



HOW TO AVOID THE FIELD WORK DAY BEFORE NEXT SEASON

▲ **Turfplaning the outfield** at the University of South Alabama, Mobile. The turfgrass manager is Zach Willard.

As we all realize, maintaining athletic fields and facilities can be a year round job for the coaches, groundskeeper, booster clubs, maintenance staff, etc. So often we hear of coaches setting a work day in January for “all hands on deck” and a long 12-hour or more day is spent edging, painting, cleaning bathrooms, concession stand etc. Here we will hopefully give you some ideas that can be put in place throughout the year that will help you avoid this on a cold, cloudy, dreary January day.

Typically, in most sports, there is some down time for the field. With travel ball, select tournaments and various leagues throughout the country, finding the down time is important and must be scheduled just like the weekend tournaments. Coaches and players might not like having access to the fields, but, if they realize that this is to keep them safe and playable, then it is easier for them to understand.

For timing purposes, we will use the baseball/softball season for colleges/high schools/parks and recreation (typically January 1 through June 30 in the South). As you are reading this, you might think “That doesn’t happen at my location,” but, with some planning, you can apply these field maintenance practices into your schedule.

JULY

The main focus during this time is your turf health. You want to aerify your fields as soon as possible to help reduce

the compaction from the season and aerifying will create space for the nutrients, water and oxygen to reach the roots to stimulate plant growth. Ideally, you will aerify in two directions immediately after the season to give your turf the most time to recover and become healthy.

Along with aerifying, you need to topdress with sand (USGA is recommended), but, if budget or availability is a problem, you can use washed, slightly coarser sand. Try to find sand that is free of debris and rocks. After aerifying in two directions, apply a heavy layer of sand up to ¼ inch, then mat drag the field to allow the sand to help fill the space created.

Other things to consider could be: vertically mowing, replacing sod, turfplaning, sand surface leveling of your fields or major renovation projects.

AUGUST

August is a great month to add infield mix to your skinned areas. The weather is warm and drier and therefore infield material will be much easier to work. We will save the discussion for what type of infield mix to use for another day, but, basically the areas you need to address will be: Low spots on your infield; the edges of your grass and skinned infield; baselines; mounds; home plate area holding water in the batters boxes; and bullpen mounds. With the infield and mound work, it is much easier to complete this time of year and will allow for the material to settle and be ready for the season in January. Try to

have your on-field work completed this month before you overseed your field so you won't be driving over your field.

SEPTEMBER

Overseeding is the next step in your process getting ready for the season. A few things to remember and check before you begin your overseeding: Irrigation is key to establishing a great stand of your overseed variety. We recommend taking time about 2 weeks before overseeding to check your system. Monitor all irrigation heads making sure they are rotating properly and getting adequate coverage (head to head). If not, replace or repair at once. By making sure the irrigation is in proper order, it helps with your overseed establishment. Once your irrigation system is working, the next step will be to prepare your field for the seed.

Remove most of the grass on your field by lowering your cutting height while trying to avoid scalping the grass. You will need to remove the excess clippings by sweeping your field to get it clean. Once clean, you can then overseed your fields. Ideally you want to use a drop spreader around the edges (infield, plate, baselines, warning track, etc.) so that you don't spread seed where you don't want it. The drop spreader can be used on the infield and lip areas; make sure you go in two directions with the seed.

For the outfield, you can use a walk-behind rotary spreader or a machine-mounted spreader, also going in two directions. Once you overseed, keep the seed moist until it germinates and then start backing off the water to help the roots establish. If your budget allows, you can add a starter fertilizer approximately 7-10 days after overseeding. We recommend waiting until you see the grass start to push up out of the ground before fertilizing so that the plant can use the nutrients available.

OCTOBER-NOVEMBER

If you didn't get all your clay work completed in August, now is the time to finish it and fine-tune your field. You want to minimize the traffic on your field so that the newly planted overseed won't be damaged and the field will be in great shape for the season. This is a great time to pull out your screens, nets, backstop padding, rail padding, tarps (mound/plate/bullpen), infield protectors, windscreen, etc. You will want to check for holes, tears, rips, etc that might have happened during the off-season. Repair or replace these items now and have them ready for the season in November. As with most items, once the season gets closer, manufacturers get busy and the timeframe is longer to get that replacement. Avoid the rush and shop early for items needed in January!

DECEMBER

Time will move quickly from Thanksgiving to Christmas to New Year's. With the downtime and getting ready for holidays, it is a great time for you to pull soil samples and get them to the lab for analysis. You will want to do this about the same time every year that will help you with your planning for the following year. Soil reports give you the necessary information—the good and the bad. The report allows you to target the areas that are deficient in nutrients. By having this



▲ Hoover Met Field overseeded for Hoover High School football. Sam King is the turfgrass manager.



▲ Left: Leveling home plate with mound clay at Stone County High School, Wiggins, MS. Field maintained by head coach Hayden Cox. Right: Adding clay to the Pensacola Blue Wahoos Field, Pensacola, FL, where Ray Sayre is head groundskeeper.

at the first of the year, it allows you to create a game plan on how to attack your fertilization needs going into the spring. This allows your turfgrass every opportunity to be healthy and grow.

Yearly equipment maintenance and repair can also be on the list of things to do in December. Some things to make sure happen are: sharpen bed knives, grind reels, change oil and fuel filters, replace batteries, make sure tires are in good shape, and repair any hydraulic leaks, worn hoses, etc. Have your equipment ready for the season means one less headache to deal with in January.

JANUARY

Final step is to add your conditioner to the skinned areas. You want to put your conditioner out before you do anything on your field. If you have the December camp and you plan for infield/outfield, then adjust your timeframe and have the conditioner on the field before players are there. The last thing you want to do is to have your field looking great and a 1-day hitting/fielding camp ruin your hard work.

As with most schedules, they can and probably will be adjusted. Take the time to plan ahead. January is a great time to create a yearlong calendar for the field and begin documenting what you do to your field. By doing this, it will allow you to plan for the next year and begin a yearly maintenance/checklist and will help you avoid the "all hands on deck" field day in January. Have a great fall and we'll see you in Denver at the STMA Conference. ■

Bill Marbet is president of Southern Athletic Fields, Inc.; Glenn Lucas is a sales representative for SAF in the South Alabama, South Mississippi and Louisiana, www.safdir.com.