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The perfect match: core cultivation and fertilizer

BY BOB STAIB

A gronomists and turf managers have made remarkable strides in developing and improving natural grass playing fields for soccer, rugby, football, lacrosse, field hockey, and even baseball. The present surfaces are far more advanced than those that existed before the era of artificial turf. Still, communities and schools across the continent continue to endure a never-ending plight of muddy, bare sports fields with hard surfaces.

Twenty years ago, artificial turf was proclaimed the ultimate solution for athletic fields of all kinds. Prices were expected to come down to the point where every school district could afford artificial turf. But injuries mounted and the resulting widespread negative publicity prompted several university researchers to develop natural grass systems that matched the endurance of artificial turf. Some proved quite successful, e.g., the Purdue University-designed P.A.T. system.

But new technology has not lowered the price of sports fields. These modern systems remain out of reach for most school and community budgets. Maintaining a healthy natural sports turf field without breaking the budget requires going back to the basics of turf management.

Compaction is the enemy

Most sports fields begin the season with a solid cover of green turf. Northern turf is usually ryegrass, bluegrass/ryegrass mixtures, or turf-type tall fescue. Southern turf is usually hybrid or common bermudagrass, or tall fescue. But no single variety of turf is immune from wear and tear.

Compaction is the bane of nearly all turf surfaces. But compaction is not always due to human activity. Just plain wetting and drying of clay-type soils causes a hardness that acts as a barrier to percolation of air and water. Bounding, cleated foot traffic common to sports fields hastens compaction of all soil types. This traffic, combined with the ripping and tearing from game activities, increasingly reduces turf cover as the season progresses.

Sports fields should be core cultivated (aerified) at least twice a year: once in late summer or early fall and again in mid- to late spring. At these times the weather is more conducive to root formation and regeneration of vegetative cover. The cores can be removed or broken up by dragging them back over the surface several times. By reincorporating the same soil into the holes, turf managers save money on costs of top-dressing or sand. Care should be taken not to incorporate straight sand into clay soil as the distinctly different layers act as barriers to percolation.

Core cultivation is an extremely important cultural practice to use in growing superior turfs for sports fields. But timely slow-release fertilizer applications also have a direct benefit to the grass. Soil microorganisms use nutrients to enrich the life of the soil. Turf environments typically support an active microbial population.

A well-nourished soil has billions upon billions of both single-celled and multicelled organisms whose primary function is to break down decay-resistant plant tissue (thatch) and soil organic matter. In the process, they create humus, which helps to keep the soil porous and serves as the medium for banking and exchanging nutrients for plant utilization. They also extract and solubilize insoluble elements from soil complexes for later plant uptake.

Under adverse conditions, such as compacted soils that are often too wet or too dry, the numbers of microorganisms decline drastically.

Fertilizers and microbial activity

Ureaform and methyleneurea fertilizers are unique among nitrogen sources. The carbon (C) in the nitrogen-carbon-linked polymers provides the energy microorganisms need to exist and multiply, while the nitrogen (N) is their food source. Like higher life forms, carbon is necessary for energy. Nitrogen is the chief component of proteins and amino acids. The only other fertilizers that provide useful carbon are natural organic materials with C to N ratios rarely narrower than 12 to 1. The C to N ratios of ureaform (UF) and methyleneurea (MU) are approximately 1 to 1. Decomposer microbes use both elements to fulfill immediate and long-term nutritional and energy requirements.

As microorganisms carry on their life processes, they return nitrogen to the soil in the ammonium (NH\(^+\)) form. The plants are literally the second guests at the table. Even in poor soil there is an inherent population of beneficial microorganisms that exist symbiotically with living plants. Core cultivation, and the use of UF and/or MU fertilizers will greatly enhance their numbers. The result is a complexity of benefits, chiefly a deeper and more vigorous root system.

Soil microorganisms require lesser amounts of other nutrients, many of which are available in soil organic matter and plant residue. Phosphorus is essential to the chemical transfer of energy in all living cells. Occasional applications of phosphorus can be as important to the health of microorganisms as they are for turf and other plants. Ureaform and methyleneurea fertilizers are both slow-release N sources. Rates of these fertilizers are governed by the percentage of water insoluble (WIN) and sparingly soluble nitrogen in each.

