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8 Steps to an Easy Field Facelift

*Adapted with permission of author, Jeffrey T. Fowler
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Author's Note: In the last 10 years I have been called to countless athletic fields to lend advice to the athletic field manager, school custodian or the school board member who wanted a "better" field for the young athletes in their district. The similar advice I was giving made me realize that many who are responsible for football fields were forgetting the basic steps to proper field management. This serves as refresher of the basic practices.

1. Soil Testing

Soil testing is the first step in any field facelift. Without a soil test you have no idea what the soil needs and thus, what the turf plant needs to thrive. I like to compare soil testing to a human blood pressure. Medical professionals can tell a lot about our health by taking our blood pressure. Turf professionals can tell a lot about the soil's health by conducting a simple soil test. This test will give you the soil ph and nutrient levels present in the sample.

To conduct a soil test:

Take 20-32 core samples from all areas of the field. Mix them together and allow them to dry. Send this representative sample to a certified laboratory. Check with your local County Extension Office for a list of laboratories in your state that can perform this test. Cost will range from six to \$20, but the cost of this test will pay for itself many times over in the amount you save on lime and fertilizer expenses.

2. Lime and Fertilizer

Dollar-for-dollar fertilization does more to improve poor quality turfgrass than any other single management practice. Proper fertilization practices will produce a dense, medium-to-dark green turf that

resists pests and environmental stresses. However, careless application techniques and/or applying excessive amounts of fertilizer at the wrong time of the year on your field can result in serious turf damage and contamination of water resources.

Successful fertilization for turfgrass fields requires:

- an assessment of the nutritional requirements of your turfgrass
- an understanding of fertilizers
- how much and when fertilizers should be applied
- proper application techniques ¹

3. Mowing

Whether you are mowing your field with a reel type or rotary type mower, you need to make sure that the blade is always sharp. Mowing frequency depends upon the rate of growth. You should never remove more than one-third of the green growth in one mowing. If you want to maintain a height of two inches, you should mow when the plant reaches 3 inches. Clippings do not need to be removed from the field as long as you maintain a regular mowing schedule.

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4. Aeration

Aeration is the process of disturbing the soil to relieve compaction. Compacted soil does not allow for proper air, water, and nutrient penetration and makes it difficult for proper plant root growth. Core removal should be performed at least two times a year when the plants are actively growing. There are many different aeration methods that can be used during the playing season that will not disrupt play,

5. Topdressing

Topdressing is the addition of sand or soil to the surface of the turfgrass.

Topdressing gives the sports turf manager a chance to:

- improve the soil quality
- improve the seedbed for new plants, and rooting of both new and existing plants
- level the playing surface of a field

The material used during topdressing should be chemically and physically very similar to the existing soil on the field unless the intent is to modify the soil texture.

6. Overseeding

Overseeding into thin turf or small patches of bare soil can be done in late winter, spring or early fall. When overseeding, it is especially important that the seed comes in contact with the soil and has space to germinate. Perennial ryegrass overseeded at the rate of 8-10 pounds/1,000 sq. ft. serves very well. Perennial ryegrass is a quick germinating variety that can tolerate enough wear to be effective on a field.

7. Playing Surface

I have been asked many times at different athletic field maintenance seminars if I would do a quick demonstration on “puddle repair.” My answer has always been the same, “NO.” We can not fix puddles; we fix low spots in our playing surface by constantly working the area around it in all

directions to maintain a playing surface that will not form low spots.

8. Transition Areas

The appearance of the transition areas can make your field look like a million bucks or a million ducks, depending on the care.

These areas include:

- where the grass meets the track
- where players run on and off of the field
- where the athletes always walk to and from the practice field.

Attention to these areas can really make or break the appearance, safety and playability of a field. We need to continually work to keep these areas from forming lips, dips and safety hazards on our fields.

9. Communication

Wait, the title of this article is eight steps to an easy field face lift, not nine steps. But, I realized that this article really wasn't complete until I added this last step. Even if you know everything there is to know about the first eight steps of a field facelift, no one will understand them if you do not follow step nine. You must let the people around you — your boss, supervisors, coaches, players, volunteer parents and school administrators — know what you know. Not only what is needed for a safer and more playable field, but also why it is needed. Your job as sports turf managers is to maintain athletic fields; their job is to do something else. You need to communicate your needs and your reasons for those needs so that they better understand the importance of the first eight steps.

If you adopt these nine steps and formulate a game plan for your athletic fields, you will have spectators saying, “How did they do that?”

¹ **Turfgrass Fertilization, A Basic Guide for Professional Turfgrass Managers, Peter Landschoot, Assoc. Professor of Turfgrass Science, the Pennsylvania State University. Bluegrass Billbugs 2003-05-06**