



Field Maintenance

..... No Snow ?

Consequences of a Nearly Snow-Free Winter on Ballfields !

By Paul Zwaska

For the majority of the United States, it's been a mild, nearly snowless winter, a complete about-face from last year's brutal winter that found snow cover in parts of all but one state in the contiguous United States. Fields in the southern half of the country have had it pretty easy this winter as the warmer-than-normal weather has allowed crews to work on fields throughout the winter to prep them for the baseball and softball seasons. Activity is already well under way in many parts of the south.

To those who maintain ballfields in the northern half, snow cover can be a huge benefit. A protective blanket of snow can reduce the depth that frost may penetrate into the soil profile, cutting back on heaving of the soil. The blanket of white also seals the infield skin from the strong winter winds that can blow infield skin topdressing and soil into the grass edges, forming lips. This year's relatively snow-free winter across most of the northern United States means there will be plenty of fields dealing with some serious frost heave and wind-blown lips in their turf edges.

In order to get northern fields ready to go for the season, you first need to wait until all of the frost is out of the ground. Often people are fooled when they go out to their infields in the morning and the surface is frozen and looks dry and firm. They begin to work on the field only to find that as the sun rises and the temperature warms, the field quickly turns to a mucky mess. Frozen infields cannot drain the free water in their soil profile until all frost is out of the ground. Once the frost has left, the field will dry and firm up much more quickly. Many groundskeepers complain about their coaches who see a snow-free field and think they can finally get their team out to practice only to be told to stay off the field until it has fully thawed out. It seems that all the bubblegum and chewing tobacco has affected their better judgment.

When conditions are right, the first action is to get the lips that formed over the winter out of the turf edges before you roll the infield skin. Most of this material should be fairly easy to pull out of the turfgrass edges as it shouldn't be too glued in yet. Utilize a fall leaf rake or a hand broom to comb the infield topdressing and soil out of the lips and back onto the infield skin. If you are lucky enough to own one, a power broom makes an easy job of it as the rotating broom really powers through the loose material in the lips. Continue around all of the edges to ensure that they are cleaned out. You might want to take a grooming rake and rake up any grass clippings, pebbles or other trash that was deposited onto the skin from this process.

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The freeze-thaw cycle is essentially Mother Nature's ways of aerifying soil. Pore space in the soil fills with water and freezes. As it freezes it expands in size, opening up the pores and making them larger which in turn, puffs the soil surface up. To battle this, simply take a roller, tow-behind or self-propelled, and roll the entire skinned area. This should be done in a couple different directions to be sure to get the entire skin area.

Fill the drum(s) of the roller with water for added weight and make sure the infield skin is dry and firm enough to accept the roller. If the roller or the piece of equipment you are towing it with is sinking too deep into the skin, then it's too wet; you could get seriously stuck and mess up your infield's critical surface grade. Two or three times over the skin from different angles will be sufficient to firm it back up.

It's also a good time to confirm that the base anchors are still plumb and level. The right soil and freeze conditions can cause a base anchor to heave out of position. Simply remove the plug from the base anchor and use a small torpedo level resting vertically against the side of the anchor to check that the anchor is still plumb and level. Check for plumb on two sides that are perpendicular to each other. If you find an anchor that is not plumb, it is important to dig up and correct the anchor so that when the base is installed, it sits flat on the infield skin surface. An anchor out of alignment can cause a base to sit improperly on the playing surface. This is a hazard to ballplayers as there is a risk of a hand or foot getting caught beneath the base and possibly causing serious injury.

After making these simple corrections to the infield, finish the entire process by lightly nail dragging the skin and follow it up with a quick float drag to smooth everything off. Some sunshine and warmer weather, and you are on your way to another season of ball on your fields.

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