

"SAFE PLAYING FIELDS":

What does it really mean?

Part 1

By Rich Watson

Over the course of the past year, anyone involved in New Jersey's turf industry has heard the term "Safe Playing Fields" used by a variety of people in regards to the safety of our children. The sports field manager has been portrayed as someone who is trained only to apply pesticides on a schedule to deal with pests and is not aware about safer alternatives that prevent these problems long term. I have heard terms like careless, uninformed and misguided to describe sports field managers who apply pesticides on athletic fields. These types of statements are what led me to stand up and try to bring some clarity to the conversation about safe playing fields. Lost in this conversation are the dedication, time and energy that sports turf managers put into their craft. Most people don't see the pre-dawn irrigation checks, the weekend visits on site, and the amount of time spent at home researching, plotting and planning updates to their turf plan. The first thing considered at all times is the safety of the athletes that use our facilities. With that being said, let's look at what a safe playing field really is.

I don't know if there is one true definition for a safe playing field. However, turf quality is a good place to start the discussion. If a field has a smooth, well rooted and groomed surface it is more than likely to provide a safe playing surface for just about any sport. The key ingredients for quality sports turf are fertility, proper seeding, good cultural practices and responsible pest management (IPM).

New Jersey's fertilizer law is in full swing these days. After passing the certification test, don't let the law scare you from keeping fertility up on your fields. The law in regards to sports fields is fair and can be adapted to fulfill your field's needs. It will take some thought and close monitoring though. Consistent fertility applications throughout the year are very important to maintain quality turf. Spring turf requirements call for moderate amounts of nitrogen (my choice is ammonium sulfate), while summer stress can be dealt with by introducing an organic or

Continued on page 12

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Continued from page 5

slow release product. Fall should be reserved for higher amounts of nitrogen to ensure your fields will survive the demands of the season and falling soil temperatures. This is a very important point that is often overlooked. Fall fertility serves two purposes. First, nitrogen (again, ammonium sulfate is my choice) availability is crucial to establish new seed and also for recovery from fall sports damage. Secondly, it allows turf growth to extend into the end of the fall sports season. Too often fall fields are allowed to stop growing when temps drop but field use continues. Starting early in the spring and continuing all the way through the fall season will give you maximum results for your fertilizer dollar and provide a dense, consistent turf cover for the entire year.

Dr. Dave Minner from Iowa State University and I talk often about how difficult it is to overcome the amount of seedheads produced by crabgrass. Having large amounts of seed introduced into the soil and then worked in by the athletes seems like a tough thing to deal with. Crabgrass technology can be used by the sports field manager in the same manner. From August through November we live by the motto "If you see brown, throw it down". This means introducing perennial ryegrass seed any time you see bare soil. The broadcasting of seed during the fall sports season is the key to keeping turf coverage all year long. A common perception is that you are wasting money if you seed during field activity. I disagree. Due to unpredictable weather in the spring and hot/humid conditions in the summer, fall is the season of choice for overseeding. Unfortunately, this is when athletic fields absorb the most abuse and wear. I take a nothing ventured, nothing gained approach. If you don't seed during the fall, you will end up with a good deal of bare soil at the end of the season. I believe that it is easier to grow turf from seed during moderate fall weather conditions than any other time of year. Perennial ryegrass is my choice for use during this timeframe due to its wear tolerance even as seedlings. As the season winds down, we start to introduce turf-type tall fescue into the fields. This is done later because

tall fescue doesn't hold up to traffic upon emergence as well as perennial ryegrass does. Tall fescue however, has displayed more disease resistance on our fields. It is not a common mix, but it has been working for us. My friend Scott Bills who is a Certified Sports Field Manager also points out that overseeding regularly allows for the introduction of multiple generations of seeds, including newer varieties. The amount of seed planted in the fall allows our fields to emerge from winter with almost full turf cover. This gives us a better chance of fighting off pests and stress as we enter the height of the growing season.

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