

Big Game Preparation:

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Grace Under Pressure

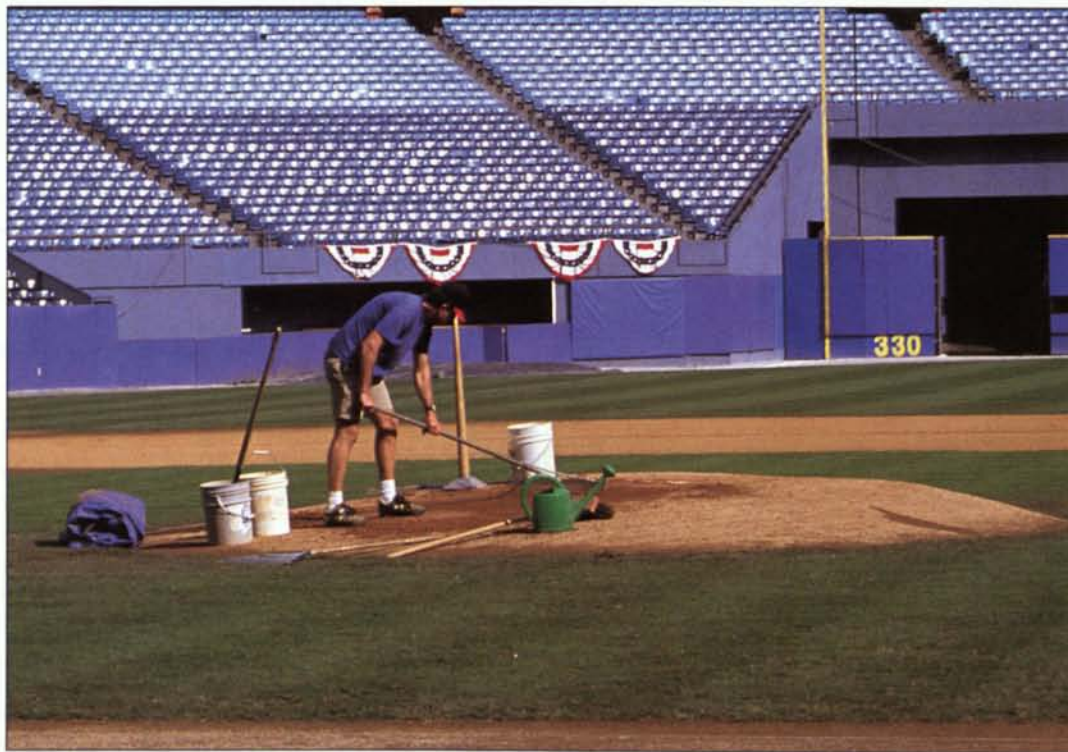
In warm weather conditions it may be necessary to prepare half of a diamond's skinned area at a time, adding more water as required. All photos of Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium, courtesy Aimcor.

By Ed Mangan

The Atlanta Braves have seen much success in the last two seasons, making it to the World Series both years. With that success comes pressure—on the players, the coaches, and even the grounds crew. The field conditions must be perfect to provide safe and consistent playing surfaces for the athletes. The field must also be aesthetically pleasing to thousands of fans in the stands, as well as millions of television viewers.

The pressure of preparation for a World Series game is intense. However, what may surprise you is that the job essentially remains the same. For the grounds crew, every game is “big.” Home field advantage means more than having the fans on your side—it means knowing that for every practice and game the field will be in the fine condition the players have come to expect.

Meeting these expectations requires tremendous consistency, which can only



Once holes are repaired and tamped, lightly go over your entire slope with a steel or aluminum landscape rake and repair and smooth any remaining areas that are not level.

be accomplished through a strict routine. At Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium, this routine begins after the previous game, in the early morning hours, when as many as 15 crew members hit the field.

Critical Areas

The first step is uncovering the pitcher's mound, bull pen mounds, and home

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BIG GAME PREPARATION

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plate, which are always covered after a game. It's vital to keep these areas covered when they're not in use. Covers prevent moisture from evaporating from the clay, as well as protecting it from heavy downpours. Moisture is critical when working with clay. Too much and you don't play—not enough and you must play cautiously in anticipation of that bad hop or loss of footing.

Setting up your mounds and plates

should not be a time-consuming or strenuous task. If it is, then you're not maintaining them properly. It takes just a few minutes after each game to repair any holes, apply the proper amount of moisture to the mounds, and then cover them. These few minutes will save you hours in the long run.

For repairing holes, it is essential to clean your entire slopes of all game debris, which includes grass, chewing gum, tobacco, sunflower seed shells, and even conditioners and drying agents

you may use. These materials can dry and contaminate the clay on the mound surface or plate area. Once this clay is contaminated or dried out, it is unable to bond properly with the base clay, which can prevent firm footing and stability. That means debris must be removed, which can be accomplished by sweeping down your entire slope with a broom so you're left with a good, clean working area.

Next, evaluate your area to determine just what you need. If you need to regrade your slope, do it now. Do not try to repair holes first and then come back to make the slope fit your repairs. Remember that when grading your slope, for every one foot you travel, your elevation must drop one inch.

