

# Baseball maintenance aided with right equipment and off-field tools

By Jason Kopp

**W**ith the official start of the baseball season upon us, sports field managers all across the country will be preparing their fields for the rigorous season that lies ahead. There are many tools at your disposal to assess your field conditions like the STMA Playing Conditions Index (PCI) and BTF Field Maintenance Guide. After completing either of these forms you may find one of the following conditions on your field raises a concern and needs to be addressed either before or during the season: irrigation, nutrient management, home plate and pitcher's mound repair, skinned surface maintenance, and/or edging and lip removal. These completed forms will help you get a plan in place to address these concerns and to have a successful season ahead.

The STMA PCI assesses your field conditions using a scoring system. The PCI worksheet is broken down into four sections: Resources, Activities, Agronomics Performance of Turf, and Baseball/Softball Specific. Within each section you select your answer that has a corresponding number based on various conditions. Once the worksheet is completed, add up the numbers and place the total score in the box provided—this is your field's PCI. Having a completed PCI on a field could also be a useful tool if you are planning to apply for Field of the Year.

Another useful tool is the Field Maintenance Guide form the Baseball Tomorrow Fund written with Murray Cook, a field consultant of Major League Baseball. When developing a field maintenance plan there are a series of questions to answer that will help in determining needs that will be critical to the overall success of the any field renovation project. The Field Maintenance Guide also provides a checklist for you to ensure you have the necessary equipment in the Suggested Maintenance Equipment section. You will also find in this guide a brief discussion on mowing practices, aeration, irrigation, and several other tasks that are performed throughout the season.

While various topics are discussed in these guides, having irrigation is probably the most critical ingredient, whether for the turf or to aid in moisture management of the skinned area. If you have a system installed already, doing your pre-season start-up will provide you with water needed to get your turf ready for the spring season. Throughout the season having irrigation to supplement insufficient rainfall will also be critical for proper turf care, skinned and clay areas. If you have multiple sites at one location or throughout an entire city, the latest irrigation controllers are an excellent option that give you control through any desktop or laptop computer.

If installing one is in the plans, understanding the soil type, water

service and flow, and field layout will be an essential part of the design process as will understanding the different rotors and nozzles available. Proper selection will ensure all areas get coverage to avoid hot spots in the turf that will come with the summer heat.

Turf concerns learned through these guides could be as simple as applying necessary amounts of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium and biostimulants to accelerate growth or it could be more complex like renovating portions of the field. When determining if a renovation project should be done on a particular field the rule of thumb noted in the guide is "if the turf has more than 50% weeds with a large amount of crabgrass or, if in the north, poa trivialis." Fall is the ideal time to do any field renovation which gives you the most amount of time until the start

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# Tools & Equipment

of the season for it to become established which can be aided by the use of growth blankets. While renovating the entire field may not be possible due to many factors such as timing, budgets, and sod availability; doing smaller portions can also be effective in addressing field conditions. A youth organization for which I recently did a field renovation was given enough sod to do the entire infield and foul areas up to third and first base. With this portion done we were able to put together a plan to aerate, topdress, and overseed the outfield selecting turf type tall fescue seed, which would match the sod they were given, and with its dark green color and resiliency it is the ideal selection for their climate and situation. Seed rates could vary depending on seed type and establishment rates. With all the new seed varieties on the market and research being done on many others take the time before selecting your variety to do some research. Sites like NTEP.org or your local extension agencies are great resources as are other sports turf managers in your area.

When renovating the infield it is a great time to repair/replace the clay in both the pitcher's mound and home plate areas and check the slope and height of the pitcher's mound. Setting the pitching rubber at the correct distance and height is the foundation to build the rest of the mound off of. Take the time to ensure that all the measurements are correct and the intersect at the center point by pulling a measurement from apex of home to second, first to third, and apex of home to left and right corners of the pitching rubber. The landing areas of the mound are easily gauged with a slope gauge which should be set so every foot out from the pitching rubber the height is dropped one inch. Install your clay bricks in the landing area and cover with a thin layer of mound clay. After tamping this area you can lightly cover with soil conditioner or infield mix. The rest of the mound should have a gradual slope towards the turf edge. Lightly rolling this area will ensure proper footing for player safety. Dig out each batter's box and catcher's box to a depth of 3 inches. Install clay bricks and cover with a light layer of mound clay and tamp. Cover with conditioner or infield mix. Keeping these areas moist and covered with tarps will be important throughout the season to ensure they do not dry out.

With the majority of the work complete on the turf and clay, it's time to get the skinned areas ready. Proper footing and moisture management on these areas will be an important matter for you to ensure player safety and water is able to drain off preventing game cancellations or delays. Most field guides call for a typical grade of .5% up to 1% on the skinned areas and 1-2% for other areas. This will ensure water drainage and a near level playing surface for player safety. If the area is already established as little as 20 tons of infield material could be used to properly grade the area. If it has been neglected or a full renovation is done it could take 80 tons of material. Once the infield mix has been evenly spread and graded it is recommended that you incorporate a conditioner into the soil at a depth of 2-3 inches. Topping this off with another thin layer of conditioner will provide added benefits and give it a finished look.

Edging the turf on the infield can be accomplished with a walk behind edger and rake or a more efficient method is using edger and broom attachments available from Toro and other manufacturers. Edging your field should be done on bi-weekly during the season to ensure player safety and reduce the likely hood of lip build-up. Throughout the season proper dragging of the skinned area and base paths will ensure proper moisture management and keep a level playing surface. Be sure to keep all drags 6 inches from the edge of turf and base paths are raked from home to first and third and not side to side.

With these task completed you can now be sure that you have given yourself the best chance at a successful start to the season. Keep using your checklist which should be updated throughout the season to ensure your equipment is maintained, applications are noted, and you take several pictures will all be resources for you to use to plan for next season as well as have references if any issues arise during the season. Best of luck this season!

Jason Kopp has been in the sports turf management industry for more than 15 years. He currently is providing equipment solutions to customers in the sports turf and grounds industries and serving on the STMA Information Outreach and Chapter Relations Committees. ■

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