

Tips for Athletic Field Management on a Limited Budget

by David D. Minner

1. Implement a site specific management program.

Identify high traffic areas on each field, and concentrate resources on those areas to provide a better return on your investment. High traffic areas of a football field (10,000 sq. ft. center plus side lines) that require more resources are usually 6 to 10 times smaller than the entire area in and around the field (60,000 to 100,000 sq. ft.). If you are treating the entire field area with one management program, then you can reduce input from lower traffic areas and increase input on higher traffic areas. High traffic areas require additional coring, seeding, fertility, and topdressing with amendments such as sand, calcined clay, and compost.

2. Rotate activity on overused fields.

Develop a program where one or more fields are completely taken out of play for at least one year. Impossible you say—then try this approach.

Identify your fields that are overused. As an example, assume four soccer fields are intensely used spring and fall. All attempts at coring, drill seeding, and other reestablishment practices have not produced acceptable grass cover because there is not sufficient time for grass to reestablish and mature. Take time to explain to parents, coaches, and others that this one-year period of rest is important so a field can be used continuously

for the next three or four years. Don't announce at the beginning of the soccer season that you want to renovate a field and that it won't be available for play. Instead, get involved in scheduling for the entire league.

Find out when they have their first meeting so you can present your plan for providing a safer facility by removing one field each year for renovation. Be firm; don't accept any period less than one year for resting the field. Explain that 95 percent grass cover may occur two months after seeding, but it will take at least one year for plants to produce enough biomass to form a protective mat of grass that is more traffic tolerant and shock absorbing.

Produce a game schedule for next season without using the field that will be rested for renovation. Once the schedule has been set without using the "rested" field, then you're home free. If you approach the planning committee after the game/practice schedules are set, they will be reluctant to change the schedule to rest a field.

Next year, repeat the process. Play on three fields, and rest one field. This three-year rotation will improve the playing conditions of all fields. Sodding is preferred when reestablishing the "rested" field. Don't compromise the renovation process by sodding and then allowing play before the full one-year rest period is over. Stick with the plan so that your committee can develop a consistent policy for game and field scheduling. Take a positive approach by letting the committee know that they will be directly affecting field conditions by using their expertise to make the schedule work with one less field. Acknowledge that their dollars spent on seed, coring, and other materials will be more effective since the rested field won't wear out as fast as the others.

Avoid using the comment, "it will sure make my job easier," since some may perceive that to be a sign of laziness. What is actually meant is that your time and

resources spent on renovation will be the same, but the field performance will be substantially improved.

3. Use volunteers.

Players, parents, boosters, and other supporters of the athletic program can provide substantial support for the field. Let them choose between fundraising and maintenance on the field. Fundraising efforts usually are more effective when they are working toward a tangible item, such as an irrigation system, core aerator, or mower. Items like sand topdressing, seed, and fertilizer are less attractive as fundraising projects. Players, and sometimes parents, usually are receptive to working directly on the field. Provide ownership in the field by allowing each player to work at the position they play. Immediately after practice or between games, players can make necessary improvements in a matter of 5 to 15 minutes. Pitchers and catchers can easily rework the mound and home plate by adding and tamping clay. First and third can rake, level, and repair the skin area around their base. Second and shortstop can broom soil from the grass to prevent lips. Outfielders can spread a mixture of seed/sand/soil into divots to fill in thin areas. Fields that are routinely managed with players seldom need severe renovation. Many players enjoy working on the field, and parents take pride in seeing their kids assume the extra responsibility.

4. Be an effective communicator.

Managing a sports facility requires coordination among the administrator, coach, band director, and grounds manager. Administrators should keep in mind that proper traffic control costs nothing in terms of dollars, and at the same time, it offers the most effective means of reducing dangerously worn areas on game and practice fields. Understanding your role as a user of the field is the first step in communication.

Coaches must take an active interest in scheduling practice activities and preventing excessive turf wear. The coach and the grounds manager can work together to develop improved grass areas specifically for drills that are conducted off the game and practice fields.

Band directors should have a practice field painted on another grass area or in a parking lot. Areas should be situated so that practice can be viewed from above,

as if you were in the bleachers. Band practice on the game field should be limited to once per week and only when the soil is dry enough to resist compaction in marching paths. No activity (band, football, or field maintenance) should be conducted on the field while there is frost on the grass.

Grounds managers should realize that they are caring for a multi-use facility rather than just a football field. Make every effort to accommodate all groups with activities on the field. Each group should take responsibility for the condition of the field. Each group can be viewed as a potential resource for funding field maintenance expenses. Extra use requires additional labor, equipment, and resources. Contributions should be requested from the band and athletic booster club. If given the chance, the band or athletic booster club may be responsible for assisting with the purchase of a new core aerifier.

