

MAINTAINING SCHOOL ATHLETIC FIELDS ON LIMITED BUDGETS

Secondary school athletic administrators today face great challenges in maintaining sports fields. One of the 14 legal duties of coaches and athletic administrators is to provide a safe environment for student athletes that includes playing fields, yet athletic administrators are facing budget cuts that challenge the ability to do so. In an effort to maintain playing fields, the athletic administrator must be creative in field management and

must develop ways to acquire the needed resources with less money.

The limited resources experienced by most athletic administrators fall in one or more of the following areas: (1) Knowledge—a large number of athletic administrators do not have the knowledge or training relative to the care and maintenance of natural or synthetic turf fields. In addition, a growing percentage of principals and superintendents have little or no background in athletics and do not realize the importance of supporting the athletic administrator in maintaining safe playing fields; (2) Finances/

Resources—many athletic administrators are being asked to cut budgets in these challenging financial times for school districts; (3) Personnel—in many situations, the athletic administrator may not have a grounds manager for the sports fields or at best there may be a grounds manager for the entire school district of which the athletic fields would be a part of that person's responsibility.

The NIAAA has made strides in addressing the limited knowledge of some athletic administrators. The NIAAA Sports Turf Committee composed of both athletic administrators and individuals from the industry corporate side has developed a number of programs to educate athletic administrators relative to management of sports turf fields. Four courses have

been written on the care and management of both natural and synthetic fields. These 4-hour seminar classes are taught across the country by the NIAAA. In addition, the committee writes articles for the NIAAA's quarterly publication, *Interscholastic Athletic Administration*.

A third education program created by the committee is the annual sports turf seminar conducted at the National Athletic Directors Conference. All of these initiatives provide training for the athletic administrator in the area of care and maintenance of sports turf fields. Athletic administrators are encouraged to take advantage of other educational opportunities such as seminars or field days conducted by regional STMA chapters, by university agronomy departments or by companies in the turf industry. The NIAAA encourages its member State Athletic Administrator Associations to partner with an STMA chapter in their state to conduct sports turf seminars at state athletic administrator conferences.

It is not easy to address the limited personnel available to maintain the fields. If the athletic administrator is faced with a lack of staff to properly maintain the fields, there are some options. One is to designate funds in the athletic budget to hire personnel. This is usually not a viable option because the athletic budget is already stretched far too thin.

Another option is to ask the school district to allocate more funds to employ necessary grounds maintenance personnel. This is also a challenging option because of tight school budgets and the need to hire academic staff first. There is also the educational gap in many districts where the superintendent and/or school board does not understand the importance of maintaining safe fields. Unfortunately, too many school leaders learn the importance of safe fields the hard way when facing litigation due to an injury on an unsafe field. School districts then realize the cost

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▲ Bruce Whitehead, CMAA



▲ **School districts** should realize the cost of [professional] grounds maintenance personnel can be far less than the cost of settling injury litigation.

of an additional grounds maintenance person would have been far less than the cost of settling the injury litigation.

The third option for the athletic administrator to address this need is to seek in-kind labor from either the booster club or companies in the community who specialize in turf products or services. In many schools, the booster club can be called upon to provide labor and companies in the community can provide the expertise.

Acquiring the resources necessary to maintain safe fields does not have to be directly related to the athletic department or district finance available. Yes, it would be optimal if the athletic department or school district budget allocated necessary funds to purchase the required products, equipment and services but that does not always happen. In many communities a partnership between the school district and the park department or golf course can result in a sharing of the equipment to meet the needs of all entities. Partnerships between the school district and local businesses can also be developed. The school district might offer some advertising opportunities to local businesses in the event programs, on the public address during events or on signage at the venues in exchange for products or services.

Athletic administrators face a greater challenge today to provide safe athletic fields, but it is something we owe to the students participating in our athletic programs. It is a challenge that can be met if the school, the

community and the sports turf companies come together in partnerships.

Bruce Whitehead, CMAA, has 33 years in public education as a teacher and coach, and

for the final 25 years was Director of Athletics at Crawfordsville (IN) High School. While an athletic administrator, Bruce was a member of the IIAAA board (Indiana Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association), the IHSAA Board (Indiana High School Athletic Association) and the NIAAA Board. Bruce has been employed by the NIAAA for 13 years and has been the executive director for the past 9 ½ years.

ABOUT NIAAA

The NIAAA is located in Indianapolis and is the national organization for high school and middle school athletic administrators with 9,000 individual members. The membership includes athletic administrators from organizations in the 50 states, the District of Columbia and internationally. The NIAAA champions the profession of athletic administration through education opportunities, advocating ethics, developing leaders and fostering community. ■


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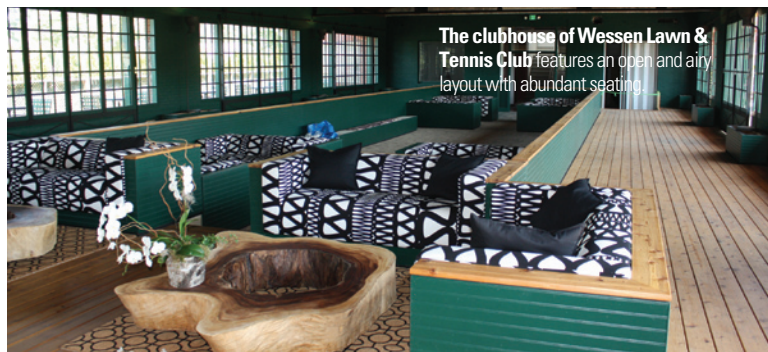
Wessen Lawn & Tennis Club Owner & Founder Bill Massie with his convertible Mercedes that serves as the marquee for his new tennis complex in Pontiac, MI.



