

Field Renovation with Sod is a Natural Fit on this Busy Sports Field



by Don Savard, CSFM, CGM

Someone once described Salesianum School in Wilmington Delaware as a sports program with a high school attached. With over 117 State Championship banners hanging in our gym, this private college preparatory school for young men trains very hard. The 8.5 acre outdoor athletic field complex features two native soil, cool-season multipurpose sports fields. Primarily a practice facility, 6 of the 14 sports programs offered by the school call these fields home. Baseball, soccer and lacrosse teams (at all 3 levels) play their home games here, as do the freshman and junior varsity football teams. The Varsity football team plays their home games offsite.

This location hosts over 850 events annually which include practices, games, camps, winter intramurals and physical education. On any afternoon in the spring or fall, there are 6 teams outside practicing on the fields. High trafficked areas get worn out and damaged. But safety and playability are important at this school. Post season usually means renovation, and renovation means new sod. Truck loads of new sod!

Our decision to re-sod is a matter of necessity. For example, in late November when the football season is over, the roughly 2.5 acre upper field practice football area is worn down to bare soil from our three football teams that practice on it daily. In the spring, this area will transform to a baseball infield and outfield with a lacrosse field configured on it. We need the quick turn-around that sod provides.

The lower field has just over 5 acres of multipurpose sports turf. In the springtime, the field is configured with a varsity baseball infield, the outfield serving 2 lacrosse fields in both right and left field. We re-sod the worn lacrosse goal creases just after Memorial Day as these areas also serve as a soccer pitch in the fall. Depending upon the amount of wear, we might install up to an acre of sod on the lower field. In a school with a successful soccer program, a smooth turfgrass surface means better ball handling!

Sports field renovation requires specialized equipment and people with the know-how to get the job done, especially when timelines are tight. Soil preparation begins by stripping off the worn surface and hauling off the debris. Next, the area is laser graded to plane off the high spots and fill in the low spots. Often, additional soil is brought in to improve the grade. The surface is decompacted and fertilized to enhance rooting. The trucks arrive with sod and a crew skillfully installs it. The size and shape

of the area determines whether we use big rolls or slabs. Freshly cut sod is perishable so it must be installed quickly whether it is the first week of December or the first week of June. For these reasons, we hire an experienced sports field construction contractor to renovate our fields. Sean Connell, owner of Georgia Golf Construction of Woodbine New Jersey has been our renovation contractor since 2006.

We choose a turf type tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrass mixture sod because it adapts well to our site. We oversee with Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass around Labor Day through late October, skipping the completely bare, heavily worn areas that result from teams constantly running drills in the same spots (there really is nowhere for teams to move around to). Completely worn areas usually require additional topsoil and laser grading at the end of the playing season as the soil has become displaced and the surface is uneven.

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To some, the thought of using sod may seem like an expensive luxury. Compared to growing a sod quality stand of turf from seed, the cost of "purchased" sod is reasonable. For one thing, how many of us work at a facility which has available space for an in-house sod nursery? I would guess very few. Then, there is the problem of time; sod farms can produce a crop of marketable turf in 12-18 months. During that "grow in" time, no sports team is trying to use the sod farm for a warm up, practice or a game. Consider all of the components- seed, irrigation, fertilizer, pesticides (to optimize plant health) as well as frequent mowing, harvest and delivery. All of these material, equipment and labor inputs cost money; the sod farms have a better economy of scale, and a lower unit cost. If you want to produce sod farm quality turfgrass, you have to do what the sod farms do. For most of us this is impractical. But, if you decide that sod might be a strong option, please be aware that you must consider the aftercare. Freshly installed sod requires water, the sooner the better. I always have a hose and a sprinkler ready to go during and after the installation.

Renovating sports fields with sod keeps our student athletes healthy and promotes better playability on the field. Did I mention that it also looks great to our spectators and guests?

Don Savard, CSFM, CGM is a Certified Sports Field Manager (CSFM); Certified Grounds Manager (CGM), Sports Turf Manager, Salesianum School, Wilmington Delaware; Past-President, SFMANJ; and current member of the SFMANJ Board of Directors.



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