

Q&A NOW What?

Have questions? Send them to Dave at: ISU, Hort. Dept., Ames, IA 50011.

by Dr. Dave Minner

My beautiful football field was destroyed in one muddy game. Now what?

- Muddy in Kansas City, MO

Dear Muddy in Missouri, don't feel bad. You're in the same boat as all the others that have had home games on wet fields. I've used excerpts from several of your calls to build the following scenario for this Q&A.

It rained two inches on Thursday before our homecoming game. Our football field has a good crown, so there was no standing water; but the soil was definitely wet. It wasn't raining when the game started, but the field was soft. After the first quarter, it started raining and didn't stop until the last splash in the fourth quarter.

The field was beautiful before the game, but now it's basically gone between the hash marks. There's a lot of mud on the surface, and many ruts make the playing surface uneven. It looks dangerous.

Our next home game is in one week. What can I do to make the field playable?

As a sports turf manager, it's your job to have a plan to get the field ready for game day. But before we get to the plan, now is a great time to give your administrator a tour of your newly created cow-pie pasture, and to evaluate your policy for canceling games. A homecoming event is pretty important, and usually it will take lightning to postpone or cancel a football game.

Be sure to take your athletic director and/or school superintendent onto the muddy field, especially if they are wearing shiny shoes. Start on a section of the field that isn't too bad, but then head straight for the 50-yard line. Don't look back and don't say too much; they will follow you right into the mud, and that will speak volumes. On the way off the field, offer to clean their shoes back at the shop.

This strategy may help you get the next game moved to another site, and it might get some of the other games, practices, and other activities off the field. It may even help you get that sand field you've been talking about. Don't miss this opportunity to make a little headway on the things you've been suggesting all along.

Now for the plan...

Here are some of the strategies I have watched many of you implement. Follow the rationale closely, because the strategy changes depending on the weather and your projected outcome.

If clear weather is predicted, open up the field and dry out the surface. Sunny and windy conditions are most helpful. Use coring, slicing, and other methods of cultivation that open the surface and promote drying. Leave the surface rough so there is more soil surface for drying.

As the surface dries, cultivate to expose more wet soil. If there is little grass in the center of the field, this is an easy decision; but if there is still a substantial amount of grass, you need to stop cultivating

when it appears that you are damaging too much of the protective mat of grass. Drying agents like Turface will also help remove water from the surface.

The surface will be rough, and you should eventually roll it to make it smooth and playable again. Don't roll until you're finished drying the field, since rolling will seal the surface and slow the rate of drying. Seeding with perennial rye and/or Kentucky bluegrass before rolling might help get a little grass cover started.

If you expect cloudy and cool weather with a chance of more rain before the next game, consider rolling the field as soon as you can. I know that we've programmed you to avoid soil compaction, but many of you have convinced me that it is more important to first get the field smooth and ready for game day, and then deal with compaction later by coring.

I'm for rolling the field when there's no other option to smooth the surface. You can make your own call, since you have to deal with the outcome. In addition to smoothing the surface, rolling will compact the top inch of surface and reduce water infiltration. Your goal here is to make the soil impervious to water and to use the crown to quickly move any additional rain off the field. □

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