

# Ontario Turf Grass Symposium 1997 Highlights

Where else in Canada can you listen to Ron McLean, Ken Mrock, Pam Charbonneau, Dr. Steve Bowley, Dr. Jack Eggens, Peter Barrow, Dr. Steve Baker for only \$200.00. Where else for \$200.00 can you see all the equipment you would want to, hear all the Don Cherry jokes you would want to, learn to diagnose those cryptic turf problems, hear how a soccer ball should bounce when dropped from 3 metres, how to organise and service your customers better, the best base for Woodbine race track, and how to infuse money into the 'Special Events Budget'.

It was three days full of networking and education. As a supervisor I am delighted when staff attends. I know our department will gain from what they learned, heard, and overheard. In 6 years of attending the Symposium I have learned so much. Whether they're someone else's tricks of the trade, or new ways to squeeze more out of the Nitrogen, simply by altering the application date, it was another outstanding Symposium. Here are a few of my highlights:

Not being a hockey fan, I thoroughly enjoyed Ron McLean's address. He was very gracious when he acknowledged the gathering of speakers, and the success of the Guelph Turfgrass Institute (GTI). Not only was he entertaining but also started the Symposium on a very upbeat and dynamic note.

## "Innovative Sports Turf Tips" was a fabulous session.

Both Mike Regan and Dwayne McAllister threw out tips I wish I had known 5 years ago. Dwayne's talk was directed at

attaining a professional sports field or diamond whatever equipment you have available.

Mike Regan handed out copies of *The Progressive Groundskeeper* by Floyd Perry Jr.

Instead of maintaining problems, correct them. If drainage in a certain area of a surface is haunting you, and you can't have drainage tile installed there are inexpensive quick fixes. Auger a 6" hole down 2' (or below the hard pan) and fill with sand. This will drain a small area. An even quicker fix is Turface. But don't broom it, you'll spread the water and possibly create a lip, rake it instead.

If you're not getting the maximum tine penetration when aerating, let some air out of the tires on your aerator which lowers the entire unit. Mow your lines a quarter inch shorter than the rest of the field, it will extend their life a few extra days.

Use a sod cutter, or hand edger to keep turf edges neat, and weeds off ball diamonds and warning tracks.

Are lips on ball diamonds making you work too hard in the fall? Try these two tips: Use a broom attachment every second week at the edge of the infield to brush back the infield mix. Mike Regan also suggested pinching a copper nozzle to increase water pressure and hose back the infield mix from the turf. If you still have a lip in the fall, and your turf is worth saving, lift it with a sod cutter, lower the grade as far back as necessary, and replace the sod. Mike uses poly tarps in the front of his batting cage. Mentioned that Turface is \$67.00/40 lb bag - so use sparingly. When topdressing use the existing soil.

## Sean Gault: Woodbine Race Track - One Year After

This was a fascinating lecture about the redesign of Woodbine Race Track. 3 tracks of different lengths were finally built - one for standardbreds, and two for thoroughbreds. Three people were involved with the consulting: Dr. Bob Sheard, Dr. Jack Eggens and Engineer Peter McCallery. A test area was built, two different sands were used plus simulated rainfall. The track had to be stable enough to support a 14-stall gate weighing 10 tons. The impact on the horses leg is explicit to the bulk density of the mate-

rial. Lastly the turf has to have a reasonable resistance to shearing from the horses hooves.

All the construction was completed in eight months including relocation of irrigation systems, drainage systems, tunnels and removal of the apron in front of the grandstand. (All water is reclaimed from the stables for irrigation). See the article in March 1995, *Sports Turf Manager* 'Turf for the Sport of Kings' by Dr. R.W. Sheard, for more technical information.

## Ken Mrock and the Chicago Bears Football Field

Ken Mrock (Grounds Superintendent, Chicago Bears), was full of stories, which to most in the room were dreams come true. How about having a heated football field? He revealed some of the tricks he keeps up his sleeve that keep coaches and himself smiling.

