



The athletic field manager's challenge: smaller budget, same results.

## SHOCKING FUTURE:

# athletic field use up, budgets down

**Due to many changes—both good and bad—today's sports turf manager has to budget wiser, work smarter and communicate better.**

■ It's the best and worst of times for today's athletic turf manager, as declining enrollment at colleges and universities results in smaller or frozen maintenance budgets.

The good news is that sports participation by more students and developments in turf-seed, fertilizers, chemicals and equipment are moving forward at full speed. Artificial turf is also losing ground in baseball and football applications. It's just not safe.

Additionally, the NCAA has ruled that colleges must allow women's sports equal access to finances, for development of scholarship programs.

"We're going to see a tremendous growth, institutionally, in field hockey, soccer and softball, and it's going to drive to some extent the way we plan the economics," says Tim Bowyer, a consultant with STN Sports, Inc. According to Bowyer, and other athletic turf specialists, athletic field use will increase but there will be less dollars to maintain those fields, apart from the capital required to build them.

In both good times and bad, the athletic field manager faces one constant: the turf. Your budget may shrink, your crew may be cut, your game schedule may grow; but the fields have to look good—and play safe—every day of the week.

**Renovation in the '90s**—Economics makes renovation or replacement decisions especially tricky.

"No one plans to fail," says Bowyer, "but we often fail to plan.

"You've got to organize your thoughts," advises Bowyer, "and consider what you need. You must have a detailed plan, drawn to scale, that includes location of irrigation systems, outlets, water discharges and underground wires and pipes.

"We also want safety first," says Bowyer, in addition to an aesthetically pleasing field appearance.

**Ithaca's ideas**—A roundtable discussion during the most recent New York State Turfgrass Association's annual meeting in Rochester, N.Y. addressed the challenges of the '90s.

Robert Deming, director of athletics at Ithaca College, says the injuries connected with artificial turf, at least among Division A football and baseball, means stadium conversions to natural turf will be a big issue in coming years.

"Artificial turf has been found to provide less-than-ideal playing conditions," says Deming. Player safety is naturally one reason natural turf is preferred to artificial surfaces. The rising cost of medical care is the other.

Deming says most colleges saw the decline coming, but the reality of the numbers is still sobering.

Deming believes in using "creative prioritizing" of certain budget expenses. After an accident in which a player was cut leaping into a Cyclone fence in pursuit of a fly ball—

Deming decided to cap the Cyclone fence around the field. To get the \$980 request through, he assigned a "safety related factor" priority to the item.

Post-season play in the college or high school ranks poses another challenge to maintenance budgets. Ithaca has often been in post-season baseball playoffs, and the solution, says Deming, is to add 20 percent to the following year's budget if post-season play looks probable.

Communication between coaches and physical plant personnel and turf outsiders is a key element in the Ithaca plan.

"There's no such thing as infinite wisdom," says Deming who believes in tapping into the knowledge and insight of others in the business.

"You have the knowledge in your area," says Deming, "but you need to talk to the experts in the area of turf science. Seek answers and ask questions."

**Twice the problems**—John Fik, grounds and landscape manager at Hobart College and William Smith College in Geneva, N.Y., has his hands full. Two colleges can mean twice the challenges.

"Strike a balance between the needs of the coaches, the safety of the players with the agronomic needs of the turf," says Fik, who uses field hockey as an example.

"Field hockey coaches are constantly striving for a very level surface, which is difficult to achieve in field hockey," explains Fik, who now uses a turf roller.

"But rolling the turf too much can often impede percolation," warns Fik. "The surface





◀ **Hornung: Follow maintenance and construction standards.**

▼ **Fik: Balance player needs with turf agronomic needs.**



is not going to accept much more water unless you aerify it. If it rains, the water just sits there."

The answer lies in compromise.

"We tell the coaches we will not roll the field under certain conditions," says Fik. "Luckily, an indoor practice facility makes the decision easy to deal with."

