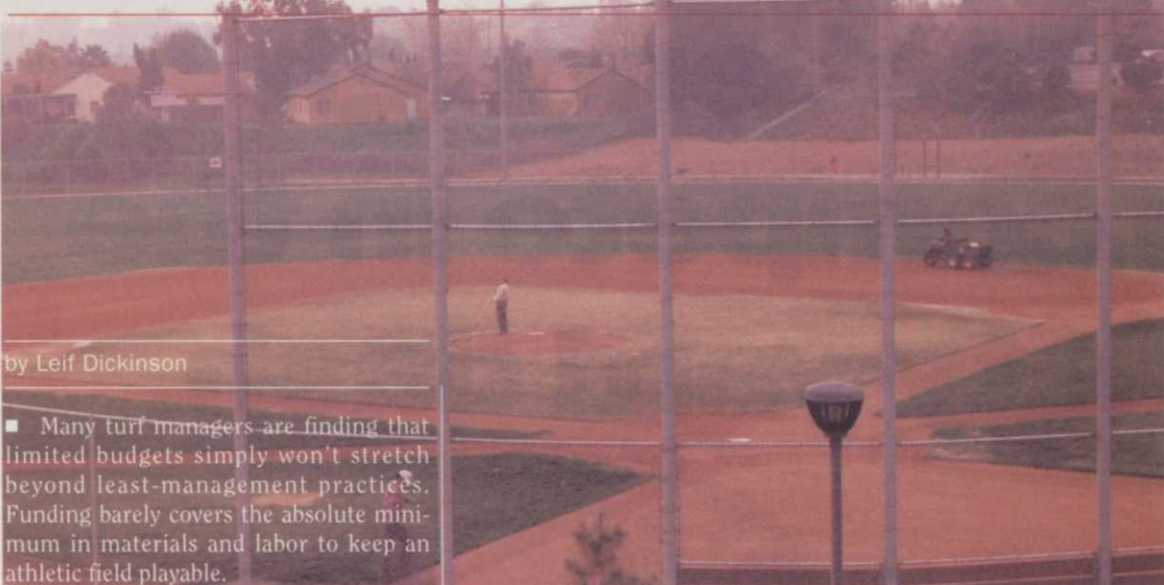


'Least management' methods for neighborhood fields

Small towns, high schools or community colleges may need a little help from their friends.



by Leif Dickinson

■ Many turf managers are finding that limited budgets simply won't stretch beyond least-management practices. Funding barely covers the absolute minimum in materials and labor to keep an athletic field playable.

Because there's a growing awareness of injury liability, turf supervisors are trying new plans and practices. Still, fields used for unsupervised play receive little attention. Care beyond basic mowing and occasional fertilization depends entirely on what funds are budgeted and how much volunteer help can be recruited.

Personnel—Team players and other volunteers can perform much pre-game preparation work with proper supervision like normal maintenance crews, or even savvy coaches.

On the high school and community college level, coaching staffs and players can establish playing standards by the amount of their cooperation. Often, an unwritten agreement can be made where the team is expected to handle the day-to-day and pre-game tasks, while the maintenance staff handles the more technical procedures and those involving power equipment.

At the other end of the scale, it's not uncommon to have as few as two people in charge of an entire 40-acre park, including baseball, softball, soccer and football facilities. Even when staffs are larger, these people have little time for fine-tuning playing fields. Little League

and senior league supporters pitch in to bring the quality of the fields up.

Frequently, the spearhead of a volunteer-assisted municipal program is a local business person with a love of sports but little turf experience. By working closely with such willing volunteers, turf managers have been able to achieve results far better than least-management budgets would allow.

Infields—It's important on low-maintenance fields to find a workable infield mix. In southern California, most such fields use 60 percent clay and 40 percent brick dust for the mound and home plate. The rest of the infield is a mix of 60 percent brick dust and 40 percent clay.

The infield may be composed of 100 percent skinned area in little-used and low-budget fields. Warning tracks also may be skinned surfaces.

