

WINTER SPORTS FIELD TIPS

James A. Murphy, Ph.D.*

Clean-up. Leaves, sticks, and other debris that accumulate on the grass over the winter should be raked up when weather permits. Debris lying on the turf too long can smother the grass and create bare spots. Bare spots will probably transform into weeds later in the season.

Mowing. Winter is a good time to clean, lubricate and repair your mowing equipment. You do not want to find out that your mowers do not work properly at first use in the spring. Because of the chance for wet weather and rapid shoot growth any delay in mowing at the start of the season (spring) can turn into a "behind the eight-ball" scenario very quickly.

Fertilization. Plan for your fertilization needs by testing your soil to determine whether liming is necessary to adjust soil pH (6.0 to 6.7 recommended) as well which nutrients are needed and how much. If you applied a thorough late season (autumn) fertilization, your turf probably will not need as much fertilization in early spring (March - April). Without a fall fertilization program, the turf may require some rather aggressive fertilization to encourage recovery from play or winter damage or to enhance spring green-up. An application of 2/3 to 1½ pound of actual N per 1000 sq. ft. is a good starting fertilization rate in early spring. Fertilization with phosphates or potash should be based on soil test results.

Winter Seeding. Winter seeding is a risky practice; the probability of the seed washing away and being eaten by birds is very high. Work the seed into the soil if you choose to seed during winter and realize that is likely to you will need to re-seed when warmer weather returns. Seeding when air temperature consistently exceeds 50 degrees Fahrenheit provides a better chance for success.

Drainage Assessment. Winter is good time to assess your fields for areas of poor drainage. Identifying and mapping out these areas now will give you a record of where you need to treat with your aerifier this spring. If aeration is not enough, maps of the poorly drained areas will provide documentation that you can use to show facility administrators where improvements such as slit drainage are needed.

Cover Skinned Infield Areas. Wet winter weather can lead to considerable erosion of skinned areas on baseball/softball infields. Consider covering these areas during the winter to eliminate much of the skin restoration headaches this spring. Type "baseball field covers" in any of the popular internet search engines to see examples of numerous companies that can supply covers in various sizes and shapes.

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