

Proper mechanics for field repair

BY CHRIS HARRISON

Who at Colorado State University's Hughes Stadium takes more bumps and scuffs than star quarterback Bradlee VanPelt? The answer is not the CSU Ram opponents' egos. The correct answer is the field itself.

Right in the Ram's fight song it says: "Tear the (opponent's nickname) line asunder, As down the field we thunder." Thunder, they do.

Sports turf managers at levels from peewee to pro know their precious turf will suffer through the wars over the weekend. The idea is to have good, dense turf at the opening whistle and be ready to return the field to playable shape as soon as possible after the final gun.

The football field at Hughes Stadium is home to the Colorado State Rams. Built in 1968, the field is being renamed for head football coach Sonny Lubick, who served for many years.

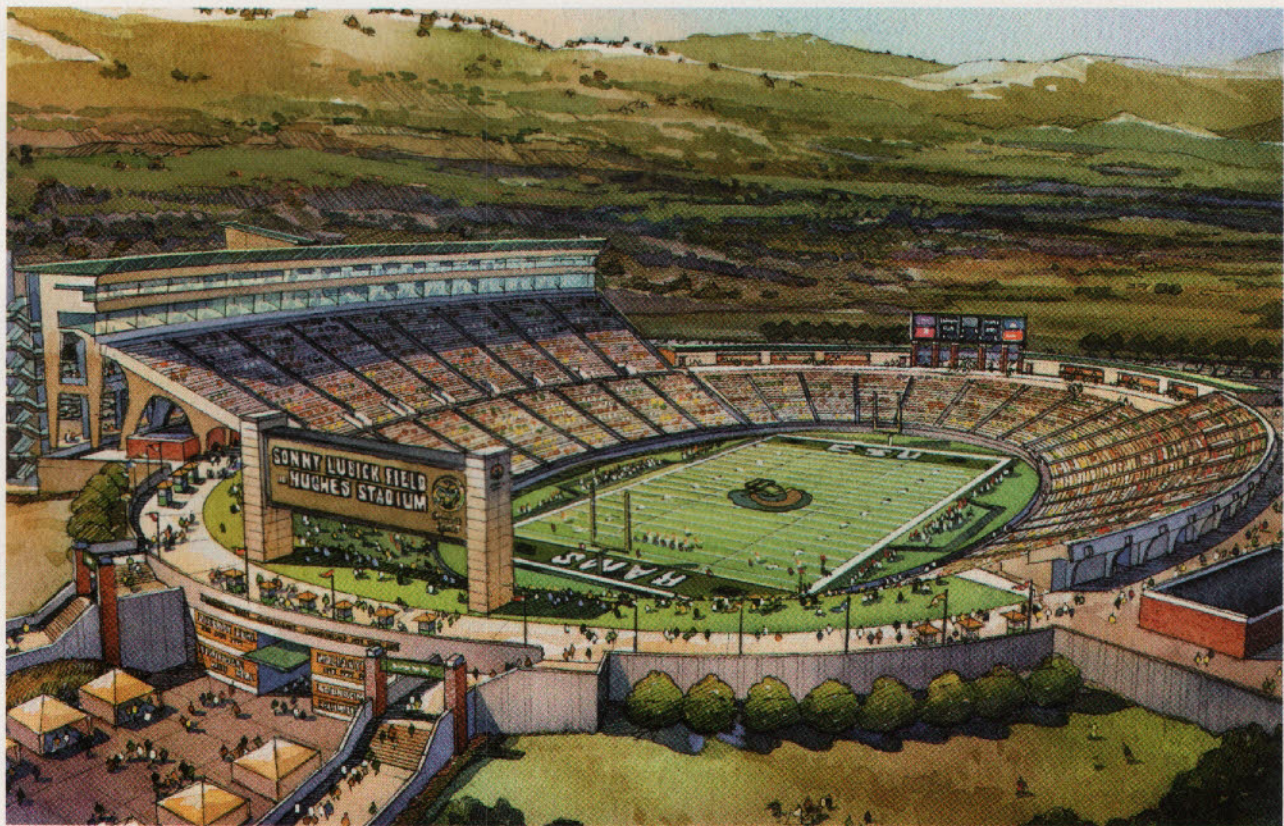
"My first suggestion is to overseed with rye," says Dr. Tony Koski, extension turfgrass specialist, at Colorado State (CSU) in Fort Collins. "It's simple and it's cheap."

Koski is liberal with his ryegrass. He says a field manager should put down rye any time the field is being aerated, before games and after games.

