

Natural and Synthetic Turf: Managing the Mix



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Weather conditions were continually monitored on game weeks and could require multiple cycles of covering the field and uncovering it.

The University of Central Missouri (UCM) in Warrensburg, Mo., is an NCAA Division II university, a strong competitor in the 11-school Mid-America Intercollegiate Athletics Association (MIAA) Conference. Outdoor facilities on our main campus include the football and track stadium, baseball stadium, football practice field and an intramural field, also used for band practice. At the South Recreation Athletic Complex site, we have the soccer stadium,

softball stadium, three intramural softball fields and three intramural soccer/football fields. We also have an 18-hole golf course.

Currently, all of the athletic fields, except the synthetic football game field, are native soil with natural turfgrass. UCM is building a new student recreation center on campus. A natural grass field adjacent to that facility will be replaced with a second synthetic field. That installation is scheduled to be completed by the spring of 2010. It's a much-anticipated addition to our program and will give students access to a playable surface 24/7.

We have the full contingent of men's and women's intercollegiate sports. While fall football, women's soccer and cross-country are in full swing, we have the fall practices for the other sports. In the spring, we have baseball, softball, track and men's soccer, with practice seasons for the fall sports. We also host the local high school softball team and their district tournaments. Intramural teams use their fields every night and on weekends whenever the weather allows on-field activity.

I coordinate intramural field use, working with individuals in our campus activities office. If there's a weather issue, we'll meet at the field midafternoon so I can assess conditions and make the decision on play. That office informs the players if games are cancelled. Their cooperation is also outstanding.

Before the synthetic field

We had developed a good native soil football game field, augmented over the years through aeration and topdressing with a combination of sand and Turface. We're in the transition zone, so bermudagrass was our base grass, overseeded with a blend of perennial ryegrasses.

I started overseeding the first of August to get the cool-season grass established to carry us through our six home games each year. We mowed the field daily from spring through late fall, only cutting back the frequency as we approached winter shutdown.

One of our major challenges was the annual Band Bowl. It always took place toward the end of October, a week before our last regularly scheduled home game and any subsequent playoff games. As the prime fundraiser for band scholarships, this event was very important to their program. It drew high school bands from Missouri, Kansas and the surrounding states.



This aerial view shows the configuration of the synthetic field and expanded eight-lane track.

We'd prepare the field to game-ready conditions, painting the high school hash marks. Competition began at 7 a.m. and ran through 5 p.m., with one band taking the field as the previous competitor moved off. Then came the awards presentation and show performances by the winning bands, usually lasting until midnight.

We'd nearly always have rain during at least part of this event. One year, prior to my arrival, there was a torrential downpour the entire time. The field was so wet it actually pulled off the boots of some of the participants. These were trampled in by the other marchers. It cost \$13,000 to get the field playable for the next week.

So, the music and athletic departments came to the agreement that the music department would cover any Band Bowl damages. Our physical plant director and I were on-site for the next competition to assess field conditions and advise the event coordinator if damage was reaching the compensation level. The competition moved forward through sporadic light rains during the day. By 5 p.m., a rainstorm was clearly developing, and we informed the coordinator that continuing would lead to significant damage. The awards were presented off the field and no show performances were allowed. Though necessary, this did create a controversy, which, after much consideration, resulted in suspending the Band Bowl until after the natural grass field was replaced.

After the synthetic field

In the summer of 2004, Sprinturf's Ultrablade system was installed on the Vernon Kennedy Field at Audrey J. Walton Stadium. The existing field material was removed, stockpiled and then used as needed in various areas of the campus landscape.

Landscapes Unlimited handled the removal and site preparation, installing the 6-inch rock subbase. Sprinturf did the installation. The seams are glued and are located at midpoints, the 2.5-yard mark, the 7.5-yard mark, etc. The hash marks, sidelines and logos at midfield and the end zones are seamed in. The infill is straight crumb rubber.

Outward expansion of the existing six-lane track to eight lanes would have required changes to the stadium structure. Instead, the additional lanes were configured inside the existing track footprint, which narrowed the sideline areas. An eight-lane, Beynon synthetic track was installed when the field installation was completed.

We use the brush provided by Sprinturf to groom the field. We groom once each game week, again starting in March to get ready for spring ball, and then a couple times in the summer prior to the start of the practice season. We use a lawn sweeper with a modified broom pulled behind our Toro Infield Pro to sweep the field three or four times a week during the active use seasons. The rest of year, we sweep as needed, from once a week to once a month.



This turf-level view of players on the synthetic field shows its game-ready playability.

Initially, the football team practiced on the natural grass practice field once each week prior to an away game on natural grass. So, we continued our previous maintenance program and lined the field for that practice. All 10 of the universities in the MIAA Conference that participate in football have now installed synthetic fields. For the last two years, our team has moved all its practices to the stadium field. We still maintain the practice field, but at a lower degree of maintenance, and we no longer paint it.

The synthetic turf field is also an asset for our baseball and softball programs. Spring practices start in January when their natural grass fields are seldom accessible. Though they can't work on hitting within the football stadium, when weather conditions allow, they can take their infield practices outdoors on that field. Our coaches really like doing that because the ball makes a perfect hop every time, training the players to be in the correct position for play on any field surface.

We've also been able to reinstate the Band Bowl. We've worked with the music department to establish the rules: no props of any kind over 300 pounds; 3-inch wheels on anything wheeled onto the field; rubber foot protectors on anything that will be carried on and set on the field; and the standard food and drink restrictions. They've done an excellent job of communicating those requirements to all participants, so it's absolutely not an issue. We simply paint the high school hash marks with removable paint and wash them off after the competition.

With the synthetic field, we've made a significant reduction in costs for inputs, such as fertilizer and topdressing, and on-field paint. The biggest advantage for us is the time savings, allowing our small crew to more effectively manage and maintain our other outdoor fields.

Brad Mackey is athletic field coordinator at the UCM in Warrensburg, Mo.