

End of the Season Practices for Athletic Fields

<http://turfgrass.hort.iastate.edu/extension/end.pdf>

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If you are putting your field to bed this fall and tucking it in nicely with some love and care then you can expect it to wake up next spring ready to go and ahead of the game. If you are darn glad the fall season is over and you don't want to see that field until next year, then expect it to look like a pasture because you are treating it like one. If you plan to use the field for early spring soccer or baseball then it will be in the same condition that you left it at the end of the autumn. Spring conditions can often be too wet to core, seed, or topdress before the spring playing season begins. Get a jump on next year by putting your field to bed so it will wake up ready to go.

Here are a few end-of-the-season tips that will help you prepare your football/soccer and baseball/softball fields for next year.

Soccer/Football

- Seed with Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass during the fall game schedule. Start in September and keep going until the last game. Spread seed over the high traffic areas and allow players to cleat it in or prepare a pregerminated seed mixture with sand and fill divots. Sure, some of the seedlings are injured, but some of them also survive. Solid tine aeration during the playing season, followed by seeding, is another way to get some grass started as the field begins to wear out. Keep in mind your strategy for fall seeding. It not only gives you some fall cover of bare areas with green color, but more importantly any seedling plant that survives the winter will quickly mature in the spring and make a substantial contribution to the biomass cover of the field during the summer. Fall established plants will be much stronger than plants established in the spring. Spring seedings usually succumb to weeds or summer stress and the new turf is too immature for football and soccer that start as early as August 15.
- Hollow core the field and topdress with a medium sand. Drag the cores in if you have a sand field and remove the cores if the field is too hard from a high clay content. Removing cores will help you build up the sand content in the surface faster. If cores cannot be removed then topdress with sand first, then core, then drag the field. Deep tine coring with the vertidrain is also very effective on soil based fields.
- Dormant seeding in combination with coring and topdressing will give the field a quick start in the spring. Be sure to get the seed into the ground. Use a drill seeder or drag the seed into the aerifier holes. Seed that is visibly left on the surface will seldom germinate next spring.
- Breathable covers, such as those made by Covermaster can be used in high traffic areas to help extend the growing season in the fall and speed green-up in the spring. Covers can also allow for seedling development during the winter. Snow mold treatment is recommended on areas that will be covered during the winter.
- Pre-emergent herbicides, such as pendimethalin, can be applied in late fall, following the playing season, to prevent early germinating knotweed that is especially troublesome in high traffic areas. Fall applied pre-emergent herbicides **should not** be used in areas of the field where turfgrass seed is used in the fall or spring.
- Sod is often a better solution to fixing small wear areas instead of trying to nurse the field back by seeding. Sod is an instant solution for worn goal boxes and areas between the hash marks. It may be late in the season, but if a sod producer can cut and deliver sod then you can lay it on your field. Even if the sod doesn't thoroughly root down in the fall it will give you a jump on the spring season and finish rooting in the spring.

Baseball/Softball

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The fall practice schedule for baseball and softball is usually not as demanding on the field as the spring game schedule. However, it is important to remember that the field condition entering the winter will be the same as the field condition during the start of the baseball/softball season, especially for college fields. College baseball/softball can start as early as February 15 and if the weather is nice they will be on the field. The spring schedule for high school usually starts later in the spring since the high school season continues in the summer after classes have ended.

- Many of the practices described above for football/soccer can also be used to improve the grass areas of baseball/softball.
- Skin areas are often left to fend for themselves during the winter. Strong Iowa winds can blow the infield dirt materials into the adjacent grass areas and cause large lips to build up during the winter. Boards or silt fence have been used to reduce blowing dirt. Another simple method is to lay down 2-by-4 boards along the dirt infield and adjacent to the grass where the lip usually starts to form. Lay the boards flat and stake them if needed. The dirt piles up on the boards and is easily removed in the spring.
- Some high schools disc the skin area and leave it rough all winter. This works fine if you don't need the field until late spring. If you disk the skin area in the fall and need to have the field ready for play in March, you could have a problem. The worked-up infield will hold water and it may be impossible to drag and firm the surface until the surface has dried.
- Mound and batter box areas should be reconditioned in the fall and then covered with a tarp for the winter. Pull the tarp off in the spring and you are ready to go.
- Sod worn areas in front of the mound and at first and third so they will be ready in the spring.
- Avoid using non-selective soil sterilant herbicides on skin areas to prevent weed growth in skin areas. It is likely that these materials will find their way into the surrounding turf areas and cause injury.

The most important part of your fall program is to have a plan. Don't just drop the field after the last fall game and then try to get ready for next year in the middle of the summer. Autumn is the best time to prepare the field for the rest of the year and be sure that you implement your "putting the field to bed program" immediately after your last fall game.