



Standard Guide for Maintaining Cool Season Turfgrasses on Athletic Fields¹

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1. Scope

1.1 This guide covers the minimum requirements for maintaining cool season turfgrasses used for natural surface athletic fields. Practices covered include mowing, fertilization, irrigation, core cultivation, overseeding, and pest management.

1.2 The decisions involved in maintaining a quality natural playing surface should consider soil types, local climate and other factors; therefore, it is recommended that you contact your local cooperative extension service for more specific information on soils, and grass species and cultivars adapted to your area.

1.3 *This standard does not purport to address all of the safety concerns, if any, associated with its use. It is the responsibility of the user of this standard to establish appropriate safety and health practices and determine the applicability of regulatory limitations prior to use.*

2. Terminology

2.1 *Definitions of Terms Specific to This Standard:*

2.1.1 *athletic field, n*—a field constructed and utilized for conduct of various organized sporting events.

2.1.2 *cool season turfgrasses, n*—grass species widely adapted to cool temperate climates. Some species persist and are used in warm humid to warm subhumid climates; referred to as the transition zone. Cool season species commonly used for natural playing surfaces include Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass, tall fescue, fine leaf fescues, creeping bentgrass, and colonial bentgrass. Creeping and colonial bentgrasses are normally used only on croquet and lawn bowling courts.

2.1.3 *thatch, n*—an accumulation of undecomposed organic matter that can form at the soil surface in a turf.

3. Significance and Use

3.1 A dense, uniform stand of turfgrass on a playing surface improves the playing quality and safety of the field by providing firm footing for the athletes and by cushioning their

impact from falls or tackles. These standards are the minimum inputs required to provide such a surface. Various published guides have been used in the development of this guide (1-5).²

3.2 Field conditions may directly influence the frequency and type of athletic injuries occurring as a result of using the fields. While these standards do not guarantee that such injuries will be prevented, a well-maintained turf on a natural playing surface should minimize field-related injuries.

4. Apparatus

4.1 *General*—Experience and good judgment are important to match the proper type of equipment to the nature of the task to be performed.

4.1.1 *Mowing Equipment*—Mower types include reel, rotary, and flail; although, the latter type is not recommended for fine playing surfaces. A reel mower should be used for playing surfaces requiring mowing at less than 1.5 in. (3.8 cm). Mower blades should always be kept sharp and properly adjusted in accordance to manufacturer's recommendations. Mowing equipment should be operated in a speed range consistent with the manufacturer's recommendation.

4.1.2 *Spreaders*—Spreaders are necessary if dry fertilizer or pest control materials are to be applied. Spreader types may include drop, rotary (centrifugal, spinner), or oscillating. Spreaders should be calibrated to deliver the desired, labeled, or recommended rate of fertilizer or pest control product being applied.

4.1.3 *Sprayers*—Sprayers are necessary if liquid fertilizers or pest control materials are to be applied. Low pressure systems are recommended. Sprayers should be calibrated to deliver the desired, labeled, or recommended rate of fertilizer or pest control product being applied.

4.1.4 *Core Cultivators*—Core cultivation (aerification, coring) equipment relieves soil surface compaction. Core cultivators should be of the type that physically removes soil, such as a hollow tine or spoon. Cultivators with 1/2 to 3/4 in. (13 to 19 mm) tines on 4 to 6 in. (100–150 mm) spacings should be used on all playing surfaces. Spikers, slicers, or similar types of equipment are not suitable for relieving surface compaction.

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² The boldface numbers in parentheses refers to the list of references at the end of this standard.

4.1.5 *Seeders*—Slit seeders should be used for any over-seeding or renovation operations. Slit seeders cut a groove into the soil and deposit the seed in the groove at a predetermined depth.

4.1.6 *Irrigation System or Equipment*—Ideally, some source of water should be available for irrigation. Systems can range from portable or permanently installed types.

4.1.7 *Soil Sampling Tubes*, used to sample soils for testing purposes.

5. Mowing

5.1 *Mowing (General)*—The periodic removal of excess shoot growth is necessary on natural surface playing fields.

5.2 *Mowing Height*—The mowing height of a natural surface athletic field will vary with the sport, turfgrass species, and time of the year. Adjust mowing heights accordingly, using Table 1.

5.3 *Mowing Frequency*—Fields should be mowed as often as necessary. No more than 1/3 of the leaf surface should be cut off at any one mowing. Under normal growing conditions, this usually means every five to seven days for fields maintained at 1.5 in. (38 mm) or higher, two or three times a week for baseball infields and other closely mowed fields.

