

Athletic field care re-evaluated by Harper

Recent research is re-evaluating the way we look at caring for athletic fields.

Penn State's Jack Harper, Ph.D., notes that a good natural grass field will reduce injury, but that a bad natural field is just as dangerous as an artificial turf field.

He points out certain requisites for a good grass field. Coring, he notes, has become a major concern on natural grass fields because it causes too much compaction near the surface. This same problem also plagues golf courses.

The problem stems from tines penetrating to their appointed range, two to four inches, but packing soil down to that depth while penetrating.

But Harper emphasizes that coring is still a necessity and it should be done as frequently as possible—a minimum of three times a year. "You need more than one pass in one direction once a year," he states.

For cool-season grasses he suggests a heavy coring in early spring just after the turf has ended its dormancy. Also a light coring in late August before football season, each time using a dragging instrument to break up the cores.

His third recommended coring would be a heavy one at the end of the season without dragging, letting the elements break up the cores.

Harper also recommends overseeding annually, some between the hashes on a football field and near the goals on a soccer or field hockey field. He found over the last 10 years that early spring overseeding recommendations are changing from the too slow tall fescues and bluegrasses to the rapid turf-type perennial ryes.

The new turf types are the best, he says, but not perfect. The current recommended rate is 5 to 7 lbs./1000 sq. ft. For broadcast seeding, aerate, put down the seed and then drag so that the seed will fall into the holes and be covered. For slit seeding, aerate, slit seed in at least two directions then broadcast some also. Fertilizer should be added according to soil tests.

Penn State publishes a guide to athletic field construction and maintenance. The booklets are available from Dr. Harper at the College of Agriculture Extension Service, University Park, PA 16802.

Harper spoke on athletic fields at the Ohio Turfgrass Conference.

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