

# GOLF & ATHLETIC TURF

## Athletic turf management: WORKING SMARTER

by Steve and Suz Trusty

■ Sports participation in the U.S. is booming at every age and skill level, requiring more athletic fields that can withstand longer hours of use.

With minimal staffing and limited budgets, athletic turf managers must work smarter to accomplish more with less.

The good news is: they're doing it.

A core of intelligent, well-educated, highly-trained athletic field managers combine the science of growing grass and the art of maintaining sports turf to grow safe and aesthetically pleasing playing areas. And they willingly share their knowledge and expertise.

"The sports turf industry is going great guns," says George Toma, turf consultant for the National Football League and former grounds manager for the Kansas City Chiefs.

"What we need to do first is look at the construction of fields. Quality construction is the key to a good field. Contractors have to be honest and do a good job. The agronomists have to do their job and be honest. The soil testing laboratories have to be honest and assure the entire field will be put in with the specified rootzone mix. Close, honest attention to detail is vital at each step of the construction process. The groundskeeper needs to be involved from day one. Poor natural grass installations are a real concern."

Toma believes owners of professional teams should pay as much attention to the playing surface as they do to the players' other amenities, such as training areas and salaries. And, says Toma, grounds managers

need to be paid a higher wage.

"I'm all for players making good money," says Toma, "but we can't forget where the game is played. The playing field needs to be number one."

**Partnering**—Toma also says training in turfgrass management should be a priority. More professionalism, says Toma, is needed.

Dr. Gil Landry, extension turf specialist at the University of Georgia and immediate past president of the Sports Turf Managers Association, believes the industry is on a steady rise, due to better trained and more experienced people.

"Exposure to premium fields, on site or via TV, is one of the reasons for the heightened awareness of sports turf facilities, and I think that's going to continue," says Landry.

"STMA is also moving ahead, but we need more involvement from individuals, organizations and corporate entities, and more financial backing to accomplish our goals."

Landry adds that the association would like to develop relationships with associated green industry organizations.

Information is shared freely within the industry, says Mary Owen, extension turf specialist at the University of Massachusetts. "The industry is in a very positive state of change, an upsurge of positive activity. The networking opportunities are tremendous, and everyone seems to be coming together to make things happen. It's not just people wanting to help, they're eager to help."



**Toma: Make education a priority, continue to raise level of professionalism.**

Owen says field managers are trying to learn from each other, and are always looking for new products and procedures to help them get the job done.

"There's a higher level of professionalism," says Owen, "both in how the industry conducts itself and in how it's viewed."

"We're still behind the golf course industry, but we're growing and improving in all areas," says L. Murray Cook, stadium man-

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ager for the city of West Palm Beach, Fla.. "For a time, the sports turf industry was stagnant, but in the last five years we've made improvement."

**The right stuff**—The future for athletic field management may be bright, but it will dim quickly if it doesn't continue to recruit the right people into the profession.

"It's especially important that we keep many intelligent, energetic young people coming into the profession," says Mike Schiller, assistant superintendent of parks for the Schaumburg, Ill. Parks District.

"This new crop of individuals has both the personal resources and the desire to make a difference," says Schiller. "While

they're tackling their job responsibilities admirably, we need to get them involved with STMA to ensure future growth."

Some suggest that by viewing the relationship between athletic field managers and industry suppliers as a "partnership," ideas and cooperation will help the industry prosper.

"The sports turf industry is developing rapidly and should be seen by industry companies as a viable, professional entity and as a growth opportunity," says Gary Lindquist, manager of market development for John Deere Company's Commercial Mowing and Utility Vehicles Division.

Deere, according to Lindquist, has reorganized its internal business groups to bet-

ter focus on the various segments of the commercial market.

"The future of improved sports fields is positive," says Eugene W. Mayer, training and technical support manager, The Scotts Company, and commercial vice president of the Sports Turf Managers Association.

"Athletic field usage is increasing and so is new construction and renovation of fields," says Mayer. "But equally important is the increasing awareness of participants, administrators and groundskeepers that better quality and safer playing conditions are possible on all levels of play by using specifically-designed turf products correctly and employing better field management practices."

## Managers 'feel the heat'

seven to be exact.

Lamneck reports the university is building a massive, 14-field/8-diamond facility to handle lacrosse, soccer and football.

Operations the size of Marseglia's rely heavily on a team attitude and department cooperation.

"I think you need a 'marriage' between the grounds maintenance department and the athletic department," says Marseglia. "Then the coaching staff; and it continues to the athletes and the administrators understanding your needs, you understanding their needs.

"Then there's the community at large, and the general public. If I need volunteers, they're there."

Lamneck credits his success to his being able to set priorities, and to "dedicated people who are willing to communicate effectively; and a well-trained staff."

**Terry Dale Meyer**, park services manager for the City of Olympia Parks and Recreation Department, Olympia, Wash. believes budget support is an essential. Meyer says he's "maxed out" in terms of the athletic field supply and demand ratio. Meyer tends 12 fields, which are used for softball and baseball, so it's a relief to have the money at hand.

"They give us what we need," Meyer says. "If they ever give us more fields, they'll have to give us more money to maintain those, but right now we don't have any more fields."

Some of that money went for a new irrigation system, installed in September. Employees are kept happy by a progres-

sive policy for part-timers.

"We increase payroll or benefits (for part-time workers) the same as our cost-of-living increases for our full-time," Meyer says.

Some departments have to contract work out to landscapers to make ends meet. Marseglia doesn't have the personnel or equipment for every job, so he contracts out some seeding, fertilizing, aeration, turf renovation and ball diamond rototilling.

Marseglia believes "attitude" is important if a crew wants to get any work done.

"I would rather have an individual who does not know anything (about the industry) and likes to work outside; that's half the battle. If they're conscientious on top of that, I just feel I have a gold mine. I will painstakingly teach that individual, and it's usually very rewarding."

"Everybody is going back to grass from AstroTurf," says **Mike Hess**, grounds manager for Georgia Tech Athletic Association, Atlanta.

The stadium at Georgia Tech now surrounds a natural grass field of Tifway 419.

"I've seen a trend in soil amendments," adds Hess, who is trying an amendment called Rebound, which consists of finely chopped rubber particles

"In anticipation of the 1996 Summer Olympics, we're redoing the track and renovating the coliseum. The stadium is smack dab in the middle of what will be the Olympic Village."

—James T. Holter & Terry McIver



■ Much of the athletic turf industry was in a "heated" state this summer, thanks to tropical July and August weather.

Consequently, managers had to divert their attention from planned projects to restore dying turf.

"Turf disease hit this summer," says

**Dan Marseglia**, outside maintenance foreman for the Cheshire Public Schools, Cheshire, Conn.

Marseglia had to manage summer patch and pythium, which he thinks was brought about from the high humidity followed by a dry spell. Marseglia suspects the fungi might have had a chance to incubate, what with the extra irrigation.

Which raises the question: which is worse, no turf or diseased turf?

**Mark Lamneck**, manager of intramural fields and irrigation, Ohio State University, blames the weather for some dollar spot and turf rust problems.

"We're putting down a 21-3-21 (fertilizer)," to bring the turf back," he reports. "We'll review the fields then we'll decide to what extent we'll have to overseed.

If we do overseed, which I think we will, we'll probably use straight ryegrass for quick growth."

Marseglia—as do many athletic field professionals—manages multiple fields,