

MAINTAINING QUALITY BASE PATHS ON SOFTBALL AND BASEBALL FIELDS

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They asked me to give a talk on the care of base paths, so this is going to be a kind of before and after explanation, with the main ingredients being a good base with good drainage.

Prior to my coming over to the athletic area, our baseball and softball diamonds had basically a soil, mostly clay, base paths and skin area. Softball was all skin infield and baseball was grass with skin area between infield and outfield.

Early in the spring we would take an edger and square up the grass edges around the base paths and skin areas. Then the crew would mix a soil and clay to be used to fill in low areas and more or less top dress the skin areas. This would all be rototilled in and then rolled. Our base paths on baseball were wide enough to accommodate a small John Deere garden tractor, which we use for dragging. During the season, with this clay type base, our skin areas could become very hard and would have to be dragged with one or two of our people riding on the drag in order to loosen the soil. When doing any watering you had to be careful not to water too much, as you could end up with a slippery sticky mess. And also a very unsafe situation for the ball players.

Over a period of time from our dragging, we would build up a ridge right on the edge of the grass. Several times during the season this edge would have to be raked out or we have even taken a sod cutter to remove it. With this clay base we never did have good drainage, so it was always unpredictable whether we would play after rain or not.

Two years ago we had our baseball infield completely renovated. During the construction we had the base paths and skin areas excavated about 4 inches and then back filled with rock dust which is free of all sand, silt and clay. As we had a little extra funds in the project, we did the same thing to our softball diamond. These areas were then wet down and rolled into a firm base. During the renovation we narrowed our base paths down to about 30 inches. With this material, we have been able to cut back on our maintenance. The skin areas can become very firm and packed, but will work up very easily when dragged and raked. We have been using a 36" aluminum landscape rake called "The Great Rake". After dragging and raking the skin areas, our base paths are lined. If it has been dry, we can safely water all the skin areas a few minutes prior to start of the game, because of the excellent drainage of the rock dust.

At least once during the season we still have to remove a raised ridge along the edge of the turf, which we do now with either a stiff broom or wash it out with water pressure.

In the event of rain on game day, if it isn't a downpour, we have been able to take care of any wet spots with diamond dry. This is a commercial non-toxic, and with no chemical additives, material that does an excellent job

of absorbing any moisture that you have to get rid of, without building up in the base, as some clay products will.

On our intramural softball diamonds there isn't much we can do with the amount of games that are played during the season. We will furnish a stock pile of sand-soil mix and the intramural student supervisors will use it to fill holes. At the end of the softball season we will disk and drag the base paths and work spots, add top soil to low spots, seed and straw and try to get some grass coming back before we turn them into touch football fields. After football, we will aerify, fertilize and overseed, if the weather cooperates and we have time, hoping that next spring we can start out with some grass on our diamonds

In closing, I will again say that the secret to good base paths and skin areas is good drainage and good base structure.