

Baseball to football field conversion a big job in little time

Two weeks is all they get at San Diego's Jack Murphy stadium. Speed, proper equipment and a sharp crew are needed to get the job done.

by Steve Wightman
Jack Murphy Stadium

■ August, September and part of October is a busy time at San Diego's Jack Murphy Stadium.



One of the big jobs in a baseball-to-football field conversion is adding seats. It's done with forklifts and wheelbarrow transport machines. Ten-ton forklifts move 36 seating units and the pitcher's mound.

window for the conversion from baseball to football.

How it's done—First, we remove four-inches of heavy clay soil from the baseball skinned areas and fill to one-inch below grade with our standard sand-based field media. Bermudagrass sod—cut at 1-1/2-inch thickness—is put down in its place.

Thick-cut sod takes longer to knit than regular sod, but thanks to its bulk, weight and density, we can play football within three to five days. If standard-cut sod was placed over the field's sandy rootzone, we'd be replacing strips of sod after the first half of play.

The heavy-soil sod breaks every agronomic rule. Its higher clay and silt content creates a layering effect. We then spend the next two-and-a-half to three months increasing core aeration and topdressing to counteract the layering.

Throughout the season, we have two entirely different growing mediums within the same field. The turf looks the same on

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Besides the Chargers exhibition and regular season games, we have seven San Diego State University Aztecs games, the California Interscholastic Football Triple-Header (with three games on one day), a football game between Howard University and Delaware State University, the Holiday Bowl, and maybe even Chargers playoff games.

The biggest difference between sports turf management and other areas of turf care is that our prime concentration is

always on athlete safety and field playability. The optimum agronomic conditions for the turf and the aesthetic appeal of the field take second place. We also have extremely limited timetables in which to accomplish maintenance procedures and, with the income generated by a home game, we can't afford not to play.

The Padres' last scheduled home game is played on October 1st. There's an Aztecs game on October 14th, and a Chargers exhibition game on the 15th. That's our

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the surface, however the rootzones prevent it from reacting properly to irrigation, drainage or fertilizer, so fine tuning is required.

Ryegrass overseeding—After the sod is in place, the entire field is overseeded with a perennial ryegrass blend. If the window is small, or weather conditions are less than ideal, we pre-germinate (or "prime") the perennial ryegrass, cutting a day or two from the initial timetable. In 21 days, there will be no advantage to using the primed seed.

During the period when the football and baseball seasons overlap, football is played on the baseball skinned areas.

The pitcher's mound and bullpen mounds are built on top of circular, 3/4-inch-thick steel plates, 13 feet in diameter. The 2-1/2-foot strip around the actual mound allows us to reshape the slope down to field level.



5,000 seats are repositioned for football, moving from the third base area to left field and center field.

The clay cover over the steel must be thick enough to avoid player injury.

A 10-ton forklift is used to remove and reset the steel plates. For the pitcher's mound, we lay 4x8-foot sheets of plywood from the warning track to the first base area to drive onto the skinned area. We then place plywood from second base to the back of the pitcher's mound for a straight shot across the turf infield. We dig down to expose the plate where the

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forks will go, insert the blades, and lift up the plate and mound. The only cracks appear around the perimeter of the slope that meets the field surface. This method saves 85 to 90 percent of the work on the mound.

To reset the steel plate in the exact

plywood in the bottleneck area from one end zone to the 20-yard line. We geotextile and plywood half of the infield area, using three rows of plywood from the foul lines to first base and along the third base line.

Our 10-ton forklifts move 36 seating units, as well as the mounds. We also operate a smaller forklift and other self-propelled equipment including a large winch unit for areas we cannot cover with plywood.

We dry the field down to reduce compaction. The last irrigation takes place three days prior to a field conversion. The timing and amount of water applied are critical. We can't stress the turf, yet it must be as dry as possible to withstand the heavy traffic. We start adjusting our fertility and irrigation programs a month before the first conversion.

To reset the field for baseball, all of the above steps are done in reverse.

Delegation is important—Our 25-person conversion crew is divided into four separate units. Each unit is assigned to specific tasks, and each task must be performed in the correct sequential order. Anything that slows one unit usually will affect other units.

An additional, eight-person grounds crew works the entire conversion cycle. They pull, reset and rebuild the mounds, set and pull the football goal posts, place the benches and line the field.

A final inspection is done to make sure every task is completed and in proper operating order.

Because our schedule is so complex, I plan the entire year's calendar, and color-code each event. This allows me to view the big picture, make adjustments when necessary, and take advantage of every time window, no matter how brief.

—The author is stadium turf manager for San Diego's Jack Murphy Stadium, and an LM technical advisor. He is also a past president of the national Sports Turf Managers Association, and currently serves as an STMA advisor and chairman.

position each time, we line it up with guide pins set it into the playing surface. Because of the precision required, it's easier to remove the steel plate from the pins than it is to reset it.

Guard against compaction—There is only one entry tunnel from the parking lot to the field. All materials moved on or off the field must travel through this tunnel. We use three, 150-foot rolls of geotextile material and lay out 250 sheets of 4x8-foot