

Managing skinned areas

By Bruce Suddeth

When I was asked to write about infield skin management I thought, "Who, me?" How could I write such an article? I don't have the greatest of literary skills, I'm just a landscaper/field manager. Besides, I read every book and article I can find to learn from others how to manage skin areas. The list includes pros like George Toma and Floyd Perry, and that list goes on and on. Our field management team also puts great trust in the South Carolina STMA chapter membership's wealth of knowledge. So how can I write an article about skin management when it is an ongoing learning curve for me?

After much procrastination, I began thinking of what we as "dirt managers" do. Then I saw the light. Here at the University of South Carolina Upstate (USC Upstate) I'm very fortunate to have the situation and resources that we do.

I'd have a safe bet to say that Coach Chris Hawkins puts in more time and is more hands-on with his facility than any coach in the country. You'll see why later.

Composition

Six years ago, our skin area was built of 50% clay, 10% silt, and 40% sand. The field was then amended with three tons of calcined clay conditioner. Since that time more sand and conditioner has been added; the current composition is in the area of 45% clay, 10% silt, and 45% sand. This ratio gives Coach Hawkins the consistency he needs for his team.

Clay bricks are installed in the pitcher's circle and batter's box areas. The bricks are topped off with bagged clay to achieve consistency. The bullpen areas are constructed of the same materials in an attempt to simulate the field's playing surface. Irrigation heads as well as a quick coupler hose for hand watering have been installed in the skin area.

Pre-season prep varies depending on how extensively the skin needs to be repaired. This work typically happens during late November and December. Samples are taken of the skin area and a "cup test" performed to determine the consistency of the soil. We have determined a happy medium between drainage/firming up and moisture retention for playability. This test dictates whether more sand or clay should be added to the skin area.

Whether it is sand or clay the materials are spread with a small top-dresser to achieve consistent results. Using a pulverizer, the materials



Coach Chris Hawkins (left) and Bruce Suddeth.

are incorporated into the existing soil profile. A leveling bar is then used to smooth the soil composition so as to keep the grade (1%) for surface drainage.

Once the field is prepped to Coach Hawkins' satisfaction all play is suspended until practice begins mid-January. During the summer growing season we address any lip area issues. We typically cut two widths 16-inches wide with the sod cutter between second and third bases. We remove the built-up soil and return to the stockpile, then relay the sod. Edges are tamped so as not to have a large transition between skin and turf. In addition, the edges are cut once per week during the growing season. A sharp edge makes the turf and manicured skin stand out.

Tournament, game-day prep

Tournament and game-day prep are for the most part the same. Coach Hawkins applies water to the skin area depending on the nature of the tournament or game. For tournaments the field will be in service for extended hours if not days. Knowing this, Coach Hawkins monitors the amount of water applied to the skin depending on the weather, length of play, and time of year. Coach also takes into account the competition and regulates the skin speed based on the amount of moisture applied. It may

also be necessary to water the skin area between games to maintain a constant playing surface throughout the tournament.

For tournament play the field prep begins the day before. The skin turf interface is blown with a backpack blower to move any conditioner in the turf back into the skin. Water is then applied to the skin to the point of saturation, allowed to stand until absorbed, and the field nail-dragged to loosen the top of the soil layer.

Coach Hawkins also likes to mat (cocoa) drag the skin to break up any clumps and level the area for a more finished look. When dragging the skin he likes to alternate start and stop points at baseline to baseline and inside to outside. This reduces the amount of movement in the skin profile.

It is important to start and stop approximately a foot away from the turf areas to eliminate contamination with the skin soils. These areas should be hand-raked. Another important note is to lift the drag before leaving the skin so as not to pull soil into the turf.

Our practice and game-day prep is much the same as above. We water the morning of practice or game similar to tournament prep. The skin is then dragged with nail and mat for a smooth finish followed up by hand raking along the edges. After and before every event or practice the bullpens are hand raked to keep them looking ready for play.

Due to the amount of effort in keeping Cyrill Softball Stadium ready for play at all times, a constant look at the weather is necessary. During periods of practice, game-day, or tournaments it may be necessary to tarp the field to preserve the skin.

The preparation and work of the skin is not the hard part but the planning, scheduling, coordination, and communication that must happen that is difficult.

Bruce H. Suddeth is director of landscape services for the University of South Carolina Upstate, Spartanburg. He would like to thank USC Upstate Landscape Services, Shurburt CampusScapes, and especially Coach Chris Hawkins for their contributions in winning the 2006 STMA College Softball Field of the Year. ■

www.sportsturfmanager.org

^{Ball Diamond} Conditioner Specialists



Infield Custom Blends



Vitri-Cal Clay



Diamond Clay Conditioner



Calcined Clay (Surface)



Mound Clay Fortifier



Diamond Sands

We've got a conditioner for every application. Which means less maintenance, less rain-outs, less wind erosion, less complaints and safer conditions at any level of play



MAR-CO
CLAY PRODUCTS INC.
1-800-950-2555
www.marcoclay.com

Fill in 124 on reader service form or visit <http://oners.hotims.com/12047-124>

AerWay®

AerWay® delivers Speed

AerWay® can aerate the typical playing field in less than 30 minutes, without taking it out of play. More frequent aeration treatments reduce compaction, speeds drying of the field when it rains, and makes more efficient use of water when it's dry.



for more information call **1-800-457-8310**

Advanced Aeration Systems

www.aerway.com email: aerway@aerway.com

Fill in 125 on reader service form or visit <http://oners.hotims.com/12047-125>