



Athletic Field Design

Protecting Turf with Field Blankets

By Mike Hebrard, Athletic Field Design

As professional groundskeepers we are faced with the problem every season:

What to do with the sidelines during an athletic contest?

Quickly, the substitute players make a quagmire of the turfgrass. To make matters worse, the more they don't play, the more they find something to do on the sidelines. They write their names in the mud with their cleats, or slip and make a big divot running to the water cooler.

In the past, groundskeepers have thrown down sand, sawdust and dirt, even re-sodding with sod containing netting. Though we can't always afford to take the best protective measures possible, we also can't afford not to put down some kind of protective covering over the turfgrass before it turns to unmanageable mud. By using one of the many products on the market, you may be many man hours ahead by not having to repair the worn turf.

One recent project for which I was asked to consult was at the University of Portland, in Oregon. Athletic Director Joe Etzel was concerned about the wear that was taking place on the sidelines at Harry Merlo Field, where the university's men's and women's nationally recognized soccer teams compete. I recommended the use of a geotextile supplied by CSI GeoSynthetics in Vancouver, WA -- a six-ounce nonwoven material called

GTF150EX, a 90 puncture-rated product made by Linq Industrial Fibers Inc.

This was a substantial gain in improvement for the sidelines, but had some drawbacks. Because of the relatively heavy weight of the material when dry, it got quite a bit heavier with the water and mud it soaked up and was difficult to lift and messy to store. Sales Manager Rosemary Pfeifer of CSI suggested a lighter material called Typar 3301, a three-ounce spun-bonded, nonwoven geotextile, a 25 puncture-rated product made by Reemay. This provided the answer to the problem, as the geotextile provided ample protection from the weight of the benches as well as protection from the reserve players. Other materials, such as Turf Armor, are available with sewn-in grommets to allow for pinning down the geotextile to keep it from moving from wind or traffic.

Immediately after the contest, the geotextile should be removed, properly cleaned and stored for the next event. I recommend, if you use metal or plastic staples to anchor down your material that these staples be painted fluorescent colors such as orange or red. Keep track of how many staples are used. That way, each and every staple can be picked up to prevent injuries and to ensure that one is not caught in a mower blade. For geotextiles without grommets, holes can be made in the fabric by using a soldering iron. This will give a smooth, sealed opening to insert the holding staple.

Since soccer fields are usually ten to twenty yards wider than football fields, it is a good idea to protect the coach's and players' box (six feet from the sideling stretching from the 30-yard to the 30-yard line, ten to fifteen feet wide) from the sideling traffic by placing a heavier material such as Turf Armor with prefixed grommets. This material is usually

light green in color, but other products are a light gray resembling the solid white band that is becoming standard around college and high school fields. This helps the officials in enforcing team boundaries as well as giving the participants a visual barrier. The use of this application should protect the sideline area from excessive wear to preserve the area better for the upcoming soccer contest.

Other uses for geotextile or field protection materials include baseball, especially in the higher levels of play where batting practice on the game field is necessary. Day in and day out, batting practice without some kind of protection in front of home plate can make any infield look like the local driving range. The batted ball that strikes in that area usually has to top spin, which causes the ball to bite more aggressively into the turf, making a slicing divot.

Almost any discarded material can help in reducing the damage, such as an old leaky tarp, netting or even woolen blankets. But if you can afford it, I highly recommend the use of products that are sold on the market and can be custom made to fit your field's measurements. However, this might not be foolproof for every groundskeeper who sets the field up for batting practice then goes on his or her much-needed break. As I observed at one major league stadium while talking to my former minor league manager, "Take that...[expletives deleted]...net off so I can hit some real fungos," just as the head groundskeeper walked out of the stadium to his favorite hideaway.

While on the subject of baseball, I might add that it doesn't matter if it is pouring rain or 100 degrees outside -- the pitcher's mound should be covered when not in use and after it has been restored. This should also be true with the home plate area. If a mound is left unprotected from the elements, a hard rain can erode a beautifully maintained slope or

the sun can bake and crack the firmest of landing spots. By covering the mound and home plate when it is hot, with a little moisture the clay will sweat, keeping the entire surface bonded together. When ordering a new tarp, you might consider oversizing the radius by one or two feet. This will allow for the tarp to overlap the grass during a hard rain, but remember to insert an object at the pitcher's rubber or home plate to take up the slack for use while watering. These products can be expensive, so it must be made as an investment and stored properly to ensure its longevity.