

Sports Turf - The Human Elements*

Sports turf managers are accustomed to adapting their programs to the whims of mother nature. Sometimes equally difficult is adapting a program to the human elements.

That adaptation may be a factor of who the facilities' financial decision makers are and what they do -- or don't -- know about the agronomics of sports turf. It may be a factor of the perception of a sports field's importance in the larger realm of responsibilities of the sports turf manager's superiors within the education, business or government sectors. Whatever the issues that take the attention of these decision makers away from the playing surfaces, the sports turf manager must help alert them to the importance of four key people-related issues. Safety, liability, economics and field use must all be addressed in order for sports fields to become better within a single program and across the globe.

Safety is Number One

Neither the participants of athletic events nor the general public, including the parents of young athletes, are

sufficiently aware of the importance of the playing surface in helping to prevent injuries. For too long, there has been an over-all philosophy that recognizes game roughness as one of the expected, even anticipated, attractions of sports competition. Consider the "mud and guts" years of football play at all levels.

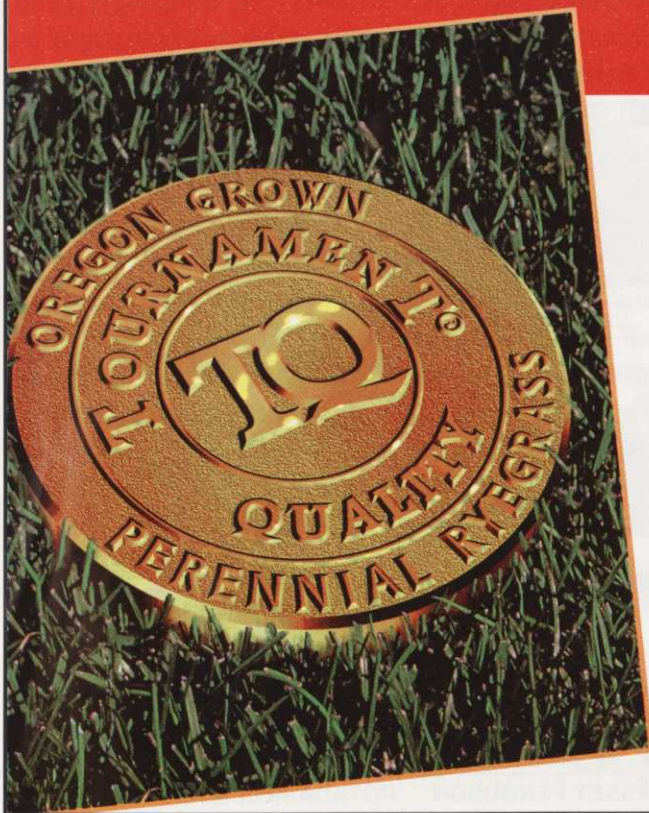
Research at major universities, as well as documented accounts of player injuries, both on natural and synthetic playing surfaces, have provided most convincing evidence in favor of well-maintained, natural turf surfaces.

It's up to sports turf managers and STMA to make the point: not only do poor field conditions present a hazard to the health of the athlete, they also may influence the outcome of the game in favor of luck rather than individual or team talent. Each athlete, young or old, amateur or pro, deserves the right to play on safe field conditions.

Field Liability Enforces Number One

So important has the field safety issue become that the liability and insurance issues are demanding increased *continued on page 16*

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attention. No longer can local school boards, municipal or other governmental agencies, college athletic directors, or professional sports teams and clubs continue to maintain a "head in the sand" attitude regarding responsibility for field related injuries. The time is long past for the improvement of unsafe field surfaces.

Many sports enthusiasts are concerned about the possibility of insurance rates increasing to the point where wide spread discontinuance of sporting events will be necessary. Costs of secondary and college education are increasing to the point where funding of scholastic and intercollegiate athletics is now close to the breaking point. Reduction of injuries as a result of better quality turfgrass fields can serve to reduce the liability issue and allow spectators to continue to enjoy competitive sports at all levels of play.

Economics Will Always Be An Issue

Economics are a fact of life. Sports fields and the maintenance of those fields do cost money. Sports turf managers must move into the new millennium on budgeting issues, presenting clearly-defined, well-documented budgets for field improvement and maintenance. Of course, when conditions are poor, appropriation of sufficient funds to do a complete field renovation properly and do it all at once is usually the most efficient option in the long run.

But, regardless of the amount of funding available, there's always something that can be done to make the field better. Because we know the weakest link determines the strength of the chain, determining the extent of field problems and correcting them in order of severity and risk to player safety will make a significant impact over a period of time. Aggressively following this program will improve total field conditions without excessively large expenditures in any one budgeting period. It's again up to the sports turf manager to establish priorities for field improvement, determine how much can be accomplished each year, and fight for the funding to develop and maintain a safe playing surface.

Use of the Field

Sports turf managers know a major factor in field condition is the amount and type of use the field receives. Many sports fields with poor quality playing surfaces are simply over-used; too many sporting events are scheduled and too many non-sports activities are staged on the playing surface. On some sports fields, overall use is within reason, but that use continues during field conditions unsuitable for play, severely damaging the playing surface and compacting the soil. Often, field use is so frequent, adequate time is not provided for recovery

of injury to turfgrasses, for remedial maintenance procedures, or for the renovation of unsafe playing surfaces.

Sports turf managers must educate field user groups and the facilities' financial decision makers on the short-term and long-term consequences of these actions. In some instances, excessive and inappropriate use can be controlled by better communication between the sports turf manager and the field user groups and more efficient methods of scheduling. The sports turf manager may need to be granted the authority to take a field out of play, and have that authority respected and enforced, if necessary. New practice fields could be a workable solution. In some cases, an increase in the number of sports fields is needed to adequately meet public demands.

People skills do matter. The best technically-accurate maintenance program can be torpedoed by deficiencies in areas of safety, liability, economics or field use.

* From the Lawn Institute Special Topic Sheets (LISTS) Notebook published October 1991.





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