One of the biggest challenges Ken has, as do we all, is keeping the players off the field as much as possible. He keeps a grid pattern painted for the linemen so they can practise - off the field. He has mobile posts that can be set up anywhere. They are also smaller, requested that way by the coaches. Again this keeps practises off the field. He paints a second field perpendicular to the main, to minimise consistent wear on hash marks. Keeping a second set of lines, painted in orange, three feet inside the official white lines enables receivers to practise sideline catches, and saves the sideline turf. So starting at 'what could Ken's job possibly have in common with mine' ended up at 'what a great idea, I'll try it next year', and throw in my own variations.

## Adding Competitive Value with Effective Customer Relations was a very informative session

Peter Barrow shared experiences and view points on how to improve your service, whatever it is. It's interesting to note that the audience represented all segments of the turf industry.

Value can mean many different things, whether it's holding the price (taxes?) and increasing the benefits, or holding the benefits and decreasing the price (everyone's' budgets). How about increasing the benefits and the price (worthwhile for some customers) or decreasing the benefits and the price (desirable for others).

The option we all strive for is to increase the benefits and decrease the price. Service seemed to be the common analogy through all, know your customer, so you can serve them.

Turn unknown prospects into known. Change creativity driven to response driven. Concentrate on filling each niche as opposed to 'steam rolling' the market with advertising. Involve your customers in the decisions. They are not necessarily passive, dialogue will beat out advertising monologue every time. Peter referred to it as 'The Great Marketing Turnaround'.

To service the customer you must know the customer. Know the mind is not fooled by 'fly-by-nights'. The eyes are always looking for a better deal. They see your logo, uniforms, signage, dirty vehicles. The mouth spreads your reputation. The heart looks for a service relationship. The guts hold true feelings and the hands count the numbers and the reasons for returning. Most importantly, the feet will walk quickly for a better deal.

Organise your customers on the loyalty ladder, suspects to prospects to customers. Then organise customers (once in a while service) or clients (consistent service) and advocates/champions (the ones which are clients and give referrals). Recognise the categories, and move persons up systematically.

Word of mouth marketing - what we - say, what we - do, what other - say, what others - do.

The 3 'A's of marketing are:

1. Anticipate customers needs.
2. Stay Ahead of customer.
3. Act. 3-33 Rule: For every three who say something good about your business, 33 others may not say anything at all. Work on the 33.

### **On Wednesday afternoon, it was a discussion on Special Events — Everyone's turf horror.**

To quote Peter Booker, 'I'd rather have grubs than a festival on my turf'. He and Lynn Powell devised a manual to guide both event organisers and Municipal Departments through the budget, staff, and repair challenges. Often organisers don't realise what they are up against — permits which cover departments from Transit to Building to By-Law to Parking to Ontario Hydro to Health Departments. There are

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## **'I'd rather have grubs than a festival on my turf.'**

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- Peter Booker

liabilities, rentals, and an organiser who always wants it all for free.

In these times of fiscal restraint, few have the monetary flexibility to absorb the heavy costs of major events. Develop one application form for all events, neighbourhood gatherings requiring picnic tables or festivals with expectations of 35000 persons. Institute criteria to recover relevant costs of services and ensure proper liability coverage. Prepare recommendations for Committee and Council approvals. Review and assess each post-event to determine if standards were adhered to, what the impact was on the community and suggestions for improvements. Agreements should be site specific. Requirements for one park will be different than another.

