

# FOOTBALL FIELD MAINTENANCE FOR NATURAL TURF FIELDS ABOVE THE TRANSITION ZONE: PART 2

By Rich Watson

With football season in full swing right now, let's look back at how it got started in August. Football season at Overbrook starts around the middle of the month but it actually begins for us around August 1. This is when the fields are laid out. Before the fields are painted we cut in a football pattern consisting of end zones cut in the same direction and every five yards cut in the opposite direction. This is done to burn the pattern in without having to waste paint before field use begins.



Consistent mowing throughout the season is very important. Mowing the same pattern for three months or longer may not be the best thing for the health of your turf. We try to cut a different pattern at least once a week usually before painting with the hope that this will serve as a clean-up cut by keeping the grass blades from laying over and not standing back up. With the pattern burned in, it's time to paint and get ready for practice.

The weather has been pretty unpredictable over the past couple of years. We have had wet weather that causes a lot of damage due to the repetitive nature of football practice. Our coaches do a great job of moving around but sometimes damage is inevitable.



After a wet practice we will sometimes use a light roller to push down damaged turf and broadcast perennial rye seed. This process is used in wet or dry conditions in order to keep up with field damage. Seed is the great equalizer in this equation. It allows us to

keep some turf cover. Summer camp is different from our regular practices during the school year. Practices are longer and are held six days a week for around three weeks. In addition to seeding, managing moisture is probably the key to surviving this time of the season. During warm weather irrigation is run just after practice to help the turf recover and allow plenty of time to dry before the next practice. A wet field can be ruined in a single practice. Monitoring your field during this period is very important. Your practice field is going to be used all year long. If no maintenance is done, it will be a very long and bare season.

## Game On: Game prep and repair

It always amazes me how much more energy and time we spend on our game fields. The team spends much more time on the practice field but the game field garners all of the attention. At Overbrook we have a very good situation when it comes to our stadium field. One of the reasons the field holds up as well as it does is the fact that it really is just a football field for games. Our coaching staff has even volunteered to move their Friday practices to the practice field in order to preserve conditions on the game field. The Overbrook marching band has their own practice area at the back of our school that allows them to practice whenever they want. They do however practice on the game field for longer periods of times than I would

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like during the competition portion of their season. It does force us to aerate more and keep an extra eye on the area of the field that they practice on over and over again. I guess the best advice is to have a good relationship with your coaches and administrators to make your life easier.

Cooperation is great but you need a good plan going in to the week of a football game. Start by looking at the weather forecast to set up a painting and mowing schedule. Typically we will cut Monday, Wednesday and Friday for a Saturday game with painting reserved for Thursday and Friday. Our cutting height is a little higher than most fields (2.5 to 3.0 inches). We counter that by using a light roller on game day to provide a smooth flat surface. In order to keep our sidelines straight, they are cut a quarter inch shorter that morning before rolling. As the season progresses we begin to broadcast perennial ryegrass seed before our games. This allows the athletes to work the seed in with their cleats. This year we have purchased a Woods seeder that we will use to renovate the center of the field throughout the season. The combination of all of these things is what allows us to provide the best surface possible on a tight budget.



Post-game repairs and rest are what really holds the field together from week to week. In the beginning of the season when it is hot, we will irrigate the field as soon as everyone is off after a game. This helps the recuperation process begin. We may also lightly roll the field to push down any loose turf. This allows that turf to re-root if given enough moisture. In addition, we also remove all loose divots that are not still attached. The divots then are filled with a pre-made divot mix consisting of mushroom compost soil and seed. Sometimes this doesn't happen until Monday depending on manpower and time of the game. However, it is better to get as much repair work done as soon as possible to give the field as much time as possible to recover.

### Putting Your Field to Bed

As one season ends another begins. After our last home game of the year, we get ready for the following year. Seeding throughout the season definitely helps this process. Our goal at the end of the year is to fully repair the entire field and have as little bare soil as possible exposed. We start by topdressing all divots and low spots and then seed the entire field with tall fescue seed. Over the past few seasons we have been trying to incorporate more tall fescue into all of our fields because they seem to do a better job resisting disease damage in the summer than perennial ryegrass. The perennial ryegrass serves its purpose during the season by being durable and germinating under difficult circumstances but the addition of the tall fescue gives us more cover going into the season. After the field is topdressed and seeded, we roll one more time and put the final application of ammonium sulfate out. I recommend that you do whatever it takes to keep any type of play off of your field at this time because it is almost at the point of dormancy and any wear will be difficult to repair. A couple of pick-up games can cause a lot of unnecessary damage that will need to be repaired in the spring.

Football in New Jersey is a long season. It starts with heat and humidity and finishes with a mix of cold unpredictable weather. The best way to survive is to have a plan that you can communicate to coaches and administrators in order to provide the best possible playing surface for the athletes to use and enjoy.



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