Infield action

It’s arguably the most exciting play in sports and too often one of the most painful; the simultaneous arrival of baseball and runner and the slide over baked clay at home plate.

Don Sadler, the barrel-chested maintenance supervisor for the Canadian city of Etobicoke (pronounced AY-TOE-BE-COE) near Toronto, works to take the sting out of the play. That’s just one of the benefits of a properly prepared infield; firm for good footing and true hops, yet soft enough that it doesn’t flay a sliding baserunner.

Catch the action any summer afternoon.

He’s your boy, he’s all arms, legs, and joints working at cross purposes and he’s rounding third, jets working. The relay from centerfield to the shortstop to the plate is chest high. The teen-age baserunner’s automatic pilot flashes down, and the runner, right knee tucked, skids in a scraping duststorm of flying gravel.

First there’s just a touch of red below the rip in the knee of the baseball pants (pants that some sponsoring merchant shelled out money for and under normal circumstances couldn’t be cut with a chainsaw), then the blood spreads along the outside of the calf from knee to ankle.

The composition of the infield is the key. Many of Sadler’s fields, particularly the softball fields, contain six inches of worked-in hazemag. “It’s crushed round gravel, not crushed stone,” says Sadler. “Crushed stone has jagged edges. You don’t want that.”

The material—available from most sizable aggregate companies—should be screened to 1/4-inch-minus.

Although Harry Gill, veteran groundskeeper for Milwaukee County Stadium and the professional baseball Brewers, prefers “more pointy” chips of sand and not round beach sand which he feels stays “loose and movey,” both groundsman agree that crushed limestone screenings or rock dust is unacceptable.

Major league groundskeepers’ jobs hinge on their ability to provide major league-quality infields, but the infields of many of our community ball fields—most of them totally skin—aren’t adequate. Too much clay baked by the midsummer sun and given perfunctory smoothing and raking, they play like concrete. Rain and they don’t drain; players skate.

Sadler, an avid amateur softball player, gives his infields the attention they deserve, including working the material around the bases several inches down with a rake before play.