### **Dr. Steve Baker spoke on Concepts of Playing Quality: Criteria and Measurements.**

This lecture was very technical. He stated to make sure the surface is safe and enjoyable to play on. In the 1980's with artificial turf we wanted to measure height of ball bounce on an unyielding surface. Rolling resistance - which affects the playing quality for soccer. Head injuries in the event of a fall - has to be energy absorbing. Ball bounce measured using a 3 metre pole. Bounce height at 1.5 metres means 50% ball bounce. Ball roll was measured using a metal frame built on a 45 degree angle, 1 metre high - ball is released. Measure acceleration and deceleration, wind will also slow the ball. Static versus dynamic tests - moving, turning, friction versus traction tests. Check hardness using first a heel test, then penetrometer for surface deflection. Deceleration of a falling mass (using a hollowed out bowling ball - same weight). Hard to measure top of grass, especially if there is a thatch layer. Also use of a Clegg impact tester.

Other criteria are surface trueness. Grasscover and sports cultivars, water infiltration rates - how quickly water disappears. Appropriate questionnaires to players measured before and after the game. The work of the Sports Turf Research Institute is excellent.

### **Solving Turf Management Problems**

No symposium would be complete with out attending one session with Dr. Jack Eggens. His entertaining way of relaying and making his knowledge easy to absorb is always one of my favourites. He spoke on Solving Turf Management Problems. Numerous times he stressed, work with someone else. State the obvious, don't always look for something complicated or rare.

When you have a turf problem, develop a diagnostic technique for problem solving. The panic sets in when your mind goes blank, you feel you do not have the knowledge to solve the problem. If you decide on an answer then you don't always have the confidence it's the correct one. Dr. Eggens' advice? Poke around and never forget common sense is a powerful tool.

Dr. Eggens walked the group through case studies, with the usual humorous anecdotes. Take pictures, find out the last thing done to the turf. Perhaps a dormant application of fertiliser, or a drainage problem? Do a 'tug test'. Rough Kentucky Blue pulls out easily, Bent is rolled at the bud shoot and gives more resistance when tugged. Look around, how are the surrounding trees and shrubs? How healthy is their growth? How long has the problem existed? Look at weed growth, has there been any pesticide applications recently? Is it a newly developed area? Compaction can take 3 to 5 years to show up. Is there heavy thatch? Thatch can impede pesticide and fertiliser applications, as well as cause patchy drought areas. Are there dogs in the area? Is the irrigating administered properly, frequent light waterings instead of deep? Is the area recently sodded, at which time of the year was it done? How thick was the soil layer from the sod nursery. You couldn't sit through this session without picking something up.

**Maintaining services after Budget Cuts ... is safety compromised?**

On the final afternoon was a panel discussion which addressed 'Maintaining services after Budget Cuts ... is safety compromised'. The format consisted of a facilitator, Hilary Sadler who refereed a lively discussion given a current situation of 1) less operational dollars, 2) more influence from the Province (more cuts to come), 3) staff cuts, supply, services for parks, shifting people to other areas. Sports fields suffer wear and tear, maintenance is ongoing. If less dollars - turf is uneven - is it safe? Who should pay? And how much? Increase in demand from user groups for playing time/field. Fields are

overscheduled. Less money, none for new facilities, land costs very high. No one felt safety of playing surfaces had been compromised. All agreed that school fields were in the worst condition. There was interest on both sides to look into corporate sponsorship. That's where the discussion became divided.

User group representatives from soccer, Football Ontario and Slowpitch Ontario all would like input on the spending of funds created by user fees. They felt the monies should be used on their fields. They would like to see the funds put in a perpetual account, with small amounts withdrawn to upgrade facilities, (lighting or score boards) or capital expenditures, (irrigation or bleachers). Municipal Rep-

resentatives responded that the infusion of funds is to maintain current standards of fields, lessening the impact of Provincial cuts.

It was an interesting discussion that filled the hour and a half. Two sides with the same goal, giving their perspectives. It did not take long for the room to polarise, Municipal versus User Group, both feeling slighted. The only thing missing was a Representative from a School Board. It was an astute move to have a facilitator. Hilary Sadler did a fine job.

1998 is just around the corner, I wonder what we are in for next year?

- Jane Arnett-Rivers  
Oakville Parks



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