



## Common Misconceptions about Organic Athletic Turf Management

A conversation between Pat Beckett, Co-Chair, Marblehead Pesticide Awareness Committee (MPAC) and *The Living Lawn Project* in Marblehead, MA, and Paul Sachs, widely-acknowledged expert on soil science and ecological turf management. The author of many books on ecological lawn care and soil science, Mr. Sachs is also the owner of North Country Organics. Mr. Sachs' most recent books are Managing Healthy Sports Fields, and Ecological Golf.

### 1. "An organic athletic field requires resting every other year."

**MPAC:** Actually, organically-maintained fields hold up under the stress of overuse, compaction, and drought better than chemically-treated turf because of deeper roots, denser turf and more microbial life in the soil. None of the athletic turf managers I have spoken to rest their fields (whether they are maintained organically or chemically) ~ although they all wish they could! It's a rare community that can afford to because of the phenomenal growth of youth sports that keeps the fields in use most of the year. Organic fields make more sense because they hold up very well under the stress of constant usage.

**Paul Sachs:** I agree 100%. Fields growing in biologically active soil are much less prone to compaction and other problems associated with constant use.

### 2. "Organic athletic fields are not "safe" and are more prone to causing injuries."

**MPAC:** People who make this claim usually are very vague over what they actually mean. I have never seen any data that supports this claim of greater injuries in an organically-maintained field. In fact, organic fields are **LESS COMPACTED** than chemically-treated fields and provide a great playing surface.

**Paul Sachs:** Agreed. This is based on the presumption that organically-managed turf is vastly inferior to chemically-managed turf. In fact, injuries are much more common on hard, compacted fields, which are almost always managed conventionally.

### 3. "Organic fields have clover problems, and clover is dangerous as some kids are allergic to bee stings."

**MPAC:** Excess clover is not the end-result of organically-managed turf! Excess clover is a soil indicator and can be addressed with good soil science...and in the meantime clover can be mown before it blossoms to prevent bees coming.

**Paul Sachs:** As you say, clover is a sign of nitrogen deficiency, compaction, drought, or all three. What most turf managers fail to realize is that **WEEDS CAN ONLY SUCCEED WHERE TURF CANNOT**. So, by providing the right conditions for turf, the weeds become a minimal problem.

#### **4. "Organic athletic field management is prohibitively expensive."**

**MPAC:** The answer to this is two-fold: There are "exorbitant costs" associated with a chemical program in terms of the health effects of exposure to toxic pesticides to human health in general, but most especially to the health and development of children and the developing fetus. These can last life-long. There is also the expense of chemicals themselves, with a year-after-year calendar application of chemicals.

An organic program may be initially more expensive, but by developing sustainable dense turf that will withstand drought and over-use, using proper organic horticultural practices and products, it becomes less expensive after a number of years to maintain, with savings in water, product purchase and labor.

Every parent I speak to would rather invest in long-term, self-sustaining chemical-free playing fields for their children than a program that relies on toxic chemicals.

**Paul Sachs:** Right again! Subtract the expense of herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, and frequent de-thatching, and the cost of maintaining turf ecologically becomes quite competitive.

#### **5. "Switching to an organic turf management program puts your fields "at risk" for all sorts of problems from weeds, disease and insects. The transition can lead to a failed field and financial loss (i.e. all the money spent on creating the fields in the first place)"**

**MPAC:** A field that has been chemically-treated for years may be at risk for disease and insect damage because of the chemicals that have depleted the beneficial microbial soil food web that is Nature's system of "checks and balances" ~ NOT because of organic turf management techniques. The answer is not to bombard the field year after year with the typical four-step program of pesticides. Experienced turf managers who have made the transition from chemicals to organics, do NOT report field failure or financial loss. They have all been very pleased with the results.

**Paul Sachs:** I agree. The chemically-maintained field is at greater risk than an organically-maintained field would be. The turf manager should just keep his pesticide gun holstered during the transition period. In all likelihood, he won't find a need for it.