Fik says the field hockey coaches also like a short turf height, from 3/4 to 7/8 inches, which gives him the willies.

"Depending on the type of grass, that's difficult to do; you could be inviting weed and disease problems," says Fik. "So we overseed at certain times of the year to get it down to that height."

"We also bought a Jacobsen Tri-King reel mower. Marriott and the two colleges each kicked in a third of the cost for the mower." To thin the turf, Fik's crew makes two passes with a Jacobsen sweeper and try to refrain from watering for three days.

Fik believes player safety is closely related to proper drainage. Identify the problem drainage areas, and work with the athletic department to outline a budget for a gradual repair program.

**On expectations**— Donald Sauvigne, director of building and grounds services at Columbia University says the future of sports turf management "is going to be based on how well we manage the expectations of others. In order to manage everyone's expectations, we have to educate them, and understand what their expectations are."

"The dilemma facing higher education is that nobody wants to hear our financial problems, but we've been meeting people's growing expectations for years, and we've become victims of our

own success."

To best react to the enrollment crisis, which is likely to put a dent in field budgets, Sauvigne says every turf manager needs to understand and subscribe to the objectives of the university it serves.

"Understand the place of sports turf and the mission of the school when it comes to athletics. The turf manager is a member of the team in helping support those expectations."

**Pro sports**— "The future of sports turf has never been brighter," says Jim Hornung, head

## SPORTS TURF: CUSTOMER-DRIVEN

1. Know expectations of players, coaches, athletic departments and fans.

2. Maximize financial and personnel resources to meet expectations.

3. Reconcile differences and communicate.

—Don Sauvigne, Columbia University

groundskeeper at Pilot Field, Buffalo, N.Y. He points to expanding interest in women's sports and the growing interest in soccer as factors.

Hornung says it's essential that we meet at least minimal construction and maintenance standards.

"We need to know what the soils are going to do, how they're going to play," says Hornung. "It's no different than what the golf course superintendents have been doing for years. They have a standard and they live by it."

Why do manufacturers fight? asks Hornung. "It's always Product A vs. Product B vs. Product C." Hornung would like manufacturers to work together more to solve common industry turf care problems.

"There are many tools we can use to meet expected maintenance standards. One aerifier or one sprayer may not be enough. There are no saviors in the equipment world."

"We all must give 100 percent and then some," urges Hornung, for two reasons: safety and aesthetics.

He suggests field managers present their budgets a little differently to make the sale.

"Talk in cents per square foot rather than thousands of dollars for the entire field," suggests Hornung, to soften the blow of asking for big bucks.

—Terry McIver

## MODULAR SOD FOR THE PROS

**Dr. Henry Indyk**, turfgrass consultant with Turfcon, notes that Turfcon's ITM system, patented in March of 1993, is a natural turf system that uses transportable turf. Modules measuring 48x40x6 inches were used for practice tee areas at the U.S. Open at Baltusrol.

Indyk believes the stadium of the future will be an indoor facility with natural turf. The turf will be grown on a single unit module that slides from the domed stadium into an adjacent greenhouse. The stadium can be used for other events, and the turf is cared for in the greenhouse.

**Arthur Milberger**, president of Milberger Turf Farms supervised the installation of modular sod in the Super Dome in New Orleans for World Cup soccer matches July 1, 1991. The modules contain deep cut sod, 5-1/2 inches deep, and have no sides.

Hybrid bermudagrass seems to provide the best playing surface, after testing by Dr. James Beard. Ball-bounce and Clegg impactor studies on the modules and a turf-tray containing hybrid bermudagrass ranked tops in all tests.

Zoysiagrass ranked second due to inconsistent ball-bounce, and rough playing surface, as judged by players.

Bluegrass was the best looking surface, but ranked worst in playing conditions.

"Our future is very promising," says Milberger, "through the research of (Drs.) Trey Rogers and Henry Indyk."