Creating a 'home field advantage'

Is it the job of the athletic field manager to create equal opportunity for all athletes, or to make sure the home team has an edge?

by Steve and Suz Trusty

Before (top) and after photos of the Ohio State University football stadium on Nov. 21, 1992 show that the turf held up under extremely wet conditions.

■ You hear it, occasionally from sports broadcasters, frequently from losing coaches. The playing field wasn't level. Some turf management practice was manipulated, perhaps unfairly, to give the home team an advantage. This charge is made most frequently at the college or professional level, yet it may surface at high school games, or in highly competitive inter-city sports.

Is such manipulation possible? You bet it is:

- Baseball fields could have specially beveled basepaths angled to comply with the speed and ability of the home team players.
- Baseball skinned areas could be kept hard-packed and fast, or slightly soft and slow.
- The length of the turf—for baseball, football or soccer fields—could be gauged to comply with the speed of the home team players, or to present a decided disadvantage to the speed of the opponents.
- Grass could be cut short to aid a fast team; kept longer for a slow team.
- Watering practices could be adjusted, withholding water for speedy teams, adding water or failing to use PAT pumping systems, to slow down a fast opponent.

Is such manipulation used? According to reports, seldom, if at all.

The sports turf manager's prime objective is healthy, thriving turf that provides a safe, highly playable surface for the athletes. This objective is long-term. It extends over the total playing season. To alter optimum care procedures for one game jeopardizes that long-term objective, and puts in question the professionalism of the sports turf manager.

Why do these accusations persist? Perhaps because of sports broadcasters, journalists and coaches. For instance, many readers might have heard this "reason" given for the 13-13 tie game between Ohio State and Michigan universities on Saturday, Nov. 21, 1992. Reports circulated that, though Ohio State has a PAT system, the ground crew didn't turn it on despite heavy rain, in order to slow Michigan down.

There is usually no factual background to such statements. Assumptions may be made according to the look of the field at game time. Or a chance remark by a player or coach seeking a "reason" for an unexpectedly poor performance may be picked up by the media as fact.

Ohio State athletic facilities director Mike Dolan has been in the sports turf management field for 35 years. He spent 10 years with the Cincinnati Reds before going to Ohio State.

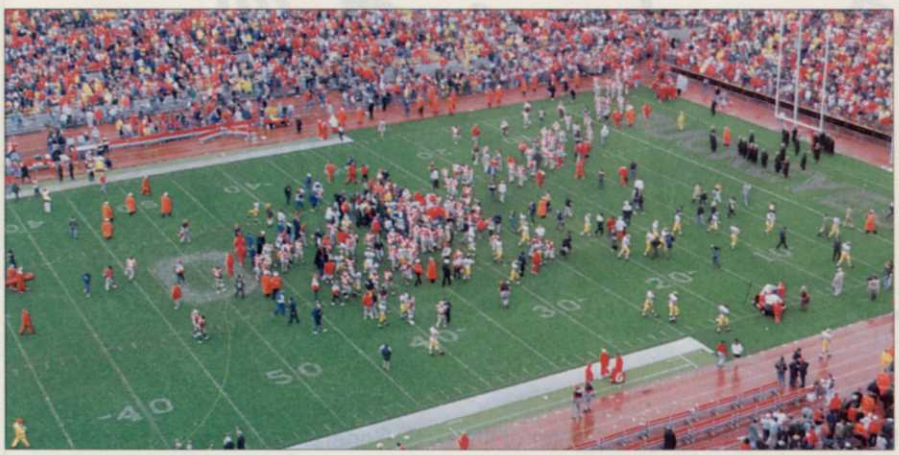
"We're constantly shooting for field excellence," Dolan says. "We have established—and seek to retain—a solid, stable turf with good rooting. We want to maintain the field in ideal playing conditions."

To achieve that goal, Dolan needs a good grass management program. He credits his turf supervisor, Kevin Miller, for much of the program's success. They work closely with Dr. John Street of the Ohio State agronomy department and Eugene Mayer, training manager of O.M. Scott's Professional Business Group in nearby Marysville. "We've formed a heavy duty group to create excellence," says Dolan.

Standard field management practices at OSU are regular soil testing to establish ideal nutrient levels, and using the PAT system to manage water. "We've been maintaining the turf at 1¾ inches since the PAT system was installed," reports Dolan.

Dolan's records show that, when the Michigan coaching staff held its walk-though of the field and facility at 2 p.m. Friday, no comments were made about the field condition.

Predictions of rain were made for Friday night, so the PAT pumps were turned on. One-half inch of rain did fall, starting at 3



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a.m. Saturday. The rains had subsided by early Saturday morning.

On Saturday, at game time, nothing yet was brought to the attention of the field grounds department by either of the coaching staffs. Dolan made a point of checking with the grounds superintendent, who had been on-site throughout the day on Saturday, to verify that fact.

"Most people thought the field was in good shape, the best of the three years since the natural turf was installed. Comments were on what great shape the field was in, and on the good stand of grass," reports Dolan.

What most sports turf managers are concerned with, and in reality all that they should be concerned with, is that the playing field provided is safe and playable.

As Dolan says: "It's unthinkable that any professional sports turf manager would create a condition that might threaten the safety of an athlete or cause a problem that might be detrimental to the overall turf program. It's our job to create an equal opportunity for all athletes for competition on a safe, playable surface. They all put their pants on the same way—and the all play on the same surface."

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Shake Out competitors to boost productivity

Are some of those 'price cutters' in reality just more sophisticated business people?

by Ed Wandtke

■ So far in the 1990s we have seen the impact of a tighter economic climate in the green industry.

The recent sale of the ChemLawn division of Ecolab to ServiceMaster at a very discounted price suggests that the green industry may be going through some rough times.

During the past three years, many green industry companies that had been in business for more than 10 years suddenly