



The correlation between poor playing surface conditions and the absence of experienced sports field management staff is prevalent at the school and municipal level. Playing surface quality expectations should be lowered in the absence of an experienced, trained sports turf manager.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SPORTS TURF MANAGERS FOR SCHOOLS & MUNICIPALITIES

// By BRAD PARK

Trade magazine articles and educational presentations frequently address solutions to agronomic and skin surface management problems faced by sports turf managers. An infrequently addressed problem involves the lack of trained sports field managers at the school and municipal level – sectors of the turf industry that comprise the vast majority of sports field acreage and are used by athletes of all ages and skill levels. General grounds, including common areas and lawns, planting beds, and even trees and shrubs are routinely within the purview of personnel working at schools and other public sector entities. While the job title “sports turf manager” will be used throughout the remainder of this article,

“sports turf and grounds manager” is likely a more accurate description of the position.

I frequently perform site visits to sports fields in a University Extension capacity and have made the following anecdotal observation concerning schools and municipalities with high quality sports fields: These institutions have personnel that include a sports turf manager with a high level of autonomy and significant decision-making authority (including purchasing) and a crew whose primary responsibility is the management of **outdoor** assets. This position may exist as a Foreman or Parks Superintendent and report to a Supervisor of Buildings and Grounds, Public Works Manager, or Recreation Department Administrator.

Among the most challenging visits are those where there are high expectation levels for sports field quality but limited investment in personnel and resources to meet those standards. Playing surface quality expectations should be lowered in the absence of an experienced, trained sports turf manager. Administrators, coaches, and athletes are often uncomfortable with the concept of having to accept less-than-ideal field conditions; however, sub-par playing surface conditions are a nothing less than a reality where field use is high and trained personnel and adequate resources are not present.

The correlation between poor playing surface conditions and the absence of experience sports field management staff

is so prevalent at the school and municipal level that I will frequently incorporate the following verbiage (or similar) into my follow-up report writing:

“Athletic Directors, coaches, athletes and others with a vested interest in playing surface quality must understand that the delivery of such a surface will be most likely achieved by an experienced sports field and grounds manager who is onsite on a daily basis and can react and adjust to changes in the surface as they occur. As such, expectations for playing surface quality must take into account the current turf management model that does not involve such a position.”

Sports turf managers can play many roles within municipal and school organizational structures; the entirety of roles are too numerous for the scope of this article. The objective of this article is to highlight several key roles played by sports turf managers to illustrate the importance of this position.

Communicating field conditions and managing high traffic surfaces

The proliferation of synthetic turf at schools and municipalities has provided administrators/event schedulers significant latitude in moving events from natural turf fields to synthetic surfaces when natural turf conditions necessitate such a move. Few public entities will ever have the resources to have a 100% synthetic sports field inventory; natural turf surfaces will always be part of the equation and require active management, including the implementation of time-sensitive cultural practices and traffic management.

Among the most high profile sports fields in any school system is the varsity football “game” field. North American football is played late into autumn, a time of the year turfgrasses in many regions of the United States are highly susceptible to damage caused by traffic. Bare soil (i.e. muddy surface when wet; hard surface when frozen or dry) is the end-of-season norm for those school systems that do not invest in quality sports field management personnel or do not value the judgment of their existing experienced staff. A sports turf manager is likely to anticipate field damage and proactively overseed prior-to



A sports turf manager is likely to anticipate and address the inevitable loss of turf by budgeting for and executing end-of-season re-sodding of high traffic locations such as goal creases.

and in-season to offset the inevitable loss of turf. He/she is better able to anticipate the need for end-of-season re-sodding or strategic core cultivation, seeding, and covering with a winter turf cover compared to a passive or nonexistent grounds department.

While a coach or administrator may ask the question, “How many events can

holding an event on a field when weather/field conditions could adversely affect playing surface integrity. His/her attempt to negotiate moving an event to a lower priority field in order to protect the higher priority field or perhaps advocate for pushing back a game time to allow surface conditions to improve should be viewed as an act of due

be held on a natural turf sports field?” and the answer is never black-and-white, an experienced sports turf manager is the principal authority on the durability of his/her field(s). Coaches and administrators should view a sports turf manager with a track record of providing quality playing surfaces as a valuable resource on the question of field durability; that manager is in a prime position to communicate the “costs” associated with

diligence in the eyes of those with field scheduling authority.

