

Beat Neglect on the Playing Field

Grounds care must stress prevention- or you'll pay double later

by Kent W. Kurtz, Ph.D

Almost every child has developed motor skills, coordination, and philosophies-and experienced "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat"-on the school playground or athletic field. Since the formative years are the most important in a child's development, the playground and athletic field during these years are very crucial to the child's future and an integral part of the child's success.

If the playground and sports fields are so vital to our students' educations, why then are we so careless with them? Take a close look at the playgrounds, parks, ball fields and sports facilities in your community-are they safe? Unfortunately, the vast majority show deterioration, neglect and worn-out turf. Many of these facilities are hard, compacted, dangerous and very unsafe. Holes, depressions, litter, debris, glass, metal, and other hazards are far too abundant.

The problems are most often the direct result of poor or faulty construction, shortcuts, politically motivated change orders, shortsightedness, a lack of knowledge or funds, or the implementation of the wrong priorities by misinformed administrators or novices. It doesn't make sense: decisions are made to save money and costs initially, but then we pay later with higher maintenance costs in order to try to rectify the condition.

Many public agencies and schools find themselves in trouble from the outset because of the low-bid process in awarding contracts. It is a fact that most contractors have no background or experience with the proper construction and/or maintenance of athletic fields and they really don't have time to learn. They lack the expertise and

knowledge of soils, soil management, and soil modification, proper drainage and surface uniformity, water infiltration rates, use and compaction requirements and the proper turfgrasses to use for heavy wear and tear. The bottom line when the low-bid contractor is selected, in most instances, is a very expensive ongoing maintenance program.

Problems that are directly attributed to the construction phase are most often soil-related. The playgrounds and athletic fields that

exhibit poor drainage and severe compaction problems are normally due to poor soil preparation during construction. Often the absence of a good site survey and the lack of soil analysis (both physical and chemical) are responsible for failure.

However, many problems arise due to the installation of improper drainage systems or none at all where there should be one. Where irrigation systems are utilized, many school districts or campuses turn the job of installation over to plumbers rather than someone who is familiar with

Get involved with sports turf associations

Probably the easiest way to begin solving playground and athletic field problems is to get involved with fellow professionals and join an organization that supports and promotes education, research and the concept of safer sports turf. Within the past two years two national organizations have emerged and are committed to work toward improved playing surfaces for our nation's youth and participants at all levels of sports. Both organizations work hand in hand in an all-out effort to improve conditions on playgrounds and sports fields to reduce injuries and make the activities more enjoyable to the participants.

The *Sports Turf Manager's Association* has over 500 members from public and private schools, high schools, colleges, universities, youth sports, municipalities, parks, professional stadiums, contractors, educators, and commercial affiliates that are committed to improving sports turf, wherever it is grown. STMA sponsors seminars, workshops, and trade shows throughout the U.S. to educate the athletic field manager in solving problems, promoting new ideas and concepts, providing on-site demonstrations, and working together to improve the image and professionalism of the sports turf manager.

STMA's goals are:

- to collect and disseminate scientific, educational and practical knowledge through association with those persons engaged in or concerned with the construction and maintenance of safer and better sports turf areas

- to provide scholarship monies to promote, develop and encourage future leaders in the sports turf industry

- to provide monies for research and development of playing surfaces, facilities and quality sports turf

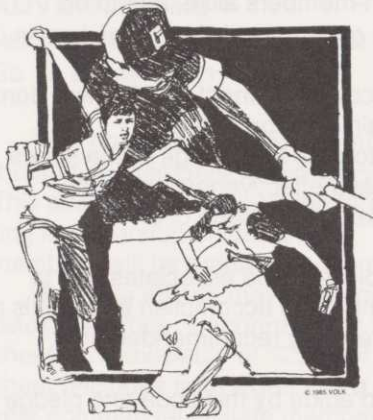
- to promote the design, development and use of related materials, supplies and equipment of the sports turf industry.

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The *National Sports Turf Council* has been organized to promote research and education leading to better and safer sports turf everywhere. The NSTC creed is "To marshal all forces that can be brought to bear on the improvement of all sports playing surfaces for greater player safety and to enhance spectator and player enjoyment."

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Beat Neglect . . .



irrigation and design of sports fields. Mistakes of this nature may result in poor water distribution, improper infiltration rates of water moving through the soil, or fields that are either oversaturated or droughty.

The wrong turfgrass

The second most common problem experienced on fields is the selection of the wrong turfgrasses.

Recommendations by so-called "turfgrass consultants" or "experts" are easy to come by and are not generally based upon research of local conditions, or are not well-thought-out beforehand. Turfgrasses must be selected for the conditions at hand and must be based upon the site, climate, soil type, use intended, funds available for care and maintenance, personnel available to maintain the site and, in some cases, the type of mowing and turf care equipment available to care adequately for the species being grown.

Many facilities are so neglected that they need to be completely rebuilt or renovated.

There is often a lack of knowledge of the specific capabilities of the grasses, the nature and properties of the soils, and the interaction of use with grass and soil. This is compounded by the common problems of poor use-discipline, overuse and abuse.

Many community playgrounds, ball fields and youth sports facilities are in poor condition, deteriorated or rundown as a result of ill-advised or poor fiscal responsibility. For too long, sports fields have had to take a back seat to other budget priorities. Many facilities are so neglected that they need to be completely rebuilt or renovated. Many of these crisis situations could be prevented with a moderate budget and a weekly maintenance program.

Care now or lawsuits later?

Beware! Lawsuits and litigation in today's society pose a big problem for all public agencies. If the courts can prove negligence, everyone within a public agency can be dragged through a very unpleasant experience. Based upon prior experiences, many schools and municipalities are being denied liability insurance coverage. In 1984 there were more than 189,000 children in the U.S. who required hospital care for playground injuries. Back in 1980 there were 130 verdicts of \$1 million or more awarded across the U.S. for liability-"negligence" cases. By 1984 there were a record number of 401 verdicts totaling \$1 million or more, and many of these were playground related.

If schools can show they are attempting to rectify conditions, courts may be more lenient.



Most injuries occur on hard surfaces that have been severely compacted and are devoid of a good turf cover. If schools and other public agencies can show they are attempting to rectify the playground and athletic field conditions, courts may be more lenient toward such entities. Well-cared-for natural grass and the correct soil composition



beneath it offers the participants forgiveness, and turf is softer, safer and more resilient than fields without grass. Injuries may still occur on natural grass, but chances are they will be reduced in severity and frequency.

Common problems found on playgrounds and athletic fields, whether they are attributed to poor construction, inadequate maintenance or too many activities, can all be solved. Unsafe field conditions and liability hazards can be avoided if the personnel at all levels within an organization cooperate. This means a strong interaction between grounds personnel, administrators, athletic directors, coaches, band directors, business managers, school boards, the parents and students. These people must work together, learn together, share knowledge, share ideas, attend conferences, seminars and trade shows, try new products and equipment, try new concepts and keep an open mind.

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