

FOOTBALL FIELD MAINTENANCE FOR NATURAL TURF FIELDS ABOVE THE TRANSITION ZONE: PART 1

By Rich Watson

As I am writing this article, winter is starting to wind down and attention to spring sports is about to begin. Baseball, softball, track and field, tennis and lacrosse will be in full swing shortly just as the weather becomes bearable for outdoor sports. As conference season comes to a close, I can recall many great talks about baseball field maintenance for all different levels of competition. There are many sources of information about the craft of maintaining baseball fields. However, when it comes to the sport of football, I don't recall any talks or articles about maintaining a high school field or any other type of football field.

I recently spent some time talking with Tony Leonard of the Philadelphia Eagles on our way back from the STMA conference in Daytona. Even at the highest level of completion, Tony is often asked "why can't you grow grass on that field"? During our discussion, I found out that there are many reasons why it is difficult. Sharing the stadium with Temple University, dealing with shade issues, hosting many non-football related events and a very narrow set of hash marks are just a few of the hurdles that Tony and his crew face. In addition, the Pro game is played by the largest athletes in all of sport. The fact that they play the bulk of the game in a very small area of the field causes a variety of maintenance problems.

Tony has adjusted by changing his field over to bermudagrass. This allows him to get through most of the season on a very durable surface. As the weather cools the bermudagrass is removed to the depth of 1.5 inches and thick cut Kentucky bluegrass sod is installed to finish out the late season schedule with good turf cover. This process has been very successful for Tony and the Eagles.

While this may be a good answer on the professional level, what about those of us on the high school or park and recreation level. Are there answers to the problems we deal with on our football fields or are we facing a future with plastic football fields as the solution? I don't claim to have all of the answers, but we have had a lot of success with the maintenance of our football fields at Overbrook High School. Our maintenance program doesn't begin and end with the football season but rather focusses on a yearlong approach. The new season begins as the old one ends.

Enjoy an Early Spring

Spring is a very important time for football fields. The fall season really wears out most fields and springtime is usually the time that significant recovery can take place. This process can be slowed by lacrosse but recovery must be taken into consideration regardless. March 1 in NJ is the first day you can apply fertilizer legally and we do. At least 0.5 lbs of nitrogen (N) per 1000 square feet are applied as ammonium sulfate. This provides food for the new turf planted at the end of last season and promotes growth of established turf also. In addition to an early application of N, there must be a concentrated effort made to begin mowing to remove dormant turf and promote new growth. It is tempting to allow football fields to lie dormant in early spring. There are a lot of other things going on and football is not one of them. Don't fall in to this trap. The quicker your turf is actively growing, the quicker it has the ability to establish and endure the stress of drought and pest pressures that are coming later in the spring and summer. Fertilizer is provided on an as-needed basis during the spring with the intention of not applying more than 0.5 lbs N per 1000 square feet per month.

Aeration

Aeration is something that is very important but commonly overlooked. In our case, we have a core-aerator but have no good way to clean up the messy cores. In addition to the mess, coring during the football season may not always provide the results you are looking for. Problems occur during the season if you open up a worn field by coring. Sometimes because of a busy schedule there is not enough time for the field to heal before the next game is played. This can cause a poorly rooted field to suffer damage even though that was not the intention. At Overbrook we have found a nice window of opportunity right after Memorial Day. Early June is after our spring season and usually before the weather gets too hot. The fields seem to really respond well

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at this time of year. The turf is actively growing and our activities are limited. We try to make up for the few coring opportunities that are available by using our slicing aerator when we are seeing signs of compaction. This aerator provides us the ability to open things up without disturbing the playing surface. It is a very valuable tool that also aides us in our fall over seeding program by providing a nice seedbed. Another added benefit of slice aerating is the ability to find grub damage quickly during August and early September. It is much better for us to find grub damage and treat it, rather than an injury occurring due to field conditions. Ultimately, it is up to the turf manager to find the right time and aerator for your site.

Summer Stress

Summertime is a time of rest for our football turf. We are lucky that there is very little activity during the summer months until football camp opens around August 15th. Our cutting height is raised to 3.0 inches and mowing frequency is set at 3 to 4 times per week. The thinking is that I don't want to put any extra stress on the turf than is necessary. Last year we went away from applying N during July with some success in suppressing dollar spot. Replacing it with an application of 0-0-62 worked well as we had very little dollar spot last summer as compared to past years. This year we may make an additional application in August to see if it reduces our susceptibility to brown patch. Fungicides are not part of our maintenance program so we are constantly making adjustments to see if we can suppress disease without their use. With that in mind, our irrigation routine is based on need not schedule. This sounds

like common sense but it gets complicated with tricky summer weather. The fields are checked daily for soil moisture and then irrigated or not based on this information. I have found that it is ok to get a little dry over the summer. Proper water management is crucial for surviving summer heat and humidity. Please don't set your timer box and forget it.

Part 2:

Preparing for the Season, Game Prep and Repair, Putting the Field to Bed - In our next issue.

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