Once your area is swept clean, you should apply enough water to promote the binding of your clay, but not enough to make it muddy. With the clay moist, use a spade to chop into the existing holes. This chopping is what will give new packing clay the cracks and crevices to bind with the old clay making up the base. Be sure to chop or scarify the entire hole, including the sides and edges. If this isn't done, the clay packed into the hole will not bind with the old clay and can be kicked out.

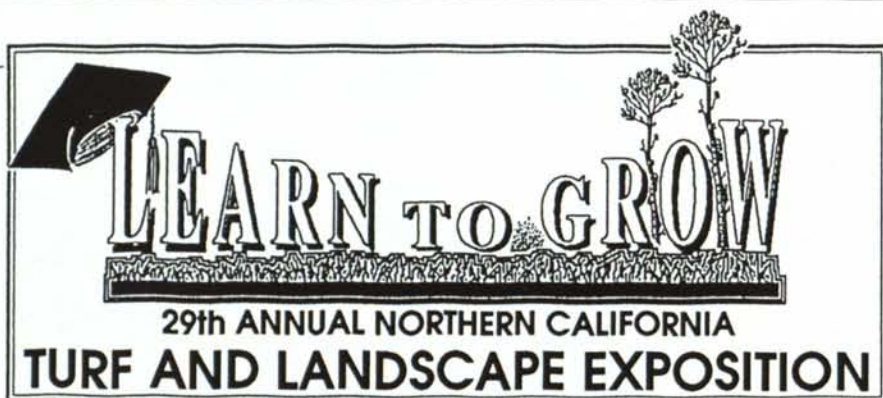
If holes are more than a few inches deep, don't try to add all the clay at once. It will pack better if you add approximately one to two inches of clay. This must be followed, of course, by firm tamping.

When your holes are repaired and you're through tamping them, lightly go over your entire slope with a steel or aluminum landscape rake and repair any remaining areas that are not level. This will eliminate any unevenness left by your tamp. Now, with your hand drags, smooth off the finished product. Once again, before you move on, check the moisture of the clay. Pay particular attention to your plateau and the areas behind it.

The steps used to repair your mound are the same you will use for the plate area, minus the slope of course. Again, moisten the plate area well. Moisture is equally critical in the homeplate area and covers go a long way to controlling this moisture.

Skinned Areas

Preparing the skinned areas follows the same basic principles. First, get the proper moisture so the clay is workable. The infield must be moist, but not saturated. Begin with your nail board or



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nail drag to get the good underlying clay to mix with the worn surface clay. The best results are achieved when you nail drag twice in opposite directions. If you are doing this on a hot, sunny day, the clay may dry out too quickly. You may have to prepare half of your skinned area at one time, adding more water as required.

Moisten the entire dragged area until the water has penetrated the clay. The wetted area must be slightly dry before floating. The area is ready for floating when the surface hazes over like the wax on your car. You want the top dry, but not the bottom. This will give you a loose, workable top surface, yet a moist sub-surface that will bind back together for firmness and stability.

After the top has hazed, float or level the entire skinned area with the back side of your nail board or some other leveling device. This will give you the opportunity to shave off high spots and fill low ones. Pay close attention to the edges where the turf meets the clay—the transitions should be as small as possible.

Once you've finished floating, you're "ready to roll." Yes, *roll*. This will get the subsurface to bind with the surface for a firm, yet soft playing area. The dry haze

on top that you've been working with is your playing cushion, yet what lies underneath must be firm for good footing. It must allow for cleat penetration, without skidding.

When you're done rolling, you'll need to come back and screen the area with your nail drag. This will smooth out the roller marks and finish off your playing surface. Again, check the clay for moisture—it's often necessary to apply a light amount of water to keep the clay from drying out during the game. Of course, this all depends on the weather and how much Turface you have in your field. Turface helps control the moisture in your field.

Don't try to use exactly the same steps every day. Hot, dry days will require more water applications than over-cast days. You've got to be flexible.

Making Turf Shine

On a daily maintenance basis, turf areas are less time consuming. In terms of game preparation, irrigation and mowing are the only necessities. At Fulton County Stadium, the infield and outfield turf areas are cut at 3/4-inch in a distinctive checkerboard pattern. The pattern is reversed during strings of

Braves road games to prevent the grass blades from growing horizontally.

Preparing damaged turf for a game is no easy task. Prior to the 1992 National League Playoffs, a college football game and a marching band practice were held at the stadium in a heavy rain. The damage to the field was significant.

The top two inches of the skinned area had to be removed and replaced with new materials, while the ground crew could only attempt to repair the turf. The turf was topdressed with sand to help level the field, followed by a series of rollings to further level the turf areas. The turf was mowed frequently after drying. This kept the grass healthy, while getting it back in condition for a game.

Here again, flexibility is essential. A routine is vital for daily maintenance, but you never know what surprises you'll face between routines.

As in all things, it is critical to realize that you get out of your work exactly what you put into it. These tips are not cure-alls, and the easiest way may not always be the best. Pay attention to the details—they separate the exceptional from the mediocre. □

Editor's note: Ed Mangan is the field director for the Atlanta Braves.

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