By Dr. Dave Minner, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Iowa State University

"PLUSH" INFIELD

The turf in my ryegrass/bluegrass baseball infield was thin and patchy last year with some bare spots. I would like to know what steps to take this fall to make the field look nicer and be thicker for next season. What comes to mind is a "plush" infield, dark green, thick and soft grass. Tearing the entire field up is out of the question.

Cole Flick
Head Groundskeeper, Saints Field, Dassel, MN

After several emails and a digital picture or two it was apparent that Cole wanted to raise the performance and appearance of his baseball infield grass. He cited the Saint Paul Saints, "Dick Putz" field in St. Cloud, and Sec Taylor I-Cubs as fields that he aspires to match.

Cole realized that by the middle of the month he would be nearing the last day to seed Kentucky bluegrass and still achieve successful establishment. A week later he replied "Thank you for the information you sent me last week regarding infield re-seeding . . . I used more than 60 lbs. of seed, which is slightly more than you suggested."

I appreciated the follow-up letting me know what particular recommendations he chose. He did a great job of making the information fit his program. Cole used a local 4:1 sand/black dirt topdressing that he has had success with in the past and that should work just fine instead of the straight sand topdressing that I suggested. A sand/compost topdressing could have also been used.

I prefer heavier than normal seeding rates for many sports field uses, but I think Cole may hold the new record for the highest Kentucky bluegrass seeding rate his side of the Mississippi River. My normal seeding rate for most sport turf applications is 3 lbs. KB /1000 sq.ft. And this is already elevated above the standard seeding rates of 1.5 to 2 lbs/1000 sq. ft.

Each year my sports turf class renovates a local baseball infield with the following procedure. The picture shows the equipment that we use for the renovation and our material cost for seed, sand, and fertilizer is around $300 per infield.

If you play spring ball before the grass greens up and needs mowing, then remember that you will be playing on the same field condition in early spring that you left off with in late fall. If it has not filled in by late fall then it will be weak in the spring, but will likely fill in nicely during the spring and summer. If you take an aggressive approach now and get the seeding in late then it may not fill and smooth out by early next spring. Use your experience to make the suggestions work for your situation, i.e., take the advice only if you think it will work for you, not just because an "expert" gives it.

1. Scalp mowing to 0.5 inches will allow better seed establishment and smoothing if you topdress and drag.

2. Verticut and rake or sweep loose plant debris from the surface. The verticutting is used to open up more channels for seed and topdressing to mix into the surface. At this point the infield is bald and you can easily see any surface unevenness. If the surface needs substantial smoothing then add sufficient sand topdressing (not to exceed .5 in.) and level with leveling drag or aluminum screed. If you don't have a topdresser don't let that stop you. It takes me about an hour to sling a 1/4-inch of sand on an infield grass area. Get a big scoop, turn shovel sideways and fan it across the surface like you are hitting a hockey puck. If you are doing substantial leveling by moving the topdressing around with a drag then be careful not to drag the seed into all of the low spots. Seeding in multiple layers will help you avoid this problem.

3. Core aerify with holes on 2-inch centers. Seed over open holes and cores. Break up cores and drag into surface.

4. Seed in multiple layers to guarantee good germination and coverage. Broadcast seed over open aerifier holes and drag. Broadcast seed and bury with a thin layer of topdressing or compost. Drill seed in multiple directions. I would seed 1 to 1.5 lbs. Kentucky bluegrass/1000 sq.ft. for each of the three operations. This will be a total of 3 to 4.5 # seed per/1000sq.ft total. Some may say this is excessive, but seed is inexpensive, you don't have time to wait for it to fill in, and my experience has been that these seeding rates do not cause any turf problems and it gives you the best chance at getting the density that you need by next spring/summer.

5. Fertilize any time during the operation with a starter fertilizer. Usually it is the last operation over the field. Follow local guidelines where there are restrictions on phosphorous application.

6. Roll if the surface is a little loose from all of the coring, sanding, and drilling seeding. Rolling will help germination with seed-to-soil contact. The existing grass KB and PR will grow faster than the new seed but hopefully everything will smooth out by the end of the fall. If not it may be a little uneven in the spring until growth starts again. Roll the infield grass if it is too much of a problem.

7. Consider using a winter cover for better establishment, winter protection and earlier spring green-up.

8. Since it is starting to get late in the seeding season I suggest that you pregerminate some or all of the KB seed since it will speed your establishment up by about 2 weeks or more. Use a drying agent or sand to mix with the seed so that it will go through a cyclone spreader.

This one-day renovation has worked for me many times and it can turn a miserable infield into a very respectable playing surface in one season.

Soft and plush describes the visual appearance that we want but from an infield playability standpoint I like to think tight and stiff. Descriptives aside, I know when I have walked onto an infield that is just right because the hair on the back of my neck stands up, tight and stiff at about a 1/2 inch. The last time that happened was on Mark Razum's infield at the Colorado Rockies' Coors Field. **ST**

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