Managing contracted services

For many municipalities and school systems, contracted sports field and grounds services involves little more than a public bidding paperwork exercise. There is typically little understanding on the part of municipal or school administrators concerning fertilizers and pesticides, particularly as it relates to what is being applied, why it is being applied, and at what rate. Complicated applicator

licensing requirements, confusing state-level regulations, product storage issues, expensive application equipment, and insufficient in-house technical knowledge are frequently cited reasons for outsourcing pesticide and fertilizer applications to a contractor.

In many instances, the application of one-size-fits-all fertilizer and pesticide programs to institutional sports field and grounds properties may be the only source of turf nutrition and necessary weed and insect control these surfaces ever receive; elimination of these services could result in the deterioration of sports fields and grounds over time. Other routinely contracted services include custom cultivation (e.g. deep tining and slicing), and field renovation projects that may involve surface milling, laser grading, and seeding and sodding.

A sports turf manager can play a key role in the school/municipality-contractor dynamic by establishing relationships with contractors such that the contractor becomes a contractor-partner. The end result is better matching of facility needs with contractor services.

The hiring of a sports turf manager, and performing more tasks in-house, can provide greater facility-level control of functions otherwise outsourced. For example, performing fertilization in-house can give schools and towns greater control over product selection (e.g. nitrogen source; nutrients and lime relative to soil test results, etc.), rate, and application timing relative to rainfall and field use. In instances where fertilizer applications are outsourced and taking the operation in-house is simply not an option, a qualified sports turf manager is routinely in a much better



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position compared to a business administrator to communicate the needs of the property to a contractor-partner and guide or author site specific application specifications.

It is recognized that broadcast liquid pesticide applications are not feasible for many schools and towns to complete in-house. A sports turf manager with appropriate pesticide licensing is capable of using a backpack sprayer to perform spot spray applications and/or chemically trim using nonselective herbicides. In many states, a pesticide applicator is required to obtain continuing education credits to maintain his/her license; the ongoing credit accumulation process requires license holders to remain up-to-date on new and existing herbicides, fungicides, and insecticides and how/when to appropriately apply these materials within the scope of applied, practical sports field and grounds management.

A sports turf manager with an active pesticide applicator license is a valuable resource even for those schools and municipalities that outsource all pesticide applications. A manager can work with his/her pesticide contractor-partner to adjust application programs such that appropriate control materials are applied to specific sites when pest thresholds are exceeded. This is a fundamental Integrated Pest Management (IPM) strategy that can ultimately reduce school/municipality-wide pesticide use.

Where to find help

An additional anecdotal observation entails those sports turf managers who regularly attend Sports Turf Managers Association (STMA) Chapter-affiliated events and/

or state level University-partnered turfgrass association field days and conferences: These managers have higher quality sports fields compared to disengaged grounds departments. Industry-engaged sports field managers have an extensive network of fellow turf managers, University personnel, and vendors to call upon for assistance. The network expands even further for those sports turf managers who serve on the board of directors for state or regional STMA Chapters, regularly attend the

STMA Annual Conference and Exhibition, or have achieved Certified Sports Field Manager (CSFM) accreditation.

It is critical that administrators and supervisors support the continuing education and industry involvement of their sports field and grounds staff by providing the resources and paid-time away from the workplace to attend conferences and meetings and acknowledge that this engagement ultimately enhances sports field and grounds quality.

While sports field management priorities differ widely among individual schools and municipal cultures, where playing surface expectations are high and a qualified sports field manager is not present, a resourceful administrator (e.g. Athletic Director, Business Administrator, Mayor, Councilperson, etc.) is the most probable person within an organizational structure to recognize the importance of a sports turf manager and potentially making the position a reality.

Among the many resources available on the STMA website are sample job descriptions for the role of Sports Turf Manager and Assistant Sports Turf Manager. These documents can serve as templates for the hiring of a new position or re-titling/restructuring of a position vacated by someone who has retired or moved on to a different role. **IST/**

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