

Changing the Face of Athletic Maintenance

By Mel Lanford, Host of the Ace of Diamonds Tour

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The new millennium has uncovered a new consciousness towards athletic fields and their maintenance with groundskeepers at the center of this evolution. Over the last decade, the "maintenance men" of athletic fields have grown into athletic field managers who ensure the quality of the athletic field and accept all responsibility for the safety and professional look of the athletic facility.

The "greens industry" of today represents billions of dollars in services, materials and equipment. Professional athletic field managers have taken on the responsibility of spearheading these operations and providing safe and playable athletic facilities for athletes. We have also come to understand that we are liable for all incidents and damages that occur on our fields. The issue of liability is frightening in a judicial system such as ours, where anyone can sue anyone for anything at anytime.

There are three main concepts that athletic field managers should incorporate in running their operations:

Educating Decision-Makers

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2. Communicating and Implementing Ideas
3. Smart Record Keeping

Educating Decision-Makers

In order to evolve into this new responsibility as an athletic field manager, we must work efficiently to educate the people who approve the field projects and financial budgets of athletic facilities. It is vital that athletic field managers inform executives about what it takes to provide a superior and safe playing surface and also the consequences of failing to reach such standards. In too many cases, athletic facilities are not using the valued products, equipment and efforts to create reliable fields that can withstand the "wear and tear" of numerous contests.

In the reverse role, athletic field managers need to be open-minded and allow the executives to teach them the business aspects of running an athletic facility. This two-way communication constructs a strong management where all sides of the party understand and respect each other's decisions. In many cases, athletic field managers will better understand the financial situation of the facility and work to conserve resources and increase productivity. Together, athletic field managers and executives can incorporate a communication model that will benefit the playing field, players and fans as a whole.

Communicating and Implementing Ideas

Succeeding at educating the decision-makers of athletic facilities is a huge accomplishment and it builds great momentum in communication among all employees at an athletic facility. Good communications will initiate the process of adding new budgets, products and services to the facilities and make the process easier and more productive. The next major strategy is to effectively communicate different ideas and needs concerning the maintenance of the facility. Through this communication, we want to remember to offer our ideas as coming from an expert in the field of groundskeeping. Athletic field managers have a special passion for their work and we must display this in our strategies and ideas that we present to executives. When meeting with these decision-makers, we need to express an involved and zealous attitude, which shows how much we care about our

profession and our projects. This tactical communication is extremely persuasive and it allows us to promote a dedicated feeling to our superiors.

Remember, we are the ones who chose this profession because we love the outdoors, the smell of freshly cut grass and the absence of sitting in an office punching numbers all day. For the same reasons, the accounting leaders chose their role in the cool setting of an office. Respect this and use this to your advantage while communicating.

Smart Recordkeeping

As you use persuasive and effective communication to implement your ideas, remember that you have put your knowledge and reputation as a groundskeeping expert on the line. For this reason, it is vital to keep records of all applications and projects that occur on your athletic field. With the evolution of athletic fields and the growing popularity of competitive sports, athletic field managers have seen their staffs grow exponentially and this causes a new system of delegation. By delegating duties, you are responsible for the work of others and this is the prominent reason why we should be keeping records of our projects.

Recordkeeping is also a key tactic for athletic field managers because we deal with so many chemicals in our daily duties. To be in compliance with state and federal licensing, we must keep complete records on all chemicals used and stored on the job. Please understand that we could be subject to lawsuits of all types and we must keep records in order to protect our business.

I have had many instances where an outside contractor was hired to complete a specific project and did not fulfill his obligation. To alleviate this problem, I always have a camera on hand to record the progress of different projects. This keeps outside contractors honest and will keep me out of trouble. The problem with most athletic field construction is very similar to what happens when a tree is damaged. The tree does not show any ill effects the first year or so, but five to 10 years later it dies and who is to blame? The same is true with athletic fields. They may take five years or more to realize failure. The dated photographs from a camera can easily show the history of a project and provide a concrete argument for your staff and yourself.

With these three concepts in mind, athletic field managers can work better to advance our industry into the realm that it deserves. Groundskeeping is still a profession that requires hard work, creativity, many hours in the sun and a strong sense of self-satisfaction that motivates us everyday. But you have the power today to change how it is perceived and respected through better education, communication and recordkeeping.

Mel Langford, a 30-year veteran of the groundskeeping industry, was the creator and host of the Aces of Diamond Tour, sponsored in part by Diamond Pro Professional Groundskeeping Products, a division of Trinity. For more information, visit www.diamondpro.com