Let's talk wear tolerance: Soldiers Field groundskeeper tells his story

By KEN MROCK

As groundskeeper for the Chicago Bears, I have to manage turf that takes the hardest beating in sports turf. Over the past nine years here, I've seen the demands on our turf increase dramatically. The players have become bigger and faster and the ball club advocates a year-round training regimen. This is tough because the Midwest has such a short growing season. Essentially, we have to grow grass when it doesn't want to grow.

This past season we had five mini-camps, several twice-a-day practices in addition to our normal four practices per week. On top of this, the Bears share their field with the Lake Forest College football team for five home games.

With this schedule, the field doesn't have as much time to grow grass! So what do we do? Punt? Kneel down with the ball? No way! We attack!

Fortunately, the Chicago Bears are in the forefront of getting better turf for their athletes. Tackling the Bears' turf every season isn't easy. Along with Assistant Groundskeeper John Bertia, I've put together an aggressive mix of seeding and fertilization together with a tight maintenance program to ensure Bears ballplayers have the best possible playing fields.

IT ALL STARTS IN MARCH WITH SEEDING

Starting at the end of March, we pre-germinate seed — a mixture of Blue, Rye, and POA Supina. As soon as the field is workable, we will aerify with a Ryan GA-30 or Toro Greensaire. We try to bring up as many plugs per square foot as possible.

We have found this speeds germination and establishes the growth of the plant a little lower in the turf surface, somewhat protecting the plant when the players try to rip them out with their cleats!

After verification, we allow the plugs to completely dry then broadcast the pre-germinated seed mix over the entire practice field and add another 7-8 lbs./1,000 sq. ft. of dry seed broadcast, mainly between the numbers down the middle of the field.

This area is the most worn and the wear area has greatly expanded, out to the numbers, due to the short passing game or "West Coast offense."

This is where three or four receivers line up between the hash marks and numbers, cutting and spinning their way up the field. With the receivers, of course, come the defensive backs and linebackers defending against them. This puts six to eight players in that small area. The divoting and wear has increased substantially!

STARTER FERTILIZATION IS KEY IN LATE MARCH

Since we have no internal drainage and the practice field was constructed with Turface caloined clay, we have continued to apply Turface and our top dressing soil to the practice field. This process is done with a Turco meter-matic top dresser. We apply this mix across the entire field then lightly drag all the material in with a draft mat. The next step we take is to fertilize with a starter fertilizer.

I prefer Vicksburg Chemical's K-Power 13-24-12. This formulation offers potassium nitrate for the established turf, quick-release nitrogen that works well in cool soil conditions, and phosphorous for seed germination and root establishment.

Next we apply Pythium Control and cover the entire field with a frost blanket. This allows us to bring up the soil temperature to speed up germination of seed and promote growth from existing turf with the K-Power.

APRIL'S MINI-CAMP INCREASES MAINTENANCE

Mini-camp hits in late April — three days of twice-a-day practices with about 80 players. I call this our opening day — the coaches first chance to see what the Bears look like! After this inauguration, the field is available to the team until January.

With all the traffic on the field, divoting and wear on the field is quite aggressive. Divots must be replaced after every practice. The ones that can't be "found" are replaced with a mixture of seed, topsoil and turface. It's the same process that's done on tee boxes at golf courses.

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GOLF COURSE NEWS
Gridiron world a whole new ballgame for turf

As with golf courses, aesthetics are important at a football field. The Bears always have five to 10 TV media outlets and 10 or so print media outlets. We have to attain game conditions at all times! The proper ratio of potassium produces the excellent turf we need.

We also topdress in all scars or rips in the turf. The integrity of the surface is extremely important.

COLD WEATHER MEANS A SHIFT IN FERTILITY PROGRAM

In September, temperatures fall and there is less sunlight. We shift our fertility program to K-Power 18-3-18.

Some of this application will release quickly, the rest will be stored for the critical cold weather weeks to come. When the nights begin to get down to 35 to 45-degrees Fahrenheit, we pull out the frost blankets as needed. This raises the soil temperatures and kicks in the fertilizer — the turf stand is excellent.

We also use our own rain/snow tarps as needed, covering 140 by 65 yards in seven sections that zipper together to form one solid tarp. This is important because, other than during a Bears practice or college game, no rain or snow is allowed to accumulate on the practice field.

As the season progresses we pump 4 million BTUs of heat via kerosene-fired heaters under the tarps to keep the field from freezing.

The only time the field is uncovered is for practice during November and December and hopefully January — play-off time.

The increased levels of potassium allow us to literally heat-up this field but it keeps getting up. In mid-November, an application of K-Power 12-0-42 at full rate is made which will take us through until the spring when the fun starts all over again!