

A man wearing a red jacket, a red baseball cap, and khaki shorts is pushing a small, black and red engine-powered mower across a green baseball field. The mower has a black frame, a small engine with a blue and white Husqvarna logo, and two large black wheels. The man is walking from left to right. In the background, there is a green chain-link fence and a green wall. The title "7 Habits of Highly Defective Sports Turf Managers" is overlaid in large white serif font on the right side of the image. Below the title, the author's name "By Jeffrey T. Fowler" is written in a smaller white font.

7 Habits of Highly Defective Sports Turf Managers

By Jeffrey T. Fowler

Jeff Fowler, volunteer crew member at the Little League World Series, Williamsport, PA.

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ost of us have a good handle on what it takes to make our fields safer and more playable. We have gone to enough conferences and field days to learn techniques; we

read articles or talk to people that help us to manage our fields. Most of us admit that we still learn new information every time we go to a seminar or field day, but, most also admit that the biggest problem that we have is with our coworkers, our team, our staff, our whatever we call those that we see more often than we see our families.

Making our team function as one unit and having buy-in from all of the parties involved requires skills just like making our fields safe for play. I have seen countless work crews that don't have enough time in their day, enough help to get it all done, enough volunteers, enough money, enough equipment, enough of this or that. I have identified 7 habits that I have seen in sports turf managers that never have enough.

1. Time management. Personal time management skills are essential skills for effective people. People who use time management techniques routinely are the highest achievers in all walks of life, from business to sports to public service. If you use time well, you will be able to function exceptionally well, even under intense pressure.

Many people spend their days in a frenzy of activity but achieve very little because they're not concentrating their effort on the things that matter the most. The 80:20 Rule says that typically 80% of unfocused effort generates only 20% of results, while the remaining 80% of results are achieved with only 20% of the effort. As you master these skills, you'll find that you take control of your workload, and say goodbye to the often intense stress of work overload.

2. Having a losing attitude. The second habit of defective sports turf managers is one that I often refer to as the Eeyore syndrome. You know the purple donkey character from Winnie-the-Pooh? "Thanks for noticing" is one of his favorite lines. He always just kind of slumps along through life and does what he has to do to get noticed. Many of us just look at the tasks that we have to accomplish and think there is no way we can do it all. Do you look forward to a new challenge? Is your glass half full, or half empty? I read a book about Steve Prefontaine, one of the greatest distance runners in American history and he

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was quoted as saying "How does a kid from Coos Bay, with one leg longer than the other win races? All my life people have been telling me, 'You're too small Pre,' 'You're not fast enough Pre,' 'Give up your foolish dream Steve.' But they forgot something. 'I HAVE TO WIN'." It wasn't his desire to win it was his need to win that made him great.

Tiger Woods said, "I don't go into any tournament thinking that it would be great to lose. I think it would be asinine to think that way." Tiger, in spite of his world rank, continues with golf lessons! Golf lessons and golf coaches are for people that play like me, not the number one ranked player in the world. I mean, think about it: how good does he need to be? Yet how many of us have that attitude about preparing our fields for the big game, or the weekend tournament. No, I mean really have the attitude that it takes to have people say "WOW" when they arrive at the field. How about lessons even when we are the best?

"Concentrate on results, not on being busy."

—James Manktelow, mindtools.com

3. Quit growing. What happens to our fields when they quit growing? They get beat down, they don't look their best, and they perform much poorer than a field that is growing. Well, sports turf managers are more like our grass than we would like to admit. When we stop growing the same thing happens to us; we perform worse than when we are actively growing. Not just growing around the middle or taller, but growing in our career.

There are entire sections in bookstores dedicated to personal growth. There are movies, audio books, podcasts, newsletters, magazines all related to growing a team, a career and even a sports field. I once heard (while listening to an audio book) "that having the ability to read and not using it is worse than being illiterate." Think about that one for a minute. When is the last time you picked up a book, or magazine, or listened to a CD, or a podcast that stretched your mind? One that really made you squirm in your seat. Set a goal to read or listen to "X" number of books, something that will make you grow in the next 12 months.

4. No "Game Plan". Speaking of setting goals, that is the fourth habit of highly defective sports turf managers—not having a game plan. Imagine

what would happen to the teams that use our fields if they didn't have a game plan? Do you think the New York Giants had a game plan when they went up against the undefeated New England Patriots in the Super Bowl? Or did they just get dressed in their uniforms and mosey out on to the field and start playing?

I had a boss in my early years with Penn State that would sit and look at my goals for the year and if she read one that wasn't up to par, she would look me in the eye and say, "So what, who cares?" I used to get so mad at her, because I had put a lot of time into my annual goals. She always followed with guidance and recommendations on making them better. Finally one year I found some things that helped me write my goals so I didn't have to hear her tell me how poor they were.

Here are the steps so your supervisor doesn't have to use that line on your goals. When setting goals think about the following: What do you want to accomplish? When do you want to do it? Write down your goals. Share them with others. Make them real and obtainable. Make them quantifiable. An acronym that will help make sure your goals are done well is SMART. Make your goals Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-Bound. Having a game plan will ensure that you and your team are moving in the same direction.