Combine seeding and fertilizing with core cultivation

Plant roots typically show a very positive response when ureaform and phosphorus are placed directly in the root zone. In established turf, the only way to accomplish this
is to apply both materials directly after core aerification. Incorporate by dragging across the surface with the pulverized cores or other top-dressing material. Slit-seeding following core cultivation will place even more of the seed and fertilizer in the soil, and will help break up the cores.

Following core cultivation, apply 130 to 220 lbs. of ureaform 38-0-0 per acre (3 to 5 lbs. per 1,000 sq. ft.) plus 2 lbs. per 1,000 sq. ft. of P2O5 equivalent in a phosphate fertilizer over the topdressing or pulverized core material. Then drag or brush to move the material into the holes.

Note: Where dragging or brushing isn’t practical, it is still recommended that ureaform and phosphate fertilizers be applied after coreing. Apply the higher rate of ureaform (5 lbs. per 1,000 sq. ft.) before beginning sports activity. This will help hasten recovery of damaged turf.

Intensively managed turfgrass requires potassium at levels equal to or exceeding that of nitrogen. Potassium is vital in maintaining leaf and stem strength, and helps the plant defend against many causes of stress. Apply 6 to 8 lbs. of actual K2O per 1,000 sq. ft. on an annual basis. Use an NPK turf-grade fertilizer or any potassium fertilizer. Potassium sulfate has a lower salt index than sulfate of potash, KCl (potassium chloride), and is safer to apply in warm weather. Since potassium fertilizer is more soluble than phosphorus or ureaform, there is no advantage in soil incorporation. Bi-monthly applications during the growing season significantly assist sports turf in recovery from wear and tear.
Syngenta GreenPartners program update

Since its launch, Syngenta Professional Products' GreenPartners program has paid big dividends for golf course superintendents and other turf professionals enrolled in the program. In 2001 alone, Syngenta customers redeemed more than 8.5 million points for office equipment, electronics, travel or other business tools.

Through GreenPartners, Syngenta customers earn points for their product purchases such as Heritage, Subdue MAXX, Primo and Barricade, which can be redeemed for business tools that help them do their job better. In fact, of the 90 percent of Syngenta customers who converted their points to merchandise in 2001, 56 percent "purchased" home office and general office equipment. To broaden the impact of the program, in 2001 Syngenta added yet another dimension to GreenPartners by encouraging customers to donate points to industry organizations such as the turfgrass foundation of their choice.

"GreenPartners was created with the Syngenta customer's business in mind," said David Ravel, manager of the GreenPartners program. "Unlike other frequent buyer programs, GreenPartners doesn't limit what members can do with their points or make them spend points on our products. It's designed to give our customers the tools to make their jobs easier and more enjoyable."

GreenPartners members also have access to GreenCast, Syngenta's online (www.greencastonline.com) collection of services and technology designed to provide customers with the latest technology information, tools and resources. Enrollment in the GreenPartners program and participation has been kept simple and convenient for members. Point totals can be monitored via the Internet at www.greenpartnersonline.com and rewards can be redeemed by making a toll-free call or online.

To learn more visit www.syngentaprofessionalproducts.com or call 1-800-395-8873.

Toro financing equipment and irrigation acquisitions

The Toro Company has formed Toro Financing to offer financial solutions for golf courses, municipalities, and sports fields to acquire irrigation systems and maintenance equipment.

Offered in partnership with GE Capital Vendor Financial Services, a global provider of financing solutions to manufacturers, dealers, and end-users, Toro Financing provides flexible financial solutions, leases, and conditional sales contracts. These solutions give organizations the opportunity to acquire the equipment they need in a single step.

Initially, Toro Financing will be available to golf courses, municipalities, schools, universities, sports organizations, and others who purchase commercial turf maintenance equipment and irrigation systems in the United States.

Southeastern Turfgrass Conference next month

The 56th annual Southeastern Turfgrass Conference will be held at the Rural Development Center, Tifton, GA, May 6-7. There will be a pesticide workshop the first morning and general sessions the next morning on pest, water, management, and genetic engineering issues, followed by specific sessions on golf, ornamentals, sports turf, and sod production in the afternoon. For information call 229-386-3416.

