

From the Sidelines



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Early season use of sports fields

THIS MONTH I turn over this space to the gracious Mary Owen, extension turf specialist for the University of Massachusetts:

“Early season use of a field when grasses are not actively growing or when grasses are not growing quickly enough to recover from wear can cause lasting damage. Such damage may require costly renovations, result in down time later in the spring or summer, or require the use of herbicides to combat weeds that will invade areas where grass cover has been lost.

“Cool season grasses grow best when soil temperatures are in the 55 – 65 degree F range. Soil temperatures will vary, of course, by geography and topography and are also highly influenced by an urban “heat island” effect.

“While fields may be showing green and some growth, some fields in play are not replacing leaf and stem tissue at a rate that is rapid enough to maintain a dense playing surface. This replacement of tissue is critical for the turfgrass plant to recover, to grow new leaves and stems, and is crucial for recovery from traffic, maintenance of turf density and field safety. When the grass is not allowed the time to recover or when conditions are not good for recovery, the turf will thin, soil compaction will increase, weeds will invade and player safety will be compromised.

“Strategies for managing fields in early spring should include not only excellent agronomic practices aimed at maximizing shoot density and rooting, but also the scheduling of events (practice, game play or other use) for an appropriate amount of time directly related to the growing conditions and ability of a specific field to handle the play demanded.

“It is prudent to consider the playing conditions that will be expected as the season progresses. Heavy use of a dormant or slowly growing field can result in serious damage to the turf and to the soil. Rest and recovery time must be allowed for in the play/practice schedule, or the result will be an unsatisfactory field, a potentially unsafe field, and costly repairs and renovations later.”

Considerations for managing sports fields in the early spring:

- Restrict use on frozen or partially thawed turf.
- Avoid use of dormant (i.e. brown) turf or turf that is not actively growing.
- Reduce or restrict use on excessively wet or excessively dry fields.
- Minimize number of hours of use in relation to the growing condition of the turf.
- Keep practices, especially drills, off areas that are high traffic during games (i.e. mid-field, goal areas) and preferably off game fields entirely.
- Spread the wear out. Shift fields and move goal areas whenever possible. Rotate practice areas.
- Traffic on lighted fields, where there is the likelihood of additional hours of play and practice, should not be increased over what the field will bear simply because lighting is available.
- Require use of “gentler” footwear that is less likely to tear and divot. Suggest or require that sneakers be worn instead of cleats, as long as safe footing is not compromised.
- Overseed to “seedbank” desirable turfgrasses where traffic, wear and use are expected to be high.
- Aerate to reduce soil compaction and increase moisture release or infiltration, using solid tine or a slicer. Take care if there is a history or potential for annual grassy weed (e.g., crabgrass) infestation, so as not to aerate during peak germination times.
- Provide adequate fertility to ensure measured growth, avoiding excessive shoot growth.
- Irrigate, especially heavily used fields, if soil moisture is not adequate.

“Because there are no hard and fast rules about field use and because conditions may vary from field to field, from season to season and throughout the season, the experience of a knowledgeable sports turf manager who has a game plan for turf management and a policy for event scheduling is invaluable in determining when and for how long a field should be used.” ■

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