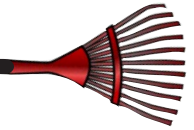


# GROUNDS CARE BY THE ATHLETE



By James Cornelius, CSFM

Education is the root of world. We now have computers that spell check our work - long gone are the dictionaries, encyclopedias and all those research manuals. The world of robotics has replaced human hands in many aspects of the manufacturing world. Yet when it comes to grounds/athletic field care, you still find that some of the best ways are the traditional ways (human power with manual tools). Yes, we have machines that help with the larger tasks and we use these as tools the way they were meant to be used; and sometimes in ways the manufacturers never intended. Yet in few places have machines replaced human power to provide the athletic facilities to the high degree of quality that we can. By and large, the industry has not changed all that much, even though we have a better selection of turfgrasses, artificial surfacing, soil analysis, topdressings, research materials, soil amendments, etc. to aide us in meeting the challenge we face every day: To provide better and safer facilities with aesthetics that are second to none.

Looking back, things have changed. Teams rarely bring out the big water jug, now replaced with individual water bottles that need recycling cans to collect them all. Most seem to find the ground long before being placed in the proper can. Trash is prolific and seems to multiply over night; still the trash can remains in-place. The holes on the mound, around home plate, in the infield, as well as the outfield become larger, deeper and if ignored, will continue to grow to mammoth size. The grass continues to grow and we struggle to keep it mowed at an acceptable height, all the while continuing to feed it with fertilizers, topdressings and additional seed to grow more grass. At this rate, frustration can set in quickly and if not dealt with in a manner that becomes positive, can lead to running oneself out of a job, or working in an endless circle that never changes much like being jobless and not looking for one.

At last there is hope. We have opened our ears and instituted a different approach to our problems. We now have athletes doing

grounds maintenance as part of their education and athletic experience on our sites. Instead of coming to work with built up frustration, we now come to execute a task. We finish what was started. We plant seeds, not only turfgrass seed but educational seeds. We now work outside the box on most occasions.

We still only have five employed in the athletic field maintenance department yet our team has grown to more than we expected. The best part is the majority of the athletes work for the ability to use our facilities. Puzzled, are you? Here is how we do it and how we got to this part of our journey.

With our frustration at an all time high, the district was renovating two high schools and building a third. Our athletic field numbers were growing, yet the staff count was not. It became time to turn things around. The district soon realized that with the athletic numbers growing and the dollars being spent needing to be protected, they formed a committee of administrators, teachers, students, public representatives, facility staff and many others to work on developing an Athletic Strategic Plan for the High School Athletic program. Nothing was overlooked. They covered everything from student safety and conduct to maintenance of the fields, indoor athletic facilities, etc. Having the privileged to be part of this committee and a voice of concern, we were able to institute an evaluation tool that we revised from information generated by Dr. Dr. Dave Minner at Iowa State University and many others Sports Turf Managers Association (STMA) and Keystone Athletic Field Managers Organization (KAFMO). We developed a

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# GROUNDS CARE BY THE ATHLETE

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communication tool using Red, Green and Yellow flags for each of our fields along with updated emails of field conditions as they changed in status from one flag color to another. We established and implemented a more meaningful facility use policy for both outside and inside venues. We limited the amount of use by outside organizations on our high school athletic facilities so that we could reduce wear and minimize traffic to where we could manage the turf to maintain top quality facilities. Lastly, we developed and implemented rules and guidelines for all users; this included that all users be taught how to help in maintaining our facilities.

All of the items incorporated into the Athletic Strategic Plan are important and meaningful, yet the one we embraced was the last one. Teaching our users was, and still is, huge. Never in my dreams did I think that we could get users/athletes to help in maintaining the fields. In the past, most groups expected the best, yet would rarely help out. Every once in a while we would have a group dump dirt (yes, dirt; not topsoil, topdressing or soil) in a goal mouth and kick it around, sprinkle some cheap seed, and call it "helping us out" or "doing our job".

We actually began meeting with the Middle School teams as they were more receptive to what we wanted to do. The coaches

liked the fact that we weren't asking them. The coaches liked that we asked the students to participate in helping us out. Our promise to them was simple: Help us out with a few small items (filling holes after practice, using divot mix on the turf where needed, spreading some seed in the goal mouths before practice, etc) and we would provide them with game day facilities each day they took the field. The first season was about 70% participation from the middle school teams. Once the other coaches saw that some fields were exceptional, they quickly realized that they too needed to work along with us. As we went into the second season, the students began asking when we were coming to meet with them. This progressed to the point where they email us when they need seed, or if a rake or shovel is missing from its place.


Each season brings something new. We now teach our outside users by holding mandatory training sessions. All coaches must attend prior to their group being issued their permit which allows them to use our facilities. We began holding these in the spring and quickly realized that with the unpredictable spring weather in Pennsylvania, one-fourth of the spring season was over before we got everyone trained. Now we hold them in late-October when we are putting our fields to rest for the upcoming winter; this allows us to be more aggressive with our

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# GROUNDS CARE BY THE ATHLETE

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training. Each team member participates in one or more stations that we have set-up. We begin with a brief explanation of why we hold the training classes, dealing with trash at all our facilities and what responsibilities they have regarding trash, how to maintain the player bench and spectator areas, and lastly the care of our fence. Depending on how many are present, we either divide them up to the different stations or we work as a group from one to another. Our stations are natural turf areas where we explain using a field within a field, repairing divots with provided divot mix that we keep at each natural turf field, grass seed for the goal mouths and center of the field that we also keep on site; on to infields we have pitcher's mound care, repair and covering with provided tarp, home plate care and repair, base path care and how each of the provided tools are used, and how to deal with water puddles, wet infields, etc. We show them how we take care of these areas and allow them the opportunity to show us a different way, try our way, and we answer many questions that they come up.

Some organizations have committed 100% to our efforts while others have exceeded our expectations. We now have groups willing to mow fields (following our guidelines), handle the irrigation responsibilities (again, following our guidelines), provide manpower and equipment to help apply topdressing, turfgrass

seed, and infield mix - all materials that we provide so we control the materials used. All of this had initial costs (nothing is free); however, we quickly recovered these costs by saving man hours. We purchased tools for each field, buckets for divot and seed mix for each field, tarps for each home plate and mound area, and batter box jigs that the crew made for each baseball and softball field. We had metal storage boxes constructed to hold materials, hoses, quick dry materials, and many other minor things for teams to maintain the fields at no cost to the teams. Ironically, some of the groups have bought extra rakes, booms, hoses, tank sprayers for wetting down the mounds, bags for trash, and have finally taken an ownership in our facilities. A win-win for all involved!

So, when your frustration level reaches an all time high/low, look around at the resources available and don't turn the help away. Turn them around to be a team mate. In the end, the children and the athletes are winners, no matter the outcome of the game; provided the game can go on.

*James Cornelius, CSFM is Certified Sports Field Manager (CSFM); Formerly Buildings & Grounds Supervisor, West Chester Area School District, West Chester, PA; Currently Services Manager, Fisher & Son, Inc.; and member of Keystone Athletic Field Managers Organization (KAFMO).*

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