

# OUTLOOK

By Bruce F. Shank, Executive Editor



## Sports turf . . . dollars and 'sense'

The fraternity of sports turf managers is a large one, more than 8,000 *Weeds Trees & Turf* readers by our count, and we're sure they watched with interest the inaugural games of the fledgling United States Football League last month.

They may feel the turf managers of professional stadia have it easy. The big budgets, the help from consultants, and the prestige. In fact, the managers of professional stadia are facing a case of intense use similar to schools and parks countrywide. Whether you are responsible for the softball diamonds of a small park or the Rose Bowl, you have to feel for a guy like Steve Wightman, manager of Mile High Stadium in Denver, home of the new Denver Gold entry to the USFL and a minor league baseball team.

Wightman told us last month, "In some cases we will have only a few hours to prepare the field between teams, not the seven days we really could use to get the field back in shape for the discerning eyes of television viewers."

Wightman's challenge is characteristic of all athletic fields in this country . . . intense use and the natural limitations of turfgrass. Increasing demand on baseball and soccer fields in parks and schools, two or three professional teams playing in one stadium at the same time, and even rock concerts have athletic turf managers concerned. How far can we push our turf?

All this comes at a time when natural turfgrass is making a comeback against artificial turf. Players want natural fields, so much so the National Football League Players Association included them in their list of demands during their strike. Injury rates have proven higher on artificial turf and players realize they are only as wealthy as they are healthy.

"It's really a case of economics," says Wightman. "Professional football can sell 75,000 tickets for each of 10 games and professional baseball can sell 25,000 tickets for each of 80 games. A stadium owner has a business to run. Even parks rely more on the fees of leagues playing on their fields for maintenance. At some point, both the stadium owner and the park board will have to deal with the limitations of natural turf."

"Municipalities and stadium owners are hard pressed due to the diversity of sports today," says Dr. William Daniel, professor of turfgrass science at Purdue University. "Soccer has caught on and is forcing cities to take athletic field care more seriously. Volunteers and sports league officials often lack the expertise to properly maintain the fields."

For Wightman, the real test comes when television cameras broadcast his field across the country, similar to the test golf course superintendents face when hosting a televised tournament. He can only do so much to overcome the beating the turf takes from intense use and weather.

Clearly, the increasing demand on sports fields has to be addressed by everyone involved, not just the athletic field manager.

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