

# Worn Out And Overplayed

Sports turf managers are starting to convince others of the needs of natural turf for safe recreation.

By Bruce F. Shank, executive editor

Three or more years of budget cuts have left many park and school fields worn out while new professional sports leagues have placed pressure on stadium managers. Both levels of sports turf need attention to provide safe and wear tolerant fields in the future.

The problem at the park and school level is to convince purchasing directors and councilmen that continued neglect will result in unsafe fields. The problem at the professional level is to develop

the technology to enable fields to recover within hours instead of days.

Professional stadia have become multi-function facilities, hosting two or more sports teams in the same season as well as concert events. Stadium operation is often a function of city or county government. However, stadium turf management budgets tend not to be a problem. Artificial surfaces exceed the cost of natural turf. The asphalt base and carpet can cost \$1 million or more to install. Top-of-the-line

natural turf systems for professional stadia are therefore affordable to stadium management.

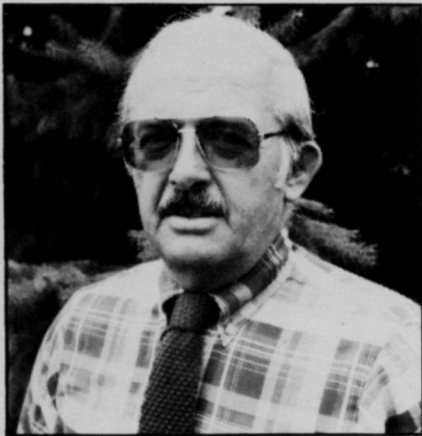
While some pay \$1 million to construct one athletic field, others feel fortunate to spend \$4,000 to renovate a worn out high school football field. "Budget cuts have caused schools and parks to neglect fields the past two or three years," says Roy Zehren, owner of Natural Athletic Turf Inc., Mequon, WI. "Before you can sell construction or renovation of a field you need to explain maintenance. Often the people responsible for the field just don't know how to maintain it. Depending upon their needs and budget, we can renovate a worn out, weed infested field for as little as \$4,500. Reconstruction might easily cost \$30,000 or more to change grade, rootzone, and sod."

"At the very least, we try to get the field managers on a program of aerification, topdressing with a sand and peat mix, overseeding with perennial ryegrass, and late fall fertilization with a slow-release product," says Zehren. "From there we can suggest a second fertilization in the beginning of August and weed control."

Zehren constructed the last Prescription Athletic Turf (PAT) field in 1979. "Some people are getting confused because of all the variations in field construction," says Zehren. Roughly half of Zehren's business is construction and renovation of golf courses. He has a

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Roy Zehren

full-time staff of six.

Steve Wightman is responsible for the modified PAT field at Mile High Stadium in Denver. The field has underground heating, a sub-irrigation and drainage system, a two-layer rootzone of vermiculite and calcined clay over sand, A-34 Kentucky bluegrass sod grown in sandy loam, and a surface irrigation system. Still, Wightman is concerned about the wear and tear of a minor league baseball team using the field at the same time the Denver Gold football team does. The Orange Bowl in Miami, Jack Murphy Stadium in San Diego, and JFK Stadium in Washington, D.C. all face similar multi-team problems.

Harry Gill at Milwaukee Stadium and David Frey at Cleveland Stadium don't have the advantage of subsurface heating to melt snow and help new sod take root. This year Gill and Frey tried seeding the center field area damaged by football and building plastic greenhouses suspended by blowers. Both the management of the Brewers and the Indians were concerned about players slipping on sod which had not taken root by the season openers. Frey was pleased with the results the week before the Indian's home opener.

"The tarp greenhouse concept has excellent potential," Frey told *Weeds Trees & Turf*. "Footing is much better than sod according to the players. When you consider football season is three months longer and baseball one month sooner than before, you realize the problems facing northern stadia switching over from football to

baseball. Grass is still the answer for outdoor stadia and an early seeding with perennial ryegrass and Kentucky bluegrass protected by a tarp is a good solution."

George Toma, field manager at the Kansas City Chiefs/Royals Complex and consultant to the National Football League, is experimenting with pregerminated seed. Toma believes he can gain two weeks by germinating the seed before applying it to the fields.

Meanwhile, park superintendents view the PAT system, tarp greenhouses, and pregerminated seed as practical as a ride in the Space Shuttle.

Wightman used to take care of the sports fields for the Denver Park District. With a staff of six, Wightman had to maintain 270 fields of all types. Mowing alone was a problem, not to mention overseeding, weed control, and aerifying. Maintenance levels had to be specified for fields, most receiving limited care.

Meeting basic turfgrass require-

ments alone is a problem for many schools and parks. Wear only complicates matters further.

The worn out fields will eventually get attention. "Sometimes

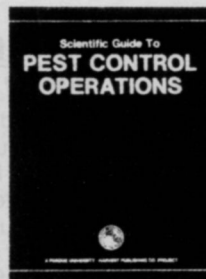
While some pay \$1 million to construct one field, others hope for \$4,000 to renovate a worn-out field.

things aren't done until a councilman's child gets injured," says Zehren. "If a park or school makes a commitment to renovating one or two fields per year it has made a major step forward. Once renovated, the schools and parks will make an effort to protect their investment with maintenance or face continual renovation. When purchasing directors and board members become aware of the needs of athletic fields, the people doing the work will have the supplies they need to at least cover the basics."

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