

# Lessons learned in 25 years with STMA, Part III

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**L**esson #9: **Whenever possible establish grass from seed or sprigs instead of sod.** By no means does this statement indicate that sod should not be used in many athletic field situations. I've included this as one of my lessons because it took me many years to realize that seeded or sprigged fields, especially sand-based fields, have fewer layering problems. The soil, fine sand, and thatch associated with sod can impede water movement and rooting into the field's rootzone below.

More importantly, the amount of roots produced below the sod are far fewer than those produced from the same area of a seeded field. If you want evidence, try this: On a sand-based field that has been sodded in the past 2 years, reach down and grab the sod, then pull straight up and notice that the sod easily lifts about a half inch. I have even noticed this on fields that are 4 years old and that have received several rounds of topdressing and aerification.

Now cut out a square foot of the field and shake the sand free from the sod to inspect the amount of rooting. Each square inch of sod may only have five or fewer roots anchoring the sod to the rootzone mix below. More roots are present where the aerification holes are and that is a testimony for aerification of sodded fields to reduce layering problems.

Compare this with a seeded field that has a continuous and massive supply of roots through out the upper 6 inches of the rootzone. Sodded fields have the advantage of being more stable after 30 to 90 days of grow-in; however seeded fields will have better stability and usually less divoting after the initial playing season. I was convinced of this by a sand-based football field in Minnesota that was seeded with Kentucky bluegrass by John Hopko of Professional Turf & Renovation. John seeded on April 29, 2000, and play began August 21

that same year. The field hosted 28 events and was home to the Eden Prairie 1A Football Champions.

By the second season the seeded field was more stable than most sodded fields of the same age. To compete with synthetic turf there is a need for low-cost, natural grass fields that have high performance. Six to eight inch sand pad fields can be seeded or sprigged, treated with Primo, and ready for play in 4 to 8 months depending on the location.

The point is, when planning new field construction, don't assume that it must be sodded. Since seeded fields have fewer problems, plan early and try to arrange the construction schedule and opening day to accommodate seeding. Use sod as a back up if needed. Seeding cool-season grasses also provides the opportunity to specifically select grass varieties that may not be available as sod.

Just so I don't get "big rolled" by my sod friends it should be stated that there are countless examples of sodded fields, both native soil and sand-based, that continue to perform quite well under the supervision of a sports turf manager who understands the need for cultivation. For many years I would direct clients toward the sod option since it was easy and provided instant and mature grass. In situations where instant grass is needed, big roll 2-inch thick-cut sod has been a wonderful and saving recommendation to have in the arsenal. However, the lesson I learned and want to share here is that sand fields can in fact be seeded and by the second playing season they often perform better and are easier to manage than sodded fields.

**Lesson #10: Develop at least one "show case field"** since your reputation as a field manager will be built on the quality of your best field, with less attention given to the amount of resources or number of fields under your care. Be sure to allocate sufficient resources for one field so that you can show your ability to produce a high quality sports field. Sacrifice resources used on other fields that are not producing a noticeable improvement. Document additional resources needed to produce a quality field and use the information when requesting future resources to improve inadequate fields.

You should be able to define minimal inputs required for a desired level of field quality. Select a field with moderate to light traffic to "showcase." Additional resources may not produce a better field if excessive traffic is the major problem. Purchase a digital camera; it is the most important tool for showing the changes that occurred on the facility under your direction. Pictures of construction projects are also a valuable record of what is buried under the facility. Underground irrigation, drainage, and utilities may need to be accessed and pictures are often more important than drawings. A photographic record of the grounds crew and their activities can also develop a sense of pride in a job well done. ■

