

Dealing with expectations of athletic field quality

The groundskeeper must listen to views from many sources and focus on the issues, not the emotions.

by Jesse Cuevas

■ Everyone involved with an athletic field wants a major league field on a minor league budget.

The number one concern—first, last and always—is a safe facility. The second concern is fairness. If the field is instrumental in a win-or-lose situation, the groundskeeper hasn't done his job.

Initial fund-raising for field renovation often is driven by the project's excitement and the expectations of the entire community, school system or professional sports organization.

But getting a yearly financial commitment for proper field maintenance is a

tougher proposition. The "money people" will need to be convinced from the beginning that field care is an ongoing need.

Projected annual maintenance budgets should be brought to the table when field renovation is first discussed. Costs should be broken out into categories for equipment, parts and repair, fertilizer, seed and chemicals, irrigation, other supplies, and labor. The groundskeeper must have the courage to present this case, fully detailed and documented.

Then, teamwork—Once a decision to repair a field is made, designate a person to take the steps necessary to keep it up. Whoever holds this position will be an integral part of the team, and should be treated as such. That bond should be encouraged and reinforced—even at facilities where the pay scale is low. Little things, like a team hat and jacket, can symbolize the team concept.

Field maintenance expectations start at the top. It's vital that the administration or athletic department provide positive support. The head coach and field maintenance supervisor must have a mutual respect. The players will take their cue from the coach.

Top level personnel, removed from the day-to-day activity of field maintenance, are reactive to pressures from their superiors and funding entities. These people mostly want answers.

Toward these people, the groundskeeper must listen to the views expressed and focus on the issues, not the emotions. Most coaches and players have good-sized egos. If the game is going well, it's largely due to their ability. If the game is going poorly, there must be other con-

tributing factors—and the field is a likely candidate.

It's here that the groundskeeper must be thick-skinned. Only about two percent of the comments he gets on the field will be compliments. The groundskeeper must be able to listen to complaints without acting defensive. Let the complainer express his or her concern—vent some anger if necessary—and then allow a cooling off period.

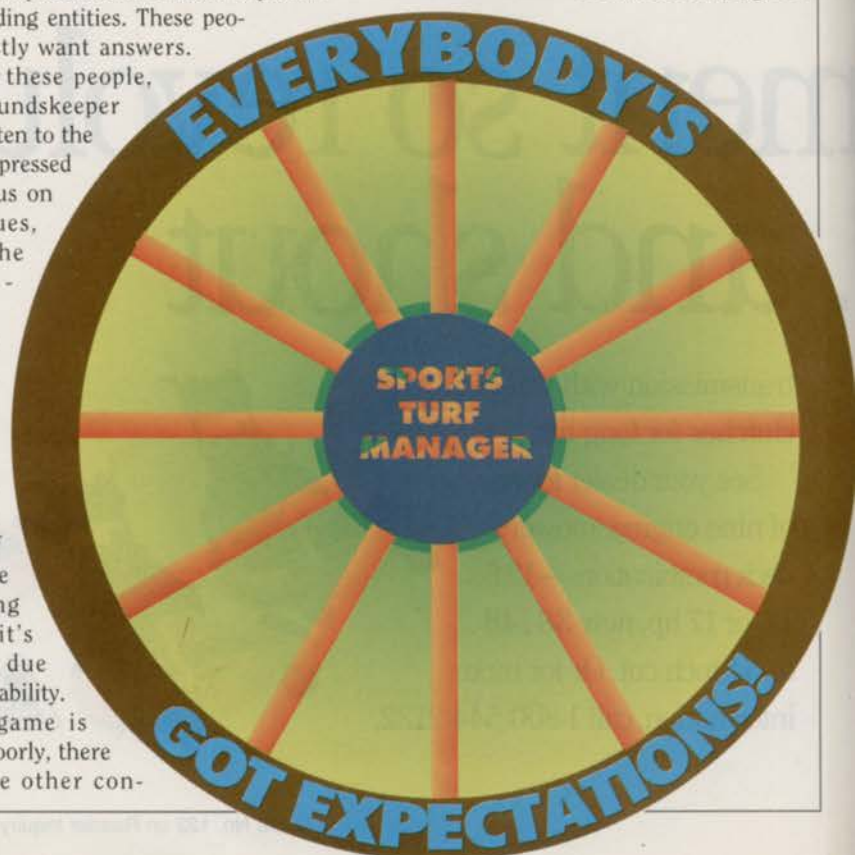
An investigation comes next. If something is wrong, the groundskeeper must take responsibility to get it fixed. If the field is in proper condition, the complaint can be chalked up to the emotions of the game.

Players' parents can be the groundskeeper's biggest help, or greatest detriment. Some might want to help (see list). Those who only want to criticize can wreck team morale. Some of the best volunteers are found in the smaller towns where the ballfield is their pride and joy. These people are hungry for advice and more than willing to follow the maintenance program laid out for them.

Dollars and sense—Dollars will always be an issue. Only so many dollars are available, and that money has to be stretched to cover total field needs. To do that, turf maintenance knowledge is essential.

If the groundskeeper doesn't have formal training in field management, there

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Volunteer jobs

Members of the community, whether they be coaches, players, players' parents or just interested spectators, can be used to help maintain fields. Some of the jobs they willingly accept are:

- ☞ raking
- ☞ dragging
- ☞ laying sod
- ☞ cleaning up
- ☞ fence mending
- ☞ painting
- ☞ fund-raising



The sports turf manager's skill can create field conditions that allow players to concentrate solely on the game and their part in it.

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are many sources of help: university extension agents, sports turf consultants, state and local turf organizations, and professional associations.

The Sports Turf Managers Association (STMA) and its regional chapters offer excellent hands-on events for the major aspects of field care. Members readily share their own expertise with other members.

Over the last 10 to 15 years, safety and the quality of playing conditions have

improved drastically. Equipment has been modified for greater player protection. Weight training and nutrition programs have been incorporated into athletic programs at the high school and college levels. Field quality may be the last factor to be addressed, but it has reached the attention of the public.

The groundskeeper has the opportunity to pull together the entire program. By listening to everyone's expectations, he or she can develop a plan to deliver the best facili-

ty for the least cost. The athletic field manager can then make sure that wheel is rolling steadily forward, with a sturdy set of spokes supporting it all the way.

—Jesse Cuevas is stadium superintendent of Johnny Rosenblatt Stadium, Omaha, Neb., home of the Class AAA Omaha Royals and the College World Series. He is a board member of the national Sports Turf Managers Association.

Save time, make money

Mowing equipment tips from Mike Kail, founder and owner of Lawn Rangers, Inc., a full-service mowing/maintenance company in Indianapolis:

☞ If you have an open mind for mowing equipment and techniques, you can improve your profitability.

☞ If you're using walk-behinds, as your company grows, Kail suggests you consider switching to mid-size riding mowers.

"Years ago, when we first started our operation, the mid-size walk-behind mowers (36- to 52-inch deck) were—and still are—quite popular. But it takes a man to run every one." Kail says labor needs have changed in such a way to require more companies to do the same or more with

fewer employees. Stricter time management requires that he now use the mid-size riding mower. It's easier to maneuver and covers more ground faster.

"A mid-size rider (48- to 61-inch deck) will replace two walk-behinds and one man," says Kail.

☞ Mulching mowers are essential; Kail says the time you save by leaving the clippings is considerable. Tell your customers: *clippings don't cause thatch!*

☞ Select an equipment dealer who will work with you, from sale to maintenance. "If you have a good dealer who keeps you mowing, keeps you making money, that's the key."



Kail: find a dealer who'll keep you making money.