TURFACE award & scholarships presented

Winners of the ABCA/Turface Pro League scholarships and awards were announced at the winter meeting of the American Baseball Coaches Association, jointly sponsored by the association and PROFILE Products LLC, manufacturers of Turface products.

Awards for outstanding maintenance programs went to Florida State University, Tallahassee, and Ephrata High School, Ephrata, WA. Both received trophies, 1 ton of Turface MVP sports field conditioner, and $400 toward new maintenance equipment.

Scholarships were awarded to Concordia University in Seward, NE, and Ashland High School, Ashland, OH. In addition to receiving $250 for 2 years, each school will receive 3 tons of MVP.

These awards are dedicated to encouraging safe, high quality playing conditions on the nation's sports fields. Groundskeepers and coaches interested in entering the 2002 awards and scholarship competitions should call 847-215-1144 or write Turface at 750 Lake Cook Road, Suite 440, Buffalo Grove, IL, 60089.

The National Fastpitch Coaches Association and PROFILE recognized the University of Oklahoma's softball field, as well as naming Sickles High School, Tampa, FL, as having the most outstanding grounds maintenance program. Regional collegiate winners included the University of Washington, University of Texas, University of Louisville, Boston College, and the University of Georgia. If you're interested in the 2002 competition, call 573-875-3033.

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Royalty payments from Pennington Seed to New Mexico State University now total more than $650,000 for NuMex SAHARA seed. Dr. Bernd Leinauer, left, checks some bermudagrass with Dr. Arden Baltensperger, NMSU professor emeritus and Seeds West consultant.
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Picture Perfect gives you first-hand, step-by-step guidance on creating your own unique lawn patterns. You'll learn the basic patterns -- checkerboard, stripes, diamonds, waves, arches and circles -- in simple step-by-step instructions, along with practical advice on equipment selection and use. Patterns are demonstrated in simple instructions followed by dozens of detailed photographs. 160 pgs.

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More than 25 years ago I was involved in a lawsuit against the professional baseball team I worked for after we held a tryout on a perfectly manicured ballfield. A young player fielding a ground ball had three teeth and his jaw broken after a ball took an irregular hop. We administered immediate first aid and second aid when his injuries required reconstructive surgery, taking care of all his subsequent medical bills.

Even though he regained full health, he still sued, like a car accident victim who sues even after the driver at fault takes care of towing, bodywork, and a new engine to get the car back to a perfect running condition.

This player didn't win the suit. The team had had the foresight to take pictures of the field right after the accident, have two eyewitnesses immediately file reports, and therefore was able to claim, "We are not liable. We did everything that was prudent and reasonable." After depositions were taken, the player's attorney said, "They're right, we don't have a leg to stand on." The case never went to court.

I tell that story a lot in my liability workshops because it illustrates well the most important aspect of field maintenance in this litigious society—safety, both yours and the users'. When a bad hop occurs, it's not enough to say "See my lawyer." The field must be properly maintained to protect users from injury and protect you from frivolous lawsuits.

Three key words

The three key words are: Prudent, Reasonable, and Consistent. If you are prudent and reasonable in your field maintenance, even if you don't have the most extensive equipment or supplies and do the best you can with what you have, and do it consistently, you may be free of any liability.

As you know, many field operators run on a Monday-Wednesday-Friday maintenance schedule, meaning Tuesday's games may be played on a field that has ruts or holes. If an accident happens, you haven't been prudent and reasonable.

In such a case, you know what happens; the case is settled out of court. Why? Because the field owners know they are wrong. If an injured player comes back and takes some pictures and there are holes in the field, that's strong evidence of negligence.

Of a field's potentially dangerous areas, the playing surface has come under the most scrutiny from lawyers. There's no such thing as a bad hop anymore, basically; instead there are poor maintenance procedures.

Clay surfaces are almost inherently problematic. In the middle of summer, clay can bake until it's as hard as pavement. A hard grounder, a bad hop and boom! You have a concussion, broken bones, maybe worse, and a liability problem. Clay surfaces also get chewed up in the baselines and at fielders' positions.

