

Kernels installing new \$150,000 field

Written by Jim Ecker

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Nobody likes a lawn that's strangled by weeds and has unsightly brown spots in the grass, and it's especially worrisome if million-dollar bonus babies are running on your lawn at full speed and trying to make sliding catches.

That's why the Cedar Rapids Kernels plan to install a new \$150,000 grass field at Veterans Memorial Stadium this fall.

The field has been infected with poa, which Kernels General Manager Doug Nelson described as a "weed grass" whose roots grow sideways and choke the regular grass. It's led to discoloration in the outfield and unstable sod.

The project is scheduled to begin Tuesday, Oct. 1, a day after the conclusion of the Kernels Foundation/Perfect Game Wood Bat Tournament.

The new sod has been purchased from a turf farm in Colorado and will be installed by the Busch Sports Turf company. The same turf farm company has supplied sod for Major League stadiums in Minnesota, St. Louis and Colorado.

"It's certainly top-of-the-line turf that we're getting," said Nelson.

Busch Sports Turf, located in Milan, Ill., is a leading expert on baseball fields and has worked with the Twins, Cubs and Cardinals, according to Nelson.

The current grass at Veterans Memorial Stadium was installed when the new park opened in 2002 and lasted 12 seasons.

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"Typically it should be replaced every five to seven years," said Nelson. "We've almost gotten twice the usage out of it as we should have."

The Kernels plan to salvage some of the existing sod from the infield for different people, but otherwise all the grass will be discarded.

"Tuesday morning (Oct. 1) we'll spray the entire field in Roundup to hopefully kill the poa weed-grass that's in there," said Nelson.

They'll let the Roundup sit for a day or two, then the folks from Busch Sports Turf will rip out the existing sod and remove the layer of peat that has accumulated under the sod. They will laser-level the field, reshape it and install the new sod.

"They have to be done by Oct. 18th," said Nelson.

It's important to work quickly, he said, to give the new sod a chance to establish firm roots so it's ready in time for the start of the 2014 season. Cold weather in late October or early November could affect the project.

"What's really important is that grass has a chance to establish itself this fall," said Nelson.

The Kernels have a sand-based field. The original sod was placed on top of the sand, and when it rained the water would go through the sod, into the sand and drain away. That changed over the years.

"When the stadium was first built, we could literally be playing a game withing 45 minutes after an inch downpour," said Nelson. "Over time, a layer of peat develops under the sod. It's just a natural occurence with a living organism. That is making it harder and harder for the field to drain."

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That's why the layer of peat has to be removed as well as the sod. When the project is completed, the field should drain as quickly as originally planned.

Nelson said the poa weed-grass thrived in the hot weather in late August this season, creating brown patches in the outfield. He said that made it particularly dangerous for outfielders when they slid after fly balls, because the sod would rip and not cushion their fall.

The Kernels also plan to replace the four-inch level of chips on the warning track and install new pads on the outfield wall. "By opening day it should pretty much be a brand-new field," said Nelson.