

5 Strategies to Get More out of Fewer Labor Hours

With maintenance budgets being slashed across the board, coaches and groundskeepers at all levels share the same critical issue: a slashed maintenance budget means slashed labor hours, but does this have to mean slashed field performance?

For years, Barney Lopas, Head Groundskeeper for the L.A. Angels of Anaheim, has been pioneering techniques to get the most out of his labor hours, using less than most major league grounds crews. With the 2010 All-Star Game being played in Anaheim, Barney's field is under assault beginning with on-field rehearsals July 7th, and going directly into an Angels home stand until July 19th after the All-Star Game.

On field activities includes rehearsals, batting practice, infield practice, autograph sessions, team photos, media days, a charity fun run, a fantasy camp, and of course the big events: the Futures Game, Celebrity Softball Game, Home Run Derby and the All-Star Game. How does Barney ready his field for this All-Star assault using less labor? Here are Barney's top 5 strategies that he says can be used on any field.

Strategy 1. Focus on Quality not Quantity

How do you achieve a high level of on-field quality with fewer workers? Barney's relentless focus on quality starts with finding the right people to surround himself with. Assistants Mike Clark and Greg Lasch are trusted partners that take ownership in the field as much as Barney does. This sense of pride that starts with Barney, Mike, and Greg trickles down to every part time employee. Between the three of them, extra time is spent teaching new hires the right techniques. Barney says, "I feel confident coming in at 9 in the morning knowing that things are getting done."

Strategy 2. Start with a Schedule, Find Ways to Decrease Time

Barney recommends crafting the ideal schedule and focusing on quality rather than speed when executing the schedule. This helps to ensure that no task is ever forgotten. Eventually, with more practice, your team will achieve better results more quickly. "We plan on edging every time a new team is in town. It does not always need it, but we stick to the schedule."

After your crew is working at full speed without compromising quality, it is time to experiment and find ways to reduce time spent on the schedule. Barney turned to innovations such as Waterless Warning Track Mix and Stabilized Infield Mix to save time. "We found that we were wasting 10 man hours a day watering the warning track. That is 900 hours a season, equivalent to having another part time worker. We eliminated that wasted time by installing the waterless Hilltopper® Warning Track." Barney also saves time by using Stabilizer® in the infield that holds onto moisture longer, needing water less frequently.

An example of Barney's daily schedule can be found at the end of this document.

Strategy 3. Prepare Ahead of Time

Part of executing a good schedule is planning for events that require more labor. By looking at the schedule ahead, Barney is able to increase protection for his field during the high traffic

events by borrowing extra geotextile covers from Kyle Waters at the Home Depot Center to cover the infield grass, helping withstand the hundreds of media members crossing the field each day. He also has sod and seed ready to help the field recover immediately after the All-Star events.

Barney utilizes the down time during game play to help prepare materials for future use. He currently has 200-lbs of Rye seed pre germinating for use immediately after the last home stand before the All-Star events. Barney finds that prep time can be another good place to experiment. Previously, to prep mound clay for use he would break up the large clods and saturate the clay on one day, allow it to dry to a damp consistency overnight, then screen and store the clay in buckets. "Now I use the Hilltopper® Mound Clay, it is ready to go right out of the bag, saving days of prep work."

Strategy 4. Use Volunteer Labor and Make Work Fun

Barney has recruited a volunteer force of 26 to remove the outfield fence for the Celebrity Softball Game. To work with volunteers, conduct expectations must first be set and volunteers should be treated like members of the grounds crew on the field, but make it fun and rewarding off of the field. Barney suggests developing a volunteer base of trusted people that you can use regularly. One of Barney's rewards to his volunteer crew is the opportunity to get the on field All-Star experience as a thank you for past work.

In addition, Barney likes to have fun with volunteers and regular staff alike after work hours. As soon as post game work is completed, Barney invites family and friends down to what has come to be known as "Club Rock," for a post game party in the grounds crew shop. Having fun is part of what keeps volunteers and employees coming back each game.

Strategy 5. Start with the Best Materials

Barney's most recommended strategy is to use the best materials from the beginning. "From my experience, you may pay a little extra for better materials up front, but you are saving in the long run." There are several ways that you are actually saving with better materials, whether it is from using less material, making fewer repairs, using less water, and most importantly using less labor hours for maintenance. "While every material still needs some maintenance, you really can't afford to cut back labor hours when using bad materials, the end result could be hazardous for players. If you can't renovate your entire field now, you can start by incorporating better materials in select areas to reduce labor hours."

Of course a groundskeeper doesn't have to employ every strategy right away. Start with one or two strategies and master them. Eventually, by starting small and working your way up to the bigger things, your field will be ready to withstand an All-Star assault.

Barney's Maintenance Schedule

Post game:

- Repair mound
- Remove clay off of grass
- Power wash out lips
- Flood infield skin

Pre game:

- Nail Drag and hand rake infield
- Mow outfield
- Prepare mound for game and tarp
- Edge when a new team is in town
- Pick up sunflower seeds and gum
- Rake debris on warning track
- Prepare bullpen mounds
- Repack home plate and base paths
- Matt drag infield
- Hand water infield skin and infield grass
- Mow infield
- Install bases
- Paint lines
- Drag warning track
- Ready batting practice screens for early hitting
- Throughout day hand water edges and dry spots