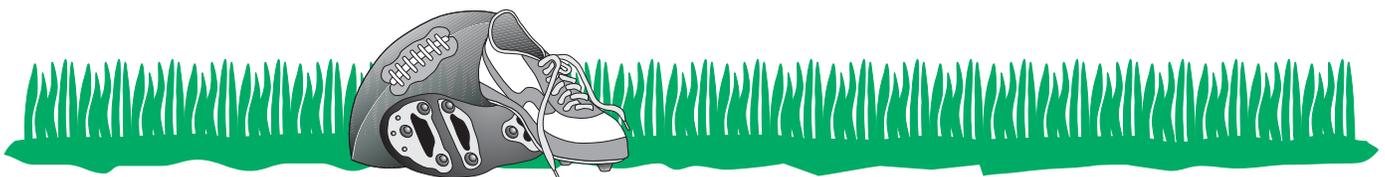
Administrators should clearly define conditions for using and not using the field. As much as possible, reserve the field for games only. In addition to field damage, administrators should consider field condition, player safety, and potential liability.

5. Develop a safety checklist.

Develop a one- or two-page safety checklist that is reviewed each year and approved by your supervisor. Include field areas, such as bases, mounds, irrigation heads, etc. Also, list nonfield areas, such as bleachers, fences, dugouts, warning signs, etc. List the priority of each item, and indicate those that are dangerous and need immediate attention. Make a column on the checklist for “proposed work completed.” Sign and date each item completed and approved. A checklist will document your awareness problems and show you are taking measures to improve safety of the facility. At first, funding may be directed toward nonfield-related items, but eventually, resources will be required for field maintenance as indicated by the safety checklist.

6. Develop at least one showcase field.

Your reputation as a field manager will be built on the quality of your best field, with less attention paid to resources or the number of fields under your care. Be sure to allocate enough resources to at least one field so that you can show your ability to produce a



high quality sports field. Sacrifice resources used on other fields that are not producing a noticeable improvement. Document additional resources needed to produce a quality field, and use the information when requesting future resources to improve inadequate fields. You should be able to define minimal inputs required for a desired level of field quality.

Select a field with moderate to light traffic to showcase. Additional resources may not produce a better field if excessive traffic is the major problem. Purchase a camera; it is the best method of showing the changes that occurred on the facility under your direction. Pictures of construction projects also are a valuable record of what is buried under the facility. Underground irrigation, drainage, and utilities may need to be accessed, and pictures often are more important than drawings. A photographic record of the grounds crew and their activities also can develop a sense of pride in a job well done.

7. Understand “joint power facilities.”

“Joint power facilities” occur most commonly when a city parks department and local school join in an agreement to share playing fields. Fields that are idle are perceived to be a waste of city or school funds. Instead of building new fields, the teams from one association are permitted to use the other’s facility. This obviously will ease the field pressure on one partner and increase the traffic injury on the other partner. Before entering into a “joint power” agreement, make sure there is a clear understanding of the additional field resources required to manage the increased level of activity. Define expectations of the field and exactly who will use the facility. Follow any transfer of funds, and be sure that the field maintenance budget actually is increased to cover additional resources needed to manage increased activity.

8. Break down expensive projects into manageable units.

Proposals to upgrade a facility or purchase new equipment often may be turned down because the total cost of the request is beyond the scope of the annual budget. If possible, find out what level of additional funding is appropriate, and then divide your total project into manageable units that can be purchased for more than one year.

For example, your \$15,000 proposal for an automatic irrigation system has been turned down, even though you volunteered to install it with your grounds crew at no additional labor cost. Break the project into three phases, and complete one phase each year at an increased cost of only \$5,000 per year. Buy the pipe, wire, and valves the first year, and install them. Buy and install heads in the second year, and charge the system. It may not be automated, but after only two years, you have water where there once was none. In the third year, purchase the controller, and fully automate the irrigation system.

9. Consider contract services vs. purchasing equipment.

Sometimes high purchase costs of coring, seeding, and spraying equipment may be difficult to justify, especially if it is only used a few times each year. Contract services can provide custom application of these field management practices without the burden of purchase, repair, and replacement costs. Contract services also may be useful if your personnel and facility are not certified to apply or store pesticides. Contracting services may be a way to reduce equipment and skilled labor costs.

10. Invest in human resources.

Provide educational opportunities by joining local and national associations. Budget for personnel to attend educational meetings and hands-on workshop activities. Develop a library of books, videos, and training manuals. Keep trade magazines in the break room for employees. Looking for a motivated person? Watch who does the reading.

Budgets are simply numbers on a piece of paper that restrict how much money we can spend in a given period of time. Don’t be overwhelmed by numbers on paper, and don’t restrict your greatest resource, the human resource. Surround yourself with dependable, competent people whom often exceed your capabilities and learn to manage them. Empower others with your vision and watch as the human resource grows with the budget you have.



For More Information

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