"The players' cleats are great at seeding for you," he says with a smile. All that running up and down the field simply assures good seed-to-soil contact and puts the rye seed right where you need it to be.

In fact, the field at CSU was Windsor Kentucky Bluegrass as recently as 1988. Under Kalin Stovall, CSU sports turf manager's guidance, the stadium's crew continued to apply ryegrass to the field at every opportunity. Today, the turf is nearly 100 percent rye.

Yet another kind of thunder is heard at Fort Collins: rain and thunder. There is not a single drain line in the field at Colorado State. The base level under the field is bentonite clay, so it will hold water. In a typical year, when Fort Collins sees its normal 12 inches of rain, this should not be a problem. However, the rain, or even snow, has a bad habit of coming in great gobs. It typically shows up just before a home game.



"Often our problem is snow during the fall games," Koski says. "Usually it is just one bad game per season." However, Koski knows that, even if the field in the 30,000-seat stadium is perfect for the other four or five home games, "It is the one bad game per season that everyone remembers!"

Stovall and the crew have come to see it as just another Colorado-size mountain to climb.

"We know how to recover it," Koski says. Typically they will apply a bit more than one-half inch of sand to the field. In conditions up to one-tenth inch of rain, the sand layer keeps it nice. While there may be scuffs on the field, the crowns remain intact, and that is what counts.

"You don't want to get too much sand down or their cleats can not get down," Koski cautions.

They also topdress the field completely in the spring. "We put one-half inch of sand down in the spring," Koski says. "It is rare for us to get a blow-out divot."

Since they began the sand topdressing program a few years ago (with one or two heavy applications of a half-inch or so per year), the field has stayed

more playable with light rain events. "And it has been easier to recover (with rolling) when heavier moisture hits," Koski says.

Mowing

Mowing is important, too. "Allow the field to get up over one inch high and it gets slippery," Koski warns. "We love rollers at Colorado State," he continues. "With our bentonite field, it smoothes out shallow ruts and undulations. Rolling firms the surface, too. The roller has been our savior," Koski says.

The team at CSU is not averse to noting good ideas from their neighbors in Denver. In fact, it is hard to keep from noticing field conditions at Invesco Field at Mile High, since the Rams will meet cross-state rival Colorado there just before press time.

"The roller can help the field look nice, too," Koski says. He recommends considering a directional-mowing scheme such as that done by Ross Kurcab at Invesco Field. Kurcab rolls in 10-yard intervals. From the goal to the five-yard line is mowed on one direction. From the five to the 15 is mowed in the opposite direction and so on, down the field. What this does is puts all of the numbers on the same color background (either light or dark stripe).

Ross's crew at Invesco Field is able to do the job while making wider turns with the mower. "So it is easier on the turf," Koski points out. "It looks good and it costs nothing."

Koski also recommends that sports turf managers give a growth-regulating product like Primo a try, if they can fit it into their budget. Some try it and don't think that the results merit the added cost, he says. Others see the regulators producing more tillering and giving better density to the turf. Since the grass grows out more than up, high traffic areas will have better traffic tolerance. With less leaf production, there are fewer clippings to deal with, too.

"The roller has been our savior." - Koski

Koski warns that some PGRs may discolor and stunt the growth of Poa annua. If you only have 5-10 percent Poa in your field, that stunting can actually help to reduce the Poa population.

However, when your Poa population is 30-40 percent or greater, it is probably not a good idea to use a PGR that will discolor, stunt, or even kill your Poa.

What makes for a busy field? Experts seem to agree that 25 events during a football season are about the limit of recovery for a native soil field. If there are 50 events, expect the field to show excessive wear. Of course, with one rain at the wrong time, all bets are off. Koski says that such numbers are probably valid but there is no good research to really back them up.

Stovall and the stadium crew have met a lot of challenges while trying to keep the facility up to par for both athletes and fans. Sometimes, though, it all pays off. In fact, many of the challenges and management practices at Hughes Stadium will change within the next year or so.

CSU recently received a large gift (approximately \$15 million) to improve and renovate the Hughes Stadium infrastructure. Part of the money is earmarked to include work on the playing surface.

There will also be some work done to improve the practice fields, including perhaps the installation of an artificial practice field.

The lessons learned will not be forgotten, however. Both Koski and Stovall will build on the lessons of past seasons as they move into a new era at the stadium. If only they could find a way to invest some of that cash in a system that would keep rain and snow away from the field on game days.

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Chris Harrison, an Ohio-based freelance writer, can be reached at chrisharrison@adelphia.net.

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