

Dressing up Turf

Get your fields in shape for the coming camp season

by Mary Helen Sprecher

Getting ready for the summer season often means airing out short-sleeved shirts and shorts, seeing if the porch furniture needs any repairs, and hunting down the bug spray. And when you get right down to it, getting your camp's sports facilities ready for the coming year shouldn't be much different from spring cleaning.

If you're among those who have a co-op agreement with a local school system, college or university, prepping your sports fields isn't something you have to worry about. They're already in use, so all you'll have to do is take over the upkeep work (meaning mowing and watering, as well as checking for problems such as pests, weeds and the occasional hazard caused by groundhogs or gophers). If your field is artificial turf, you'll just be looking at brushing the fibers and keeping the field clean, as well as making sure all equipment is in good repair.

If, however, you're working with designated camp facilities, and if those are natural turf, and have gone unused (or perhaps underused), it's time for you to shake the dust off of them and get them ready for the warm weather. Sports field designers and builders say the actual work starts well in advance of camp registration.

"Having a schedule of work to be done is important," says Dan Wright of Sports Turf Company, Inc. in Whitesburg, Georgia. "You just can't start maintenance a month before camp and expect to have a professional-looking playing surface."

"Have a game plan for when maintenance can be done throughout the year," says Chad Price of Carolina Green Corp. in Indian Trail, North Carolina. "It may not be possible to work on the fields through certain periods of the season due to camp schedule. Out of season repairs may be necessary during winter months when you normally would not consider grass or turf work, but that may be the only time to get work done, so make plans to address any repairs and maintenance items you can immediately after camp season is over. Consider the fall as the best time to make repairs to your facility, rather than waiting until spring. Weather is usually more corporative, and you reduce the spring rush stress."

For those who have limited time to maintain fields during the non-camp season, says Price, consider the use of a slow-release fertilizer, and of growth regulator, since both will result in "fewer trips across the field, with equipment, without sacrificing grass quality."

While access to facilities may be limited in downtime, it is essential to perform at least a functional level of maintenance, according to Dan Wright.

"In the fall the fields should be treated for winter weeds – for warm season (Bermuda grass) grasses this is usually in late October or early November," says Wright. "Have the soil tested in January to see how much lime and fertilizer may be needed, and in February start your second application on winter weed control and lime, if necessary. Around mid-March apply a 2-1-2 ratio fertilizer, such as 19-9-19, at a rate

of 500 pounds per acre. In May, apply ammonium nitrate at a rate of 300 lbs per acre -- and this must be applied when field is dry."

Both Price and Wright recommend re-sodding of worn areas. According to Wright, doing so between May and June will allow sod to establish without immediate worries of overuse, or of any freeze/thaw activity. Price notes that many of the camp directors his company has worked with "have found cost benefit in sodding problem areas after each camp season in preparation for the next year. There are increased cost involved in sod versus seeding, but once it is done, you do not have to worry as much about grow-in time and field protection."

With those issues under control, it's time to take a close look at the turf itself. Check for weeds (including clover, which can attract bees in warm weather) and for signs of other problematic pests indigenous to the area (fire ants are a problem in Southern areas, for example). Tripping hazards and uneven areas should be addressed, and glass, trash or other debris should also be removed before fields go into use.

Once fields are in use, a regular schedule of mowing and irrigation should be followed. Keep an eye on the facility, though, throughout the camp season. Walk fields regularly and pick up trash. Keep an eye out for the problems you were looking for in the spring -- pests, weeds and so forth. And by all means, address developing issues while they're still developing. It's easier to prevent an injury than it is to deal with it.

Take time to examine equipment -- goals, benches, bleachers, bases and more -- to make sure they're in good repair. Order replacements or repair as necessary. (Again, preventing a problem or injury is easier and less problematic than dealing with the aftermath).

Once your facility is done with campers for the year, it's time to take stock again, says Patrick Maguire of Activitas, Inc. in Dedham, Massachusetts.

"The most important turf maintenance you can do in the spring is to have put your field to bed correctly the previous fall. This means removing leaves and debris, and making sure the field has been properly aerated and fed in the late fall so that the root system is healthy and better able to resist winter injury. It also helps them to wake up strong at the start of the spring growing season. As always, you should have your soil tested so that you know what it takes to keep the proper soil pH and have a proper nutrient program recommended by your soil lab or cooperative extension."

As soon as one season starts, another begins. Right now, it's almost time for kids and campers to start playing the field. It's up to you to make sure their playground is ready each time.