Scarifiers are frequently low budget, ranging from nail drag on up. For example, the excellent program put together by Jeff Barnes at Red Hill Field in Rancho Cucamonga, Calif., uses a scarifier with a straight blade and weights, set up with a double-bar pull chain. Lug bolts can be

set from ½-inch to 2½ inches deep to scarify or rip up the field as needed. Weights are added to adjust the depth. Lug bolts are used for ripping two or three times per year because of heavy use.

At most lower-budget fields, scarifying is done on an as-needed basis. The brick dust mix is worked to a depth of ¼ to ½-inch before a game or series.

If mechanical equipment is available for infield preparation, crews start in the center and work to the perimeter, avoiding the mound, bases and batter's box. These sections are raked by hand.

Landscape rakes are used to level the surface after scarification, and the area is watered lightly.

The field can then be marked as the budget permits. In most cases, chalk is used to denote the batter's box and baselines. The outfield is painted only if funds allow. Often, special chalking and painting is budgeted only for special tournaments or major games.

Cultural practices—Many fields are heavily scheduled. To manage wet weather situations, a portion of the budget may be invested in products such as

Scarifiers, like the kinds used at Red Hill Field in Rancho Cucamonga, Calif., are frequently low budget.

'LEAST MANAGEMENT TIPS'

CONSIDERATION	NORMAL MANAGEMENT	'LEAST MANAGEMENT'
Scarification	2 to 3 times per year	as needed
Mowing	twice a week	once a week
Edging	once a month	twice a year
Irrigation	supplemental	supplemental
Fertilization	spring, summer, fall	spring, fall
Overseeding	late fall	none (heavy fall fertilization)
Weed Control	pre-/post-emergence herbicides	pre-emergence herbicides
Insect/Disease Control	as needed	none
Aeration	2 to 3 times per year	as needed for compaction

Source: the author

Diamond-Dry, which can be raked into the infield mix to bring a too-wet field into playable condition.

Mowing frequency is determined by budget. Though most turf managers can't devote time to creating a striping pattern in the grass, all alter directions with each mowing to maintain a cleaner cut.

Where funds are available, the infield and skinned areas receive some type of supplemental irrigation. Even the money-strapped facilities have found that it's more costly to rebuild a turf field than to keep it alive by watering.

Soil testing once a year for pH and fertility levels is a wise budgetary move. The test results help tailor fertilization programs to specific needs, possibly cutting

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fertility needs.

The optimum time to verticut and dethatch bermudagrass is during the playing season, which is advantageous for the turf but not good for the playing schedule. A compromise is often made, tackling these procedures only as neces-

sary, and timing them as late in the season as possible, but early enough so the grass is still actively growing. Fertilizer is a big variable in maintenance programs. Turf managers with smaller budgets use the slow-release fertilizer products to stretch fertilization benefits over a longer period.

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Use customer complaints to secure company loyalty

■ If one of your customers—whether he be a landscape client, a member of the golf course, a citizen using one of your athletic fields—has a complaint, you have a tremendous opportunity to build customer loyalty, but it depends on how you choose to satisfy that complaint.

A survey by the U.S. Office of Consumer Affairs shows that whenever customer complaints are successfully resolved, 73 percent of the complainers would return to buy that product or ser-

vice again.

Conversely, when customers had minor problems but did not complain, nearly 67 percent would not buy the same product or service again. The three reasons mentioned most often for not complaining were:

- Customers felt complaining wasn't worth their time and effort
- They believed complaining wouldn't do any good;
- They didn't know how to or where

to address complaints.

To handle complaints successfully, and better insure customer loyalty, you should:

- 1) Listen to the customer's entire complaint. Don't interrupt; let them say all that's on their minds;
- 2) Sympathize with them, and be sure to communicate sincerity;
- 3) Avoid justifying or making excuses; the customer doesn't want to hear any excuses;
- 4) Ask questions;
- 5) Agree on a course of action;
- 6) Inform and involve others who need to know;
- 7) Monitor the progress in resolving the complaint.