

Putting the Field to Bed

It is that time of year again, the days are short and turf growth has finally stopped after another long season. Most turf managers have moved indoors and are spending time with their families. In the back of their minds, they are all hoping for a mild winter and quick green-up in the spring. Even as the weather changes, forgetting about the field until spring would be an enormous mistake. "If you are glad the fall season is over and you don't want to see that field until next year, expect it to look like a pasture because you are treating it like one," said David Minner, professor of horticulture at Iowa State University. The condition a field is in going into winter is its best-case scenario in March. A field does not simply improve over the winter; it only has the potential for further deterioration. Spring conditions can often be too wet to core, seed, or topdress before the spring playing season begins. Putting a field to bed in the fall will help it wake up ready to go in the spring.

Fall Sports

Overseeding a football field throughout and after the season will increase its density and coverage going into the next season. Adding Kentucky bluegrass or perennial ryegrass even as late as mid-November can go a long way to improving a damaged field. Seed should be spread over high traffic areas to allow players to cleat it in during the playing season. Some seedlings will not make it through a tough Iowa winter, but some will survive and be weeks or even months ahead of seed applied in the early spring. Fall established plants are much stronger than plants established in the spring.

Solid tine aeration during the playing season, followed by seeding, is another way to improve field conditions. A strategy must be used for fall seeding, it not only gives fall cover to bare areas, but more importantly, any seedling that survives the winter will quickly mature in the spring and make a substantial contribution to the condition of the field in late spring and early summer. Spring seedings usually succumb to weeds, summer stress, or traffic decline as the turf is too immature for wear.

Core aerating the field during or after the season followed by topdressing can help promote deep rooting. If the field is sand-based, drag the cores in or remove the cores if the field is too hard because of a high clay content. Removing cores will help build up the sand content in the surface faster. If cores cannot be removed topdress with sand first, core the field, and then drag the field. Deep tine aeration with Vertidrain™ or Floyd McKay™ is also very effective. After core aeration and topdressing, dormant seeding as late as early-to-mid November will help give the field a quick start in the spring. It is important to drag seed into the aerification holes or use a drill seeder to improve germination. Seed left on the surface will rarely germinate after being exposed to Iowa winters. Breathable covers also can be used to help extend the growing season and encourage green-up in the spring. While covers can allow for seedling development during the winter, a snow mold treatment is also highly recommended.

If the field is subjected to knotweed pressure in the spring, a preemergence herbicide such as pendimethalin can be applied in the late fall to prevent early germination in high traffic areas. Late fall preemergence herbicides should not be applied when fall or spring seeding is considered.

Sodding is a better option in late fall to fix small wear areas instead of seeding. Sodding in November is an instant solution to worn areas between the hash marks. It may be late in the season, but if a sod producer can cut and deliver sod then it can be laid on the field. Even if the sod does not thoroughly root down in the fall, it will provide a jump on the spring season when it can finish rooting.

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Spring Sports

A fall maintenance program for a soccer field is very comparable to that of a football field. The biggest difference lies in the months available to prepare these tasks. If there is not fall soccer in the area, field managers can work from July to November on the field. There is also a greater need for fall maintenance because the field needs to be ready for use in April rather than August.

Fall practice schedules for baseball and softball are generally not as demanding on the field as a spring game schedule. However, it is important to remember the field condition entering the winter will be the same as the field condition during the start of the baseball or softball season, especially for college fields. College baseball or softball can start as early as mid-to-late February if weather allows. The first hint of spring usually finds players and coaches on the field. The spring schedule for high school usually starts in April and continues through the summer months. A majority of the maintenance practices listed above for soccer and football can be employed for baseball or softball grassed areas.

Tending to the skinned areas is the biggest difference in caring for a baseball or softball field. Unfortunately, many skinned infields are neglected during the fall and winter. Winds can be brutal in the winter, especially in open areas, and these winds blow exposed and loose infield materials into the adjacent grass, causing large lips to build up during the winter. Boards or silt fences can be used to reduce blowing dirt. Another simple method to help prevent dirt from blowing into grass areas is to lay down a 2-by-4 along the perimeter of the dirt infield and adjacent to the grass where the lip usually starts to form. Lay the boards flat and stake them into the ground if needed. The dirt piles up on the boards and is easily removed in the spring when the infield is dragged.

Some high schools still disk skinned areas and leave the playing surface rough all winter. This technique can work, as long as the field isn't needed until late spring. Disking the field and expecting it to be ready for competition in March is simply not possible. The worked infield will hold moisture and water, making it impossible to drag and firm the surface prior to spring practices and games. Other infield areas such as the pitcher's mound and batter's box should be reconditioned during the fall and covered with a tarp for the winter. Covering these areas with a tarp ensures a quick spring transition and allows focus to shift to other areas. Sodding worn areas in front of the mound and first and third base in the fall will also allow field managers to get the most out of the field early in the spring. Using a nonselective soil sterilant in the fall to prevent weed growth in skinned areas is not encouraged, these materials can displace during the winter and cause damage to turf.

Fall is the best time to prepare for the next playing season and the sooner preparation begins in the fall, the better the field will look in the spring. Field managers that plan ahead are always the ones with the best-looking fields. What the field looks like in the spring depends completely on what has been done during the winter months

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