5.4 *Clipping Removal*—Fields maintained at a mowing height of 1 in. (25 mm) or higher do not require that the clippings be removed at mowing if mowed at the proper frequency. Only remove clippings if the grass is allowed to grow excessively high so that clippings would accumulate on the playing field surface. Playing surfaces maintained at one inch or shorter should have the clippings removed with each mowing.

5.5 *Mowing Pattern*—Mowing direction should be varied with each successive mowing. Striping of fields due to mowing direction can be accomplished with one or two mowings prior to an event.

6. Fertilization

6.1 *Fertilization (General)*—Fertilization is essential for maintaining dense, vigorously growing natural turfgrass fields. Fertilizer rate, timing, source, and ratio will influence a natural turf's density, color, uniformity, recuperative ability, as well as its ability to tolerate wear, biological and environmental stresses.

TABLE 1 Mowing Heights

NOTE 1—Adjustments in mowing height should be made to accommodate the sport using the field. Mowing heights should be increased when the fields are not being used or when the mowing height does not influence the game.

Sports Field Use	Grass Species	Mowing Height
Baseball infields, field hockey fields	Kentucky bluegrass or Perennial ryegrass	0.75–2.5 in. (19 to 64 mm)
Baseball outfields; soccer, football, lacrosse, polo, and rugby fields	Kentucky bluegrass or Perennial ryegrass	1.5–2.5 in. (38 to 64 mm)
Intramural and multiple-use fields	Tall fescue	2.0–3.0 in. (51 to 76 mm)

6.2 *Soil Testing*—Soil testing should be performed on established fields every three to four years. More frequent testing (every one or two years) may be required on sand based fields or those having nutritional imbalances. Soil testing will identify nutrient deficiencies that may be corrected by supplemental fertilizer applications or by fertilizer selection. Soil testing will also identify changes needed in soil reaction (pH).

6.2.1 *Sampling*—A representative sample should be taken from each field. Using a soil sampling tube, pull out about 50 random samples per acre of turf, and combine them to obtain a representative sample. Samples should be taken from the soil surface to a depth of 2 to 4 in. (51 to 102 mm), or a depth recommended by the testing laboratory.

6.2.2 Remove the thatch and any stones or debris.

6.2.3 Thoroughly mix the cores and pull a 1-pt (0.5-L) sample from the composite to submit to the testing laboratory.

6.2.4 Provide as much information to the laboratory as possible, including the use of the area, grass species, past fertilization history, irrigation or not, clipping removal or not, age of the field, and other information the laboratory may request.

6.2.5 Submit the samples to a state or commercial soil testing laboratory. Maintain records of samples submitted, to include sampling date, soil testing laboratory, and results.

6.3 *Soil Reaction (pH)*—Soil pH should be maintained in a range of 6.0 to 7.0.

6.3.1 Lime should be applied as per soil test recommendations to increase soil pH. Lime materials may include pulverized or granular limestone, pelletized limestone, and hydrated lime. Use dolomitic liming materials if there is a need for additional magnesium in the soil. Apply lime in spring, or fall, or both, until the desired pH is attained.

6.3.2 Apply no more than 100 lbs of agricultural lime/1000 ft² (4900 kg/ha) per application on bluegrass, ryegrass, or tall fescue fields.

6.3.3 Elemental sulfur or ammonium based fertilizers can be used to decrease soil pH. Apply elemental sulfur at a rate not to exceed 5 lbs/1000 ft² (245 kg/ha) in the spring and fall until the desired soil pH is reached.

6.4 *Fertilizer Rate and Nitrogen Sources*—Cool season grass (Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass, and tall fescue) playing surfaces should receive fertilizer at a rate to deliver no less than 1/2 lb of actual nitrogen per 1000 ft² (24 kg N/ha) per growing month. The need for higher rates will be dependent on climatic and soil conditions, irrigation practices, and intensity of use.

6.4.1 Quick-release nitrogen sources, such as ammonium phosphates, ammonium nitrate, urea, or ammonium sulfate should be applied at rates not to exceed 1 lb of actual nitrogen/1000 ft² per application (49 kg N/ha). Slow-release forms of nitrogen, such as sulfur-coated urea, IBDU, ureaform, polymer coated urea, polymer/sulfur coated urea, and natural organics may be applied at higher rates less frequently through the year, and are preferred for use on sandy soils. Many turfgrass fertilizers contain a combination of both quick and slow-release nitrogen sources, and usually are applied at a rate of 1 lb of actual nitrogen/1000 ft² (49 kg N/ha).