

# Keeping cool-season turf through the playoffs

**T**he number of events, shorter days, and inclement weather can make it challenging to keep turf cover through the middle of a football field through the playoffs. Though challenging, 100% cover can be achieved with careful planning and execution throughout the growing season, not just in season.

Regardless of the turf of choice, there are five key aspects that must work in concert to achieve a safe, playable surface that will maintain acceptable cover through the playoffs:

Proper grade/drainage. A proper laser-graded crown, minimum 1% - maximum 2%, based on soil type, etc. Proper drainage based on soil type.

Mowing. Maintaining the turf at the correct height throughout the growing season.

Fertilization and pesticide program. En-

suring the turf is maintained at a level to lessen stress throughout the growing season by applying the proper products at the proper rates and the proper times.

Aerification/overseeding/topdressing. Core aerification with a PTO-driven aerifier, maintaining 100% cover though seed banking and topdressing to manage thatch, create a seedbed and maintain a smooth surface.

Irrigation. Necessary to maintain proper soil moisture to maintain turf cover, germi-

nate seed and provide a forgiving surface to the athletes.

Achieve three or four of the five aspects above and the turf has a chance to be good, but not great. Complete all five, the turf will be strong and able to withstand a tremendous amount of traffic.

## PRE-SEASON/EARLY SEASON MAINTENANCE:

To achieve 100% cover through the playoffs begins in the off-season much like the athletes who play on the field begin with off-season workouts. Starting in the early spring, core aerification along with topdressing and overseeding with a minimum of 50/50 Kentucky bluegrass/perennial ryegrass at a relatively high rate (6-8 lbs per 1,000 sq ft) begins the season. Seed heavier through the hashmarks and along the sideline/bench areas. Seeding early allows for a late spring liquid application of pre-emergent products that will control the majority of crabgrass and goosegrass. To learn more about topdressing athletic fields and creating a sand cap, look up the re-

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search from Drs. Alec Kowaleski and Trey Rogers at Michigan State University.

## SUMMER MAINTENANCE

During the summer maintain the turf at the in-season cutting height and work to keep the turf as stress free as possible. Irrigate on an as-needed basis to ensure that the turf is not too dry. Fertilize with organic fertilizer or a synthetic fertilizer that contains at least 50% slow release nitrogen in late-May and again in early August. Consider applying fungicides as needed to keep disease pressure at a minimum and apply grub control in July. Furthermore, deep tine aerification and/or another core aerification should be considered in early June followed by a light topdressing. Overall, the goal of the summer season is to keep the turf as healthy as possible.

## IN-SEASON MAINTENANCE

The games begin, where will the wear take place? The same places that wear took place in previous seasons. With that said, create a seed bank across the playing sur-

face, with the concentration taking place in the anticipated wear areas. I have a saying, "If you wait until you see wear in wear areas, it is too late!" Seed early and seed often. As far as type of seed used, I prefer using a seed blend that consists of bluegrass and perennial ryegrass. Why? The ryegrass is necessary to take immediate traffic. At the end of the day, these plants will probably be removed by traffic each week. The time to establish straight bluegrass is in a dormant seed situation or in the early spring. A general rule of thumb is applying one 50 lb bag of ryegrass through the hashmarks every week during the playing season. This equates to a seed rate of 3.14 lbs of ryegrass per 1,000 sq ft per week. Along with overseeding, a light topdressing can follow or simply let the athletes "clear the seed in." Consider reading a research project from Dr Dave Minner at Iowa State to learn more about seed bank research.

A simple pre-game and post game plan: Thursday, overseed hashmarks with one 50 lb bag of perennial ryegrass (optional light

topdressing); Friday (or game day), blow off/sweep surface using a pull behind blower or pull behind sweeper. Mow field and fill divots and lightly roll field to push in any plants that may have been slightly pulled from the soil. Irrigate playing surface to alleviate plant stress

## POST-SEASON MAINTENANCE

After the games are completed, core aerify and topdress the playing surface. Consider using 3/4 inch coring tines and tight spacing. This is the one time to aggressively cultivate the field and topdress. Fertilize with a product containing 100% water soluble fertilizer at a rate of 1.5 lbs/1,000 sq ft. When weather demands, winterize the irrigation system and get ready for next year. ■

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