

With millions of users, thousands of facilities, the previously neglected turf ballfield is gaining the public's respect. Now it needs public support.

Public Sports Turf: Drastically in Need of Standards

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Orphan Annie and public sports fields have a great deal in common.

Both receive only minimal attention as wards of the state and have the potential to rise to greater status.

The big question is, who will be the Daddy Warbucks of public sports turf?

A significant number of organizations, including this magazine, are trying desparately to find the answer. A summit of all major public sports turf groups was held at the USDA Turf Research Center in Beltsville, MD, in late April to get the ball rolling.

The public sports turf market has the potential to expand the overall turf market as the professional lawn care market did in the 1970's.

This long-delayed market will boom because the public is demanding better, safer fields while public agencies face increased liability for injuries occurring on public fields.

Greater awareness of injury liability and skillful promotion of safer, better built and maintained fields to Parent Teachers Associations and public field user groups, will cause budget roadblocks to collapse under taxpayer pressure.

Roadblocks are not just financial. Current maintenance levels are recognized as inadequate for intensive use. Field construction standards used to build most of today's fields are resulting in poorly-drained, worn-out fields. A major reconstruction effort will be needed after adequate construction and maintenance specifications are developed.

Maintenance Practices*

Practice	Percentage of Respondents Doing
fertilization	92%
weed control	86%
aerification	73%
irrigation	60%
insect control	36%
disease control	29%

Scope of need

In 1983, the National Federation of State High School Athletic Associations in Kansas City counted 14,086 schools involved in football, 13,380 in baseball, 14,414 in track and field, and 4,454 in soccer. Add to these figures the more than 12,000 park systems in the U.S. with a varied assortment of fields.

The scope of public sports turf continues to snowball when you consider junior colleges, state universities, and municipal recreational facilities.

Another perspective of the market is provided by looking at the size of public field user groups. There are more than 2.2 million children participating in 7,000 Little League® programs, more than one million kids playing in other organized summer baseball and softball leagues, and 173,000 teams competing under Amateur Softball Association rules. Add the growing popularity of soccer leagues, and extremely serious over-demand for a limited number of fields becomes undeniable.

Liability

This overdemand only becomes important to public field decision makers when kids get injured and the liability of the public agency is threatened. A recent *Weeds Trees & Turf* survey revealed schools and parks carry an average of \$1 million in liability insurance.

Liability insurance used to provide public agencies with comfortable protection against serious fi-

Types of Fields Maintained*

Type	Percentage of Respondents
baseball/softball	81%
tennis	69%
soccer	65%
football	62%
basketball	56%
golf course	12%

* 364 responses

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nancial loss to injury claims. But, insurance companies today are actively researching injury rates on public fields for possible rate increases. In the future, insurance premiums may possibly be lower for properly constructed and maintained fields. Then, and possibly only then, decision-makers will move to provide the budgets, equipment, and personnel to keep fields safe.

Demand and injury liability will force public agencies to take field construction and maintenance seriously.

Golf leads the way

The National Golf Foundation was the first to record the growing dominance of the public sports facility in 1983 when it discovered 85 percent of all regular golfers played public courses (daily fee and municipal). Forty percent of frequent golfers played municipal courses, although these courses represented only 16 percent of the total number of all types of courses.

Clearly the golfer is depending more and more on municipal and daily fee courses. In response to increased demand, more municipal courses are hiring contract maintenance companies, such as American Golf Corp., Los Angeles, CA, are growing rapidly.

If an organization like NGF existed for football, softball, baseball, and soccer, a similar or perhaps stronger case for support of public sports turf could be documented. Statistics for both the number and types of fields and number of users are badly needed.

Another sign of concern for public sports turf is the increasing number of former golf course superintendents holding the titles of park superintendent or stadium facility director.

Private sports facilities

In the WTT survey it was discovered only 10 percent of leagues playing on

public fields pay a significant portion of maintenance costs. More than a fifth of the leagues playing on public fields, however, perform some maintenance tasks.

While a public facility by definition should be open to all taxpayers, intensive use by one or more groups should be supported with additional user fees. Intensive use hours can be limited for the benefit of general taxpayers and the turf.

When sports facilities, such as multi-field softball centers, are profitable on a private basis, then two conclusions can be drawn. First, the public is willing to pay for scheduled use of quality fields. Secondly, the quality of public fields is considered sufficiently lower to pay for private fields.

It follows that landscape maintenance contractors can build a case for better sports fields for a reasonable price. The WTT survey showed 11 percent of schools and parks contract out part of athletic field maintenance. Dramatizing this possibility is the fact that 71 percent of the school and park officials polled said they lacked the manpower to accomplish needed sports turf maintenance.

Furthermore, the superintendents responded that equipment expenditures were of most concern to them (64%), more than labor (41%) and more than chemicals (21%). Equipment leasing and contract maintenance are alternatives to rising equipment costs.

Considering that 46 percent of park and school superintendents work with no budget growth and 15 percent with falling budgets, public agencies are being forced to make hard decisions.

Case by case interest

The attitude of public officials in response to public demand is very important to the attention sports fields receive. A winning team or local media coverage may create the dedication needed for adequate field care. More often fields are lumped into the overall physical plant budget simply because they exist, not because they have special needs.

Sports fields must be treated as a unique maintenance function. If the public agency is unable to provide staff for necessary care, then contract maintenance should be used.

Field maintenance contractors need to sell a package specifically designed for sports fields. Bids

should meet recognized maintenance standards for specific types of fields.

Public agencies are currently at a loss for such standards. No national park or scholastic agency can currently provide maintenance standards to local schools or parks. The only way they have any idea of what is needed is to contact extension. Extension often lacks these standards as well.

Without standards budgets are impossible to build. Once standards are developed realistic budgets can be established.

Maintenance budgets for the park and school supers polled by WTT ranged from \$200 to \$3 million. The average maintenance budget was nearly \$250,000 and the median was \$55,000.

When the status of public sports fields is raised to an appropriate level, budgets should not be a problem.

Public golf course budgets are actually higher than daily fee maintenance budgets as discovered in a WTT survey published in the January 1985

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issue. Maintenance and construction standards exist for golf, but not for many other sports fields.

There are roughly 160,000 acres of municipal golf courses in the U.S. WTT estimates there are at least 250,000 acres of public softball, football, soccer, and baseball fields in the U.S. Using National Golf Foundation statistics for rounds played on municipal courses in 1983 (5.5 million), revenue generated by municipal golf courses (\$8 per round) was \$44 million. This revenue paid maintenance costs. Some method of generating maintenance funds for public sports fields has to be considered.

A change in status must begin with development of widely recognized field construction and maintenance standards. Then, and only then, can our public sports fields leave the orphanage.

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