For this reason, skinned-area clay surfaces are now being mixed and maintained to reduce the infield's hardness. Sand infield irrigation outlets and other calcined clay additives are being widely used to help smooth out any hard bumps and prevent spikes from leaving potholes or divots.

Fencing, both on the perimeter of your complex and at the field boundaries, also is a concern. First, it is possible to install fencing incorrectly, with the poles on the inside and the bars on top. Also, the soil along the fence may become washed out, or players swinging bats or hitting balls into the fence may cause it to bulge and open up at the bottom.

In any of these circumstances, thrown or hit baseballs or softballs may get through the fence, endangering players or fans. Signs should be in clear view that state this danger and forbid using the fence as a batting cage. Damaged fences, including torn screens overhead that keep foul balls from spectator areas, should be repaired immediately.

It's worth the money to buy plastic sleeves to put on your fence tops and bottoms to prevent players being cut or entangled. They can serve as visual aids to umpires as well in making home runs easier to call.
Preseason safety checklist

- Playing field turf areas. Evaluate your wear areas and calculate the best means of repair: sod, sprig, and seed.
- Does your preseason schedule allow for aeration and topdressing, and are the equipment and materials readily available?
- Schedule your yearly soil test so a properly calculated fertilizing plan can be set.
- Schedule pre-mowing maintenance on all equipment and prepare a quality parts inventory for backup equipment.
- Inventory hand tools for effectiveness and safety.
- Check irrigation pump, clock, and individual stations. Double-check inventory to minimize downtime.
- Playing field skin or clay areas. Evaluate all low areas and washed-out sections of the playing surface. Order and properly store repair products to avoid waste and compaction. Tarp products if possible.
- Hydro-wash or power broom all grass edges that may have accumulated a buildup of solid material because of winter wind erosion. A complete analysis is important, since "tip" buildup is an extreme liability problem.
- Double-check all base anchors, pitching rubbers and home plates for repair or replacement.
- Check high stress areas on baseball pitching mounds, bullpens, and batter’s boxes. Calculate sufficient amount of packing clay needed, since these are high maintenance/high liability areas and the proper materials are necessary.
- Fences. Check fences to see if they are tied together sufficiently for strength and support.
- Have you identified holes, openings, and washed-out areas and scheduled the necessary repairs?
- Have the backstops been checked for possible openings that could permit passed balls as well as dangerous foul balls to sneak through?
- Have the perimeter gates, hinges, and locks been sprayed for easy access and availability?
- Are all dugouts and spectator areas protected from bats, balls, and other objects that may leave the playing field?
- Field illumination. Test all field lighting not only for bulb replacement, but also for industry standard candlpower and direction alignment.
- Survey all light poles, wiring, junction boxes, and transformers. Make sure all power boxes are locked and secured and an 8-ft high, barred, locked security fence protects the power junction.
- Restrooms, bleachers, pressboxes, and trash receptacles. Double-check all pipes, sink turn nozzles, urinals, and commodes after winter shutdown.
- Check all internal and external lights and switch panels.
- Are additional waste receptacles needed and will recycling stations work?
- Double-check signage to see if it is in the proper location for spectators and players.
- Parking lots and adjacent areas. Double-check all handicapped parking, fire lanes, and emergency areas for clear identification and clarity of signage.
- Replace or remove any obstacles that may interfere with traffic flow.
- Check all line markings for needed paint.
- Review all playground areas for safety, security, and comfort. Schedule all repairs in sufficient time before play begins or close the areas to traffic to avoid liability problems.
- Evaluate and repair walking trails, sandboxes, and picnic pavilions before spring access is granted to visitors.

All obstructions must be non-hazardous in terms of their location and manufacture. Foul markers should be at least 10 ft. tall so no one can fall on them; light poles and other obstructions in or near the field of play should be padded to at least 10 ft. high or surrounded by flexible fencing.

This is the time of year when you get your baseball and softball diamonds ready for the heavy play of summer. In northern areas, the previous 4 months or so of inactivity may have exposed your facility to climactic changes, each of which must be identified and repaired before play can begin.