One of Wessen Lawn & Tennis Club's 24 natural grass courts with the clubhouse in the background. The original building was constructed in 1919 and served as the Pontiac waterworks.



Just like at Wessen's inspiration, Wimbledon, players must wear all white.



The clubhouse of Wessen Lawn & Tennis Club features an open and airy layout with abundant seating.



Wessen Lawn & Tennis Club uses a Jacobsen SLF-1880 large-area reel mower to maintain its 24 natural-grass courts.

ARCHITECT BUILDS NATURAL GRASS TENNIS COMPLEX

Editor's note: This article was written by Jacobsen's public relations staff

What started as an afternoon musing during a tennis tournament turned into an obsession for Bill Massie.

"In 2008, while watching my 13-year-old son play in a tennis tournament at the beautiful Longwood Cricket Club outside of Boston, I thought to myself, 'I'm going to go back and build something like this in Pontiac,'" recalls Massie, an architect by trade.

The first thing Massie did upon his return was build a perennial rye test court. Other than mowing fairways on a

golf course for one summer during his youth, Massie had no experience or training in growing grass.

"I leaned heavily on Joe Vargas, professor of turfgrass science at Michigan State University," said Massie. "We threw the traditional golf-centric, sand-based agronomics out the window because this is literally a whole different ball game. A sand-based grass surface would never hold up to the rigors of tennis."

After mastering his ryegrass skills, Massie decided to take it to the next level. He purchased an abandoned recreation center and 50 acres of surrounding property in Pontiac, MI just outside of Detroit.

"It was an ideal site for what I wanted to do. There was an existing pool and clubhouse that we renovated extensively," said Massie.

With his architecture background and experience, Massie was able to prepare the site for tennis courts himself, doing much of the laser leveling and drainage work.

"I built a 14 x 80-foot trench that's about 10 feet deep and filled it with crushed concrete from the old building foundations. When it rains, the water runs off these courts almost immediately," said Massie. "I put a slight grade on the whole thing but it's a perfect plane so you would never notice. From one side of the property to the other, the turf actually drops a total of 18 inches."

The attention-to-detail can be seen all over the property. From the etched metal water fountain to the vintage tennis ball cans inlaid into the clubhouse bar, every inch of Wessen Tennis club has been meticulously and thoughtfully planned.

But as Massie will tell you, not all the Wessen plans went smoothly.

"It was the second week of September last year and we were sitting on \$6,000 worth of grass seed," says Massie. "Conditions were ideal and there was just a small rain shower in the forecast for that evening. We put all the seed down and almost on cue, it rained. And it never stopped. It rained an inch and a quarter in one hour and washed every last bit of seed into the river."

Heartbroken but not defeated, Massie knew the window was closing on the chances for a 2014 opening. He had new seed shipped from Oregon in just 3 days and had full turf growing by October.

"We dodged one bullet but got hit with another as the worst winter in decades followed," said Massie. "I thought we'd be able to do more to prepare for the cold but it came so quickly we couldn't do much of anything. We had record snowfall and record cold but as you can see, the ryegrass survived quite nicely."

"People tried to convince me to try other grass varieties but I knew ryegrass was the right choice, especially with the wear patterns and toughness," said Massie. "You

We put all the seed down and almost on cue, it rained. And it never stopped. **It rained an inch and a quarter in one hour** and washed every last bit of seed into the river."

could use bentgrass, but it would get very stressed from the wear. Also, ryegrass has no thatch, so you really get a good ball bounce. And it's no secret that these courts are really modeled after Wimbledon, which is also ryegrass."

To maintain the ryegrass on the 24 courts, Massie and his crew use a Jacobsen SLF-1880 large-area reel mower. They keep the grass at a height-of-cut of .375 inch, which would be considered fairway tournament height for a golf course.

"I love to get out there and mow, but there's a lot of pressure to finish the clubhouse and the pool, so I've been very busy with that," says Massie. "But I do look for-

ward to getting back to working on the turf side of things, that's fun for me."

Massie already has 105 members with a goal of 150 founding members by the end of summer. Like Wimbledon, players must wear all white on the courts.

Massie's plans for the future include bringing an ATP-level tournament to Wessen and have junior and pro players train for grass tournaments like Wimbledon.

"When people come out here and play, it's something completely new for them," said Massie. "And that was the vision all along of Wessen Lawn & Tennis Club: to give people a truly unique tennis experience on natural grass." ■





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