

“Play Ball” Don’t let them give you any lip

by Jim Hermann, CSFM

As a sports field manager it is your job to keep your field safe, playable and available to the local teams in your area. The ages range from little guys to the over thirty league.

All teams, with no exceptions, have the same credo; play at any expense. If your patient and very quiet you can sometimes observe them early on a Saturday morning in March. Sometimes parents, sometimes the over thirty league, making their somber, methodical trek from the parking lot to the infield. It’s an age-old custom. It’s the camaraderie of the game. It’s their destiny.

Shovels, rakes, wheelbarrows, shirts untucked, sneakers untied, slightly disheveled appearances, coffee in hand.

You have to understand this is an inherited tradition that is passed on from father to son, from generation to generation, and so on.

As nature calls them to their destiny a curious and sometimes comical ritual can be observed. The “spreading of the mix” as it is sometimes referred to has roots that go back as far as the game itself. Some say

this phenomenon evolved from a time when there was an actual need for additional infield mix. Others say this phenomenon is caused by the increase in daylight hours.

If you are very quiet in the early morning hours of a typical Saturday in April, you can sometimes hear the faint sound of nature as it beckons ever-increasing numbers of individuals whose competitive nature requires the sound of that timeless phrase “Play Ball”

When spring breaks and nature calls, if you don’t have that field ready, these weekend warriors will make it ready. That water and mud at first base. Right on the grass. What happens then? The depression gets deeper and the lip gets higher. Then, as if that’s not bad enough, two bags of conditioner are used to fill the depression. The next rain, that gets dumped on the grass, and so on, and so on, and so on. I once saw 20 bags of conditioner used to play one game. These guys were actually proud of themselves after the game. That’s when the conditioners were locked up.

Now, in addition, you can receive information on the proper way to remove

the water from that depression and make that depression ready for play. What’s wrong with that picture? Remove the lip. Regrade existing material into the depression. (Only use additional material if absolutely necessary. Be done with it and move on.

Talk about forethought; I once saw a guy use sawdust to dry up the home plate area. He knew there was a problem before he even went to the field, and single-handedly came up with a solution without *e v e n* being asked. Talk about dedication.

I could go on and on. It is not my intent to make light of or pass judgment on the determination and dedication of the leagues and parents. Only to draw attention to a perpetual problem which needs to be addressed. If I didn’t laugh, I would be cursing. I truly have a great deal of respect and admiration. I commend them highly for their perseverance and effort. But, enough is enough.

Many people have a way of thinking that has been inherited from a time when baseball was played in the corner of a cow field. Try to acquire equipment or manpower to improve the safety and playability of your fields. What do you sometimes hear? “You don’t need Yankee Stadium. We didn’t have it back when I was a kid. Why I remember one time right after I broke my leg rounding first base...” How can you argue with that?

If you can educate the leagues, they will in turn become your allies. They will be the additional manpower you need to improve the quality of your infields. What is needed is education, guidance and communication to go along with this ambition. The situation didn’t get this way over night and it won’t change over night.

Every employee that walks through your doors typically goes through a period of training before he or she is considered a competent productive employee. The leagues that use your fields should be given the same consideration.

Many leagues have a coach’s meeting in the spring prior to the opening of the season. Become a part of the process. If your leagues don’t have a coach’s meeting, maybe it’s time they did. This is an ideal time to impress upon them the need for proper maintenance and safety. Provide the leagues with an infield maintenance plan based on the individual needs and problems of your infields. Include the basic principles of effective infield maintenance. In addition have a sign posted in a conspicuous location at each field that lists the steps necessary to keep the infield in good condition.

As the leagues begin to see the improvement in the quality of your fields, they will in turn take more pride. ♦

“JUST ADD WATER...”

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