

CHALKBOARD

TIPS FROM THE PROS

BASEBALL INFIELD RENOVATION: DON'T WAIT UNTIL NEXT SPRING

By Mike Hebrard

You might think that summer is too late to be thinking about adding or rebuilding baseball fields. After all, high school and college teams are finishing up their spring seasons. Coaches and maintenance crews are ready to turn the fields over to summer baseball leagues. Even if they wanted to make improvements, they can't get back on the fields until the end of August or early September.

But you can do something — you can put together a plan of action for the fall that benefits both the school and the summer leagues. You provide the expertise and the summer leagues drum up support for new construction or renovation.

Groundskeepers often hit a brick wall when they ask for money for turf renovation. They have the skill to make the improvements, but fall short when it comes to raising funds. Kids and coaches in summer baseball leagues know very little about field maintenance, but they are experts on car washes, candy sales, raffles, and other types of fund raising. Give them a goal, and they'll go to every door in their neighborhood to raise funds. Working together, groundskeepers and summer leagues can do wonders.

One small wonder that brings new excitement to baseball is a bright, new infield. Perennial ryegrasses make infield renovation less expensive and nearly as fast as resodding. They have the ability to recover from wear more efficiently. What's more, there is no better time to rebuild infields than in September and October. Why rush the fields into shape in the spring when soil temperatures are too low for good germination? Get a six-month head start.

With the groundskeeper's expertise, the school's equipment and materials purchased by the league, an infield can be built (or rebuilt) for about the cost of brick dust.

The first step is to clear the field site of all existing vegetation. This is easily accomplished with one or two applications of glyphosate (Roundup). By adding a dye or spray pattern indicator to the herbicide solution you can eliminate missed patches. If you have a sod cutter, you can cut and remove the old turf and thatch just a few days after treating the field. If not, wait a few weeks to let the turf, tillers and roots begin to decompose. While waiting, send soil samples to a lab for testing and stake out the location of home plate and the foul lines (see "Baseball Field Alignment, March SportsTURF).

The biggest job of the project comes next. Till two inches of organic compost into the top six to eight inches of native soil. This amounts to about 20 cubic yards of compost per infield. Check with sewage treatment plants in your area to see if they compost sludge with sawdust. You need compost with a fine consistency — no large chips or chunks.

Level and roll the amended soil. The infield should be virtually flat. Rainfall should drain through the soil, not run off. To keep the field draining properly, aerate and topdress at least twice a year.

Lay out the field, mark foul lines and measure off the locations of the bases and the pitcher's mound. Now is a good time to install a live water source behind the mound if one does not currently exist. This enables the infield dirt to be wet down without dragging a hose across the base lines.

Use a power edger with two blades separated by a washer to cut grooves in the soil where the grass edges will be. The dirt should be a little moist to obtain a clean cut.

The foul lines do not have to run down the center of the dirt base path. I like to have turf eight inches inside the base line and roughly three feet outside the foul lines. This way you can smooth the dirt outside the base line quickly with a rake and eliminate much of the raking inside the base line. It also keeps dirt lips from building up on the infield turf.

Select a mixture of two or three varieties of turf-type perennial ryegrass recommended for your part of the country. You'll need about 80 to 100 pounds to do one infield. Seed is the least expensive part of the job. After all the preparation, the worst thing you can do is cut corners on seed quality.

Apply six to seven pounds of seed per 1,000 square feet with a drop spreader, starting at the groove around the pitcher's mound and walking in larger and larger circles until you reach the edge of the base paths. Seed from the drop spreader will fall nicely into the groove you cut. Improved germination in the groove results in a nice, sharp edge. Finish off the corners and switch to a rotary spreader. Put down another two pounds of seed per 1,000 square feet in parallel lines across the infield to fill in any spots you might have missed with the drop spreader.

Topdress the seed and soil with organic mulch or a mixture of organic mulch and coarse sand. The sand keeps the mulch from clumping up.

Set the irrigation cycle to keep the infield moist without causing puddles. Seed will float and run off with the grade if too much water is applied at one time. The seed will germinate in seven to ten days as long as daytime temperatures average 60 degrees F. or higher.

If turf in the area has previously been attacked by turf diseases, you may want to apply a fungicide and select a blend of ryegrasses with improved disease resistance. The main diseases that infect ryegrass are *Pythium* blight, *Rhizoctonia* brown patch, *Helminthosporium* brown blight, crown rust and *Corticium* red thread. Your chemical dealer can help you select an effective fungicide.

Don't wait until the turf has grown three or four inches tall before mowing. Mowing with a light reel mower knocks the tops off the young plants and encourages them to tiller out faster. A well-adjusted and well-oiled push reel mower does the job nicely. Make sure the blades are sharp and mow in two directions (cross mow).

After four weeks, or as soon as the turf is firm enough, switch to a powered, walk-behind reel mower. Again, make sure the blades are sharp. If the same mower is used on other fields, wash it off thoroughly before mowing the new infield to prevent the spread of diseases and weed seed.

A grass infield should be mowed a minimum of twice per week during the growing season. Desired height of cut will vary, but anywhere between 3/4-inch and two inches should be adequate. By consistently mowing the infield, you remove damaged grass tips, encourage dense turf and reduce thatch buildup. Many groundskeepers like to remove clippings. If you do this, make sure you dispose of the clippings and do not dump them near the field.

The best part about fall infield renovation is that when the season gets underway again in the spring, the field is dense and healthy. A strong turf combined with well-prepared dirt gives teams the incentive to win.

Editor's Note: Mike Hebrard assists many schools, colleges and parks with baseball field maintenance for Hobbs & Hopkins of Portland, OR. He is the former head groundskeeper and bull pen catcher for the Amarillo Gold Sox, a double-A affiliate of the San Diego Padres.