



▲ A unique checkerboard pattern was featured at the Little League Softball World Series at Alpenrose Field in Portland, OR. Photo by Profile Products.

FIVE STEPS to transform your field for tournament time

Editor's note: Jeff Salem is a public relations associate at Swanson Russell, based in Lincoln, NE.

Tournament season is supposed to be memorable for all involved, from the teams and players to the parents and spectators who spend an entire weekend, or longer, at the tournament site.

Field managers at any level of play can improve their fields with a few easy steps to ensure that players and spectators are presented with a tournament-ready field that is both presentable and playable.

1. MANAGE YOUR INFIELD SKIN

No tournament is going to give spectators and players the sense of something special if the basics aren't covered. Make sure the base infield soil is maintained effectively by dragging the skin and applying moisture. Prevent a dry, cracked infield by watering deeply in the days leading up to the tournament. Incorporating a calcined

clay conditioner like into the infield mix will help to hold moisture, releasing it slowly to create a balanced moisture reservoir in the infield mix, giving your field a consistent level of play throughout the tournament. Applying a topdressing layer before play ensures good footing on the surface and gives you a terrific moisture management tool if rains do threaten to disrupt play. Conditioners also help fight compaction and create a cushioned, playable surface.

Also, make sure there are no holes on the pitcher's mound or batter's boxes. Repair any low spots along the infield that could create unsafe conditions or lead to bad hops during play.

2. ADD A SPLASH OF COLOR

"Making a field pop goes a long way to creating an atmosphere at the ballpark where the athletes and spectators know that this is a special weekend," says Jeff Langner, brand manager at Turface



▲ **Georgia Tech** chose a dyed conditioner to give its field a distinct look. Photo by Profile Products.

Athletics. “Tournament season is a great time for field managers and tournament hosts to give the diamond a look that leaves a lasting impression.”

Oftentimes, Langner says, a little goes a long way to creating that visual impact.

For example, while it can create dramatic visual impact to completely change the infield color with a dyed conditioner, a field manager can apply colored particles in select areas only, at a much lower cost. It only takes a few bags of a professional-level infield conditioner applied to the mound and plate areas to help them stand out.

Other aesthetic changes to think about for tournament season include repainting the coach's boxes and the foul lines in the outfield.

3. BETTER THE BASE PATHS

A firm base path means a fast base path, which is a trait of any quality field worthy of tournament play. Top the first and third base paths with calcined clay—about two bags into the top inch of dirt along the paths—and moisten without saturating. Then, roll the paths until they are firm to maintain a safe infield throughout the tournament. Avoid dragging the base paths; instead, hand-rake those areas as necessary, which will keep the infield mix tight.

4. PREP THE SKIN

“Keeping a field safe and playable for the athletes should be first and foremost on the mind of any field manager put in charge of a tournament, even more than aesthetic upgrades,” Langner says. “Preparing the field for the elements and ensuring the ball bounces true throughout the weekend are great ways to pulling off a tournament worth remembering.”

Proper infield maintenance is critical for quality of play for the players. For starters, fix any low spots in the infield before each day of play. These are more likely to occur near the bases, in leadoff areas

and sliding pits. Low spots can be built back up by scraping away any loose material or conditioner; adding infield mix to the low spot (preferably matching the sand/silt/clay content of the base soil); and tamping it firm. Repeat this process until the area is up to grade, and then top with a light layer of conditioner.

Also, be on the lookout for lips, which can create dangerous conditions for the players.

Hand-raking the infield edges will prevent materials from building up in the edges of the turf and causing a lip to form. If infield mix works its way into the turf during routine maintenance or the course of a game, take a broom and sweep all loose materials lying in the turf back onto the skinned surface. Then remove any grass that is swept onto the infield with a rake.

Another option to remove lips is to use a garden hose and high-pressure nozzle and spray the infield mix and conditioner out of the grass back onto the infield dirt. Spray at a 45-degree angle toward the infield while someone else helps to pull the loose material out of the grass, using a hard-tooth rake.

5. PREVENT RAINOUTS

Summer thunderstorms are a part of life for many regions of the US during tournament season. Unfortunately, that means a lot of rain can pour down on a field in a short amount of time and cause long delays or even cancellations if the proper preparations aren't made before tournament play begins.

Prevent infield puddles from forming by properly grading the infield, taking proper care when dragging the field, and fixing low spots if they form. Again, topdressing with a calcined clay helps soak up excess moisture from a rain event to ensure good footing and prevent delays.

Preventing slick, muddy spots from forming in the outfield grass is important too. Apply a topdressing of soil conditioner like at a rate of 500 pounds per 1,000 square feet to protect the turf in advance of rain. This will help absorb any future moisture on the field while also helping amend the soil long term.

If a storm has already passed through the area, it's not too late to prevent a major delay in play. To clean up puddles in the infield, specially designed drying agents like can be dumped onto the area and raked as needed to eliminate water and mud. In the outfield turf, apply a soil conditioner directly out of the bag into the puddle or muddy area. Allow it to absorb the water and rake the material into the turf and resume play.

Take the time to walk your field and look for any potential hazards before the start of tournament play. Making minor repairs and small improvements can have a huge impact on whether your tournament is fun, safe, and memorable for players and spectators alike. ■

Swanson Russell represents Turface Athletics, which markets among other products Professional Mound Clay, MoundMaster Blocks, Turface MVP, Pro League, Pro League Heritage Red, Champion Brown, Field & Fairway, and Turface Quick Dry.