, I like to think the infield dirt is alive, just like the turfgrass. I find it helpful to maintain an acceptable moisture level in the dirt all the time, even when the team is out of town. I don't like having to totally reestablish moisture just before a homestand. If weather forces you to tarp around the start of the homestand, and your dirt lacks adequate moisture down through the soil profile, the ball will start taking some odd bounces. As you evaluate weather for your turf, do the same for your dirt and water accordingly.

Some other thoughts: try to avoid moving too much loose material around when you screen drag, and consider using a smaller stiff mesh drag. If you choose to nail drag regularly, remember that a light nail drag is the most effective tool for day to day maintenance. Deep spiking is a renovation technique. You want to create a firm, moist base of dirt with some moderate topdressing as an upper layer. I have had good experiences with having calcined clay incorporated into the entire infield dirt profile. Heavy watering early or late in the day will be more efficient for soaking the entire dirt profile.

Finally, it is now widely accepted that new or renovated infield skin mixes have silt to clay ratios (SCR) between 0.5 and 1.0. Our SCR here at Target Field is 0.69. So, watch the game and look for balanced hops. If the ball bounces consistently throughout the infield, you are allowing the fielders to truly determine the outcome of the play. If your infield skin can take some speed off the ball, provide a true bounce and offer clean and firm footing, you've done a great job. ■

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