5. Unwilling to change. Habit five of the defective sports turf manager is one that is hard for everyone to overcome; you not only need to prepare for change, you need to spend some energy convincing/equipping those around you.

"The front end of an individual's resistance to change is how they perceive the change. The back end is how well they are equipped to deal with the change they expect. An individual's degree of resistance to change is determined by whether they perceive the change as good or bad, and how severe they expect the impact of the change to be on them." These words are from the book "The Biggest Mistakes in Managing Change" by Carol Kinsey Goman, Ph.D. Carol goes on and lists the 6 mistakes in managing change:

1. Not understanding the importance of people.
2. Not appreciating that people throughout the organization have different reactions to change.
3. Treating transformation as an event, rather than a mental, physical and emotional process.
4. Being less than candid.
5. Not appropriately "setting the stage" for change.
6. Believing that change-communication was what employees heard or read from headquarters. These six mistakes need to be avoided and managed as change takes place in our ever changing workplace.

6. Failing in relationships with others. You cannot just pay attention to grass and dirt and expect to be successful. It is also about the people around you. People today are inundated with information and messages to process.

They only select a small fraction of the information to pay attention to and respond. Make certain that the information and messages that you deliver to your team are in the processed, not forgotten.

Communications is a give and a take. There is a sender and a receiver. Each of these has descriptive words that are used to designate problems. Now, as you read these descriptive words you are going to have people's faces pop into your head. That is what is going to help you recognize the descriptive words used to explain the problem sender and receiver. The problem sender is too vague, a detailer, a rambler, a dictator, indifferent, overbearing, has a poor sense-of-timing, or a different context. See I told you that you would have a face attached to each of the problem senders!

The problem receiver might be unreasonable, a know-it-all, an arguer, is over-talkative, appears preoccupied, interrupts, or is confused. Make sure that in your communication with your team you are clear, concise, and understood by all. Make certain that you don't just ask for more money from your budget committee, but communicate the why you need it. Don't just tell your crew what to do, but communicate who, what, when, why and where.

Don't just assume that your field users know your desires for pre and post game field maintenance, communicate your desire for the fields, what it will do and how it will affect your abilities to provide a high quality playing surface. Don't assume that your supervisor knows what you need and do, com-

municate with them about challenges and desires. Don't fail at relationships with those around you.

7. Failure to train. The seventh and final habit of defective sports turf managers is our failure to train. We are quick to be critical of our field users, our volunteers, and coworkers. We complain about all the work WE have to do but never trust anyone else to do anything for us. I have seen volunteers ready, willing and able, but not used because they get yelled at for not doing it correctly. I have been on crews that stand around and watch others work because they have not been given clear expectations of their involvement. I have seen crew members fired for not performing, yet no one has taken the time to teach them what they need to know, or have been given substandard training. Make sure that you have provided the training needed to accomplish your team goals.

All of these items require you to think and plan. You will have to care enough to spend the energy to make it happen. The payoff is this: When you wake up in the morning, you will look forward to going to work. ■

Jeffrey Fowler is the Cooperative Extension Director at The Pennsylvania State University, a co-founder of GrassStains Productions, and a Board member of the Keystone Athletic Field Maintenance Organization (KAFMO).

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Off-field maintenance

By Jim Cornelius

Did you ever open your mouth and volunteer for something only to regret it later on? I did (guess I should have taken my mother's advice that my mouth would always get me in trouble) a few years ago when we were dealing with drought-stricken fields and the water ban that the state had issued. Our turf was going dormant, the mowers were sitting idle, the seeders remained on the shelving in the shop, and the guys were returning each day covered from head to toe in dust. My solution: "Hey boss we are fighting a losing battle here and I have to find something that the guys can do that is meaningful." Big mistake!

At the time we were beginning the renovation/rebuild of two of our high schools and construction of a third high school and due to budget cuts our maintenance department was down to three individuals with no new personnel in sight. The overwhelming work load of the maintenance department had them backed up by several months, which is totally unacceptable in the educational world.

Low and behold my boss decides that the grounds department can take on several responsibilities to alleviate pressure from the maintenance crew. The first item was graduation activities of the two high schools (not so bad, it is after the sports season and the guys could use something different) and how hard could it be to set up a few chairs and a stage and sit back and watch the activities? The second item was all concrete replacement that was scheduled for the year. Now this didn't sound fun and wasn't easy work, but okay, we were all up to the challenge.

Today graduation has now become a three high school event that takes up a week and a half of our time, as we set everything up for one school's practice, take it down and move to another. Worst part is they have scheduled rain dates so not only do we risk two practices in one day but we also take the chance of having two graduations on the same night.

This year was the first graduation after all the renovations and the construction of the new high school so we were faced with the challenge of designing and creating new backdrops (someone figured if we can paint fields then we can paint backdrops) for two of the schools. We were successful in getting all three in, and yes we did have two practices in one day and the following day we had two graduations at the same time. Working on synthetic turf for 16 hours a day in 90 degree heat gives an appreciation for those who work in cold storage units; you quickly learn the value of water in its liquid and frozen states. My advice is hydrate more than you think you need.

