



**PENN STATE**

**CENTER FOR SPORTS SURFACE RESEARCH**

## **From the Field: Summertime Field Care - Preparing Your Field for the Season**

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*Welcome to From the Field - A Guide to Athletic Field Safety and Care.*

*Throughout this series, we will focus on a sometimes overlooked but critical component affecting the safety and performance for athletes of all ages – the playing surface.*

*Our goal is to provide you with simple, helpful tips about playing conditions that maximize both safety and performance.*

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With training camps only a little more than one month away, football season is getting close! Preparation is key for a football team to perform its best. It is no different for your field – caring for and preparing your field now will help it perform its best throughout the season.

The heat of the summer can be stressful for the grass on your field. This is especially true for fields in the northern part of the country that contain what are called “cool-season” grasses. Cool season grasses include Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass, and tall fescue.

These grasses often have difficulty handling the hot and dry conditions common in summer. If not cared for properly now, the grass on your field will not be its strongest once the season starts.

### **Watering Your Field**

Watering your field is a critical step to successfully getting your field through the summer and preparing it for the season. Fields that are watered throughout the summer typically perform much better in the fall compared to unirrigated fields.

There is a right way and a wrong way to water your field. Overwatering can be just as bad as not watering at all. If the field is irrigated with small amounts of water on a frequent basis, such as every day, the root system of the grass will likely be very shallow. Additionally, constant watering promotes crabgrass and other weeds.

If the top layer of soil never dries, the roots of the plants have no reason to grow deeper. Shallow roots often lead to divoting and poor footing on football fields.

Deep and infrequent watering is the proper way to water a field. Allowing the top layer of soil to dry a bit will encourage deeper roots and better overall field conditions. While it is not possible to recommend a watering schedule that works for all locations, in many situations, watering an average of two to three times per week is often sufficient (assuming no precipitation).

Deep watering means not just applying enough water to wet the top inch or two, but the entire depth of the rootzone. A very general rule of thumb is that grass needs approximately one to two inches of water per week. This amount varies with grass type, weather conditions, and soil characteristics. More information on watering can be found [here](#).

## **Fertilization**

Fertilizing in the summer to prepare your field for the season is largely dependent on your grass type. Grasses grown in the north such as Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass, and tall fescue should not be fertilized in the summer in most situations. Exceptions can be made during cooler periods given the field can be watered on a regular basis. Once temperatures begin to cool late in the summer, fertilizer can be applied.

For fields in the south that contain “warm-season” grasses such as bermudagrass, fertilizer should be applied throughout the summer months as this is the most active time of plant growth. In general, one pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet every four to six weeks is recommended until growth slows in the fall.

## **Aeration**

Just as with fertilization, the type of grass on your field determines when you should aerate. Because “cool-season” grasses grow best in the spring and fall, fields with these grasses should not be aerated in the summer. The summer is generally a time of stress for “cool-season” grasses and the primary focus should be on watering.

Conversely, summer is the period of active growth for bermudagrass. As a result, bermudagrass fields should be aerated in the summer. It is important to not wait until late summer to aerate because the field will only have a limited time to heal before play begins.

More information on aeration can be found [here](#).

## **Mowing**

Mowing should continue throughout the summer on a regular basis, making sure not to remove more than 1/3 of the length of the grass blades with each mowing. Bermudagrass will require frequent mowing as warm summertime temperatures promote rapid growth.

The growth rate of “cool-season” grasses slows during the summer. Regular mowing should continue unless the field is under drought stress and watering is not possible. The field should not be mowed under these conditions but mowing should resume once the grass begins to actively grow after rainfall.

## **Preparing for the Season**

Now is the time to be sure you have all of the field maintenance supplies you will need for the season. For example, be sure to have all of your field painting supplies such as paint, tape measures, and string.

Also, be sure to have grass seed available for seeding during the upcoming season. Routine seeding throughout the season is critical for maintaining field playability and safety.

If you have a synthetic turf field, check infill depth levels across field and add infill if needed before the season begins. Low infill levels result in a harder field and accelerated fiber breakdown.

As football season is fast-approaching, proper field care in the summer can help produce good field conditions in the fall.