The grass is always greener…or is it?

By Lisa Knapton

Summer will be here before we know it which means it is time to pull out the soccer balls, dust off the baseball bats and most importantly, prepare your athletic fields for another season of play. Members who own athletic fields should be aware of the potential risks involved with high-use athletic fields by becoming familiar with common hazards and develop inspection and maintenance plans to promote safe fields for the participants. Fields that are subject to a high volume of use, especially under very wet or very dry conditions, are at risk for turf damage which can lead to injury due to loss of traction and footing. The following are some of the common risk exposures and recommended controls to factor into your athletic field maintenance program:

Soil compaction is a common issue which can lead to participant injury and arises from foot or vehicle traffic. To combat soil compaction, consider:

- Change the location of daily practices so participants are not using the same area of the field.
- Use of portable goals and goal posts. Moving them around the playing area will decrease compaction as will rotating or shifting the field layout.
- Aeration of the field should be performed several times per year while plants are in their growing phase.

Worn areas of the playing field with less than 75% coverage of turfgrass can also lead to participant injury due to the field becoming hard and will not provide a stable surface or adequate traction. To address turf wear:

- Seed often and with the correct type of grass.
- Weeds can be problematic as when they encroach, they can crowd out the turf grass and lead to unstable footing for athletes. Increasing the mowing frequency and height will improve the turfgrass density.
- Herbicides should only be applied by a licensed applicator and only after the conditions that resulted in weed infestation have been resolved.

Poor drainage may result in standing water and muddy areas of the field which could increase the incidence of participant injury. It can also cause lasting damage to the field’s soil structure by increasing compaction. To address these issues:
• Restrict use of the field by postponing games and practice when the field is too wet and not placing it back in use until it is dry.
• Use topdressing to repair low spots and level the surface of the field. When selecting topdressing, choose a medium chemically and physically similar to the existing soil on the field.
• Aerate to help reduce soil compaction which will improve water infiltration.

Maintaining a level playing field is critical to reducing tripping hazards for participants.

• Fields should be inspected for holes, mounds, ruts or trenches.
• Mowing, fertilization, irrigation, seeding and aeration are all necessary to achieving a uniform playing surface.
• Holes and divots should be filled with sand or soil that matches the existing soil medium.
• Sprinkler heads should be inspected as well to ensure they are not sticking up above the surface level and that none are missing or broken.
• A visual inspection should be performed prior to all field use to identify any litter or unsafe debris or maintenance tools and equipment left behind by grounds workers.

For further information on risk management for athletic fields please see WCIA’s Liability Resource Manual guideline, Par.09 Ballfields. The Liability Resource Manual is available through the Member Resources page on the WCIA website: http://www.wciapool.org/member-resources.

And last of all, don’t forget to add your athletic fields to your property schedule if you want to insure the facility for property damage. The replacement cost of the turf, fencing, grandstands/bleachers, dugouts, restrooms, field lighting and concessionaire stands should all be considered when determining the value.