You should consider having a camera available so evidence can be gathered on the spot if an accident occurs. If the pictures show a properly maintained field, you can rely on other evidence—a bad slide, an overweight player—to bolster your assertion that in no way was the accident the fault of your field maintenance.

Floyd Perry, 1997 Sportsturf Manager of the Year, is an athletic field consultant, expert witness, and liability specialist. He also is director of Grounds Maintenance Services, Orlando, FL, 407-648-1332.
The 6th Annual KAFMO-PRPS Athletic Field Conference

One successful conference provides the major building block for a second successful conference. This builds to the third, which all leads up to the report of another great event, the 6th Annual KAFMO-PRPS Athletic Field Conference held this past February 15 in Grantville, PA.

The KAFMO Chapter has discovered a time frame that works well for potential participants and has used their initial successes to create anticipation for the event. Solid educational programs combine with the vendor support of the trade show to produce an excellent combination of activities in a something for everyone package.

This year’s educational sessions included a presentation on “Professionalism and certification for the sports turf manager,” by Steve Trusty, executive director of the Sports Turf Managers Association; and a presentation on “Brownsfield to Greenfield Turf Manager,” by Steve Trusty, executive director of the Sports Turf Managers Association.

The MO-KAN Chapter will hold a Spring Turf Seminar at Crockett Park, Brentwood Parks and Recreation, in Brentwood, on April 24. The program will include the following presentations: What We Do, And How We Do It - by Erin Kinney and Rich Richardson of Brentwood Parks, Experience in Smyrna - by Mike Moss of Smyrna Parks, and Time Management - by Bill Randles, Vanderbilt University. A Vendor Show will take place following the presentations. To Pre-Register for this event please call Stan Thomas 800-627-8816, Bob Hogan 888-224-6426 or Mike Sallec 615-371-2209.

Other Upcoming TVSTMA Events are as follows:

May 25: Franklin Road Academy in Nashville;
June 12: All Day Vendor Show in Jasper;
June 25: Joint Meeting with Tennessee Turfgrass Association at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville; and July 18: Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis.

MO-KAN Sports Turf Managers Association: The MO-Kan Chapter will hold a Spring Turf Management Field Day on from 8:00 AM to 2:00 PM on April 24 at the University of Kansas Baseball Stadium. This event will focus on specific maintenance needs of Baseball, Softball and Soccer fields; general spring turf maintenance; field evaluation techniques; and irrigation water management. Instructors include: Brad Fresenburg, University of Missouri; and Larry Phipps, Laser Specialists.

For information on the MO-KAN STMA Chapter, or upcoming events, call Jody Gill at 913-239-4121.

STMA Chapter News

Tennessee Valley Sports Turf Managers Association (TVSTMA): TVSTMA will hold a Sports Turf Seminar at Crockett Park, Brentwood Parks and Recreation, in Brentwood, on April 24. The program will include the following presentations: What We Do, And How We Do It - by Erin Kinney and Rich Richardson of Brentwood Parks, Experience in Smyrna - by Mike Moss of Smyrna Parks, and Time Management - by Bill Randles, Vanderbilt University. A Vendor Show will take place following the presentations. To Pre-Register for this event please call Stan Thomas 800-627-8816, Bob Hogan 888-224-6426 or Mike Sallec 615-371-2209.

For more information on these seminars call Beacon Ballfields at 800-747-5985. For information on the MO-KAN STMA Chapter or other upcoming events, contact Dan Douglas, Reading Phillies Baseball Club, at tel. 610-375-8469, ext. 212; or e-mail kafmo@aol.com.

Colorado Sports Turf Managers Association: The Colorado Chapter is planning a late spring Baseball/Softball Seminar at the City of Westminster. Also in the planning stages is a Summer Workshop covering soccer/football/baseball/softball maintenance. This event will be held at the City of Aurora.

For more information on the Colorado Chapter, or upcoming activities, visit the Chapter’s website, www.CSTMA.org, or call the CSTMA Chapter Hotline at 303-346-8954.

Ohio Sports Turf Managers Association (OSTMA): The OSTMA chapter will hold a spring workshop with the Cleveland Browns in May. More information and registration forms will be available on the website as soon as they are available.