Then we did the concrete work that needed finished before school started. Of course we have to remember that we now have three times the amount of athletic fields to prepare for the fall sports as well. We always wonder if the weather will cooperate with us or will we be smart enough to work with the weather. This year is not typical (is there is such a thing when it comes to grounds?). The grass is still growing, the summer sports activities are growing, the teams are practicing earlier, and it seems that no one is interested in the band anymore—they have all taken up contact sports.

Dreaded other duties

There are many other tasks that the grounds department must endure that do not fit within the typical grounds spectrum. Helping to move furniture, packing trailers for school renovations, parking cars for special events, assisting the



West Chester Area School District crew: front row, L to R, Jeff Cole, Rich McBride, Bill Whitcraft; middle row, L to R, Laura Swisher, Randy Aman, Bill Simpson, Joe McGuire, Jim Loughin; back row, L to R, Gary Hake, Jim Cornelius, Don Young.

mechanics to replace air filters, pulling wires, installing water lines, removing telephone poles that have been abandoned, detailing trucks, making deliveries of custodial and educational materials, and anything else that needs to be done when we are the only ones having the extra hands that are needed.

If you work in public education you know that during the summer months the custodians are busy cleaning the buildings and during the school year the majority work on second or third shifts. The maintenance tasks only increase in numbers and size as all those projects must be completed during the summer break (funny how we don't get a break) and all things prepared for the students' return.

You may be thinking this is not a lot, so let me explain: my duties are not only to the grounds departments (we split our grounds department in half last year to develop a lawn/landscape crew and an athletic field/turf crew) but also include the HVAC department, maintenance department, warehouse, vehicle mechanic, and annual general fund projects as well as several capital fund projects.

I have learned that to be successful you must be organized, able to plan ahead, willing to ask for help, and most importantly you need to enjoy what you do. In public education we tend to forget who we work for and I have realized that no matter whom my immediate leader is or who is sitting in the superintendent's chair, I work for the children who pass through our

schools. I have used this to motivate my teammates and keep them thinking in a positive way without getting distraught over the political ramifications that come with any public position.

We post a lot of thank you letters and notes we receive and those that are most cherished and hang longer than others are those from the children (especially when they are done in crayon) that needed no prompting to write.

The most important task that my grounds crew does that is out of the normal task is to educate our users, from the student athletes, the coaches, athletic directors including all the outside user groups on how to respect and maintain our fields. No one ever thought that being a grounds person required being a teacher and I am proud to say that we have succeeded in doing so.

When the crew holds a training meeting they all must participate in the teaching aspect (there are no exceptions) in order to be seen and be heard. This has displaced the shyness that some of them attempted to hide behind and the program success is in the pride they have when they show up in the morning to a field and see that the last users left it as we have asked (ready to play). I would encourage everyone who has never attempted this to try it and you may be surprised with the results. ■

Jim Cornelius is buildings and grounds supervisor for West Chester School District in Pennsylvania and a member of the STMA's Editorial Subcommittee.



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West Coast Turf crew installs big rolls of certified TifSport bermudagrass at McAfee Coliseum in Oakland, home of the Athletics and Raiders.

McAfee Coliseum's turf grown locally

West Coast Turf's adding certified TifSport availability at their Stevenson farm location in northern California came just in time for Clay Wood, head groundskeeper for the Oakland Athletics, Oakland Raiders and McAfee Coliseum. Wood has been buying grass from WCT for many years, but in early 2007, when it was time to replace the turf after the Raiders' football season, the Tifway II he'd been planning to order from WCT's local farm wasn't quite ready. So West Coast's Greg Dunn suggested that he consider TifSport, a newer cultivar that was available at their Indio farm, about 400 miles south.

Wood made the trip and liked the look and feel of the TifSport he saw there. Shortly thereafter, WCT delivered 123,200 square feet of the sod 800 miles round trip, in 22 truckloads, to McAfee Coliseum. The installation was completed in just 3 days. As Wood explains, "We found two major advantages of TifSport versus Tifway II for our Oakland location. Because of the climate here in northern California, we routinely overseed all year round. TifSport has a lot finer blade and texture than the Tifway II, so we're getting a more uniform blend with the ryegrass. That's what really impressed me. It's a big improvement visually.

"Advantage number two is that this grass never really goes dormant. My old Tifway II would start to go off-color about mid-October, giving the turf a mottled look. There's a lot less of that with TifSport. I haven't had to change my management practices, either. My fertility's the same. My mowing height's the same. I try to keep it at about 1-inch all year long." Despite the reputation of the Georgia-bred bermudagrasses, cultivars like TifSport sometimes take a while to attract notice simply because of the excellence of their tried-and-true predecessors like Tifway 419 and Tifway 2. There's a tendency to be comfortable with something that's working well.

Clay Wood didn't go looking for a better grass, but when circumstances required a change he was quick to appreciate the difference. Clay Wood became a TifSport convert, and West Coast Turf is converting new acreage to now in northern California to make sure Clay Wood can get what he wants closer to home. ■

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