Open letter from Roger Uphoff (SLYSA President)Regarding the SLYSA Complex.4/22/2008

There has been high frustration this spring because we have not been able to play. This article is an attempt to answer questions about our field objectives, about the current situation and about what we might be able to do to alleviate the problem in the future.

What are the SLYSA field objectives?

We want to have fields for league play of high enough quality such that the fields do not have an impact on the game. Eventually, we would like to have enough of these fields to use for training as well.

About five or six years ago, a number of us became frustrated with the quality of fields we had to play on for league play. I talked with a few folks and found that we were not alone. There had been a number of attempts by others in the years before that, but the fields always started out great and then deteriorated within a year's time. The primary reason they deteriorated was because of the revenue pressure on each field. So we started looking at options for developing higher quality fields. There were three options at the time: Mueller, Sportport and the SLYSA complex.

From a facility perspective, the SLYSA complex was the least attractive at the time because it had the least amount of infrastructure. It had little irrigation (resulting in wide cracks in the fields) and little in the form of amenities such as asphalt parking and a nice concession stand. However, we chose to focus on the SLYSA complex because it was the only option where the league would have control of the use of the fields. This is a key factor for being able to keep the

field quality high. The other key factor is that fields require a significant investment and we wanted to ensure that that investment would benefit our children's children's children and their children, etc.

We spoke with the clubs in the area and found support for creating quality fields. We consulted a number of experts about what was required to maintain quality fields. First priority was to install irrigation (so we sold the Aubuchon complex and used the money to install irrigation and asphalt); second priority hire someone who knows how to grow grass and give him the resources he needed to do the job (Mark Vessell), third priority was to establish parameters such as the number of games a field could support per week before damage was done and how much moisture content the field could handle before playing on them would damage them.

It took a few iterations to come to the point we are today. We now play no more than 9 games per field per week for full sided games and no more than 12 games per field per week for small sided games.

As for deciding whether it was too wet to play or not, a few years ago we used the squish factor. Two of us would walk on the field. If one of us could hear "squish squish squish" when the other was walking about 50 feet away, then it was too wet to play. Now we have instruments which we use to measure the moisture content of the field. We tested the instrument readings against the impact caused when played. Through trial and error, we identified the instrument readings at which fields would be damaged if we played. It should be noted that if we make a mistake and play the fields for even one day when the fields are too wet and roots are sheared it could cost in excess of $360K and 3-6 months of no use to repair.

Improving the quality of field comes at a cost. The annual cost of a minimally maintained field is roughly $10K. We spend roughly $22-25K. We invested in both cool and warm season grasses. We have also improved the fields with proper mowing practices, fertilization, seeding and aeration programs.

When we started this process some five years ago, we were told that there were a number of teams who would not be willing to pay the increased cost. So a couple of years ago, we created two programs: one for teams wanting higher quality fields and willing to pay the extra cost and another for teams where price was more important than quality of field. Only 12 of the 500+ teams requested the lesser quality fields.

It is clear that the teams prefer to play on higher quality fields. It is also clear that the parameters we have in place for when and how much to play a field works. We have kept the field quality high for several years while continuing to play a significant number of games. This has not been done in this area before. Given the high frustration level at not playing games, it is not clear whether teams are willing to pay the price of not being able to play in the short term in exchange for higher quality fields over the long term.

Why do higher quality fields matter?

- They are more fun to play on. Ask any player.
- Higher quality fields are safer for the player.
- While you can argue whether better fields are better for improving a player's ball handling skills, it is certainly true that better fields are better for helping a player improve their tactical skills.
- It is a lot more fun to watch a game when the field is not a factor in the game's outcome.

Why isn't SLYSA playable when other complexes in the area are?

Given identical rainfall, there are two primary reasons the SLYSA complex is not playable when other complexes in the area are: 1) Field quality requirements and 2) drainage.

We have more stringent criteria when it comes to field quality. If you don't care about field quality, then it doesn't matter. If you do care, and our experience from a couple of years ago suggests that most teams do care, then we know the criteria we use are correct, because, unlike past attempts, we have consistently been able to improve the quality of the fields each year while continuing to play on them.

Drainage is a major issue at the SLYSA complex. If we had better drainage, we would be able to play earlier. The complex has the following issues:

- The complex is in a flood plain; therefore the water table is high.
- The fields have high clay content so the water does not percolate into the soil very fast. This is the biggest issue with drainage at the complex.
- We have an aggressive deep-tine program in place to help improve this situation, but clay is clay.
- Most of the fields are crowned reasonably well and the water does drain off into the swales (valleys) around the field. You may have noticed in the past that there have been times when we have played on the fields, but there is still standing water in the swales.
- There is not a lot of difference in elevation (height) between the entrance and the retention ponds in the back of the facility. This means that the water does not move very fast from the front of the complex to the rear of the complex.
- The complex is protected by a levee. The levee keeps water outside the levee out, but it also keeps the water inside the levee in. We have been pumping water from the retention ponds into the creek outside the levee almost 24 hours a day for weeks now. The water level outside the levee is still much higher than the water level inside the levee.

Mueller is usually playable before the SLYSA complex because it drains better and field quality is not as much a factor. Mueller is the closest facility to the SLYSA complex and has similar soil type as most of their fields.

Sportport is usually playable before the SLYSA complex and Mueller because it drains better still. Sportport soil has a higher sand content so the water is able to drain faster.

BMAC is usually playable before any of the complexes. They have the best field design and highest sand content. They sometimes have the opposite problem in that the field almost drains too fast.

What options do we have to improve the situation?

One option is to say the heck with it and give up on the idea of improving the quality of field for league play. This is effectively the option being selected when people make statements like “just let the kids play” or “I played in the rain and snow and if it was good enough for me, then it should be good enough for them.” This option is not acceptable to me for two reasons: 1) we have the wherewithal to make it better for our kids, and 2) we already have enough venues where we can play under those conditions. But for some, this might be the alternative of choice. If enough teams want to select this option, then we are happy to organize the least expensive league for them and play in those venues and will make that option available for the fall season.

Another option is to improve the drainage of the SLYSA complex. This can be done in a number of ways. All require capital funds. The first is to increase the sand content of the soil. We estimate that it would cost about $60K per field and take about 2 years to complete given continued use of the fields during the process. Simplistically the way this is done is to deep-tine aerate the soil and drop sand into the hole that was created. This would be done several times over the course of the year. The total cost of doing this would be about $840K if all fields were done at the same time or we could do it gradually and do a few fields at a time over a longer period. This technique is called top dressing.

Another way to improve the drainage is to “sand cap” the field. This option puts a thin layer of sand and soil on top of the field. The cost would roughly be $70K-$100K per field for a total cost of $1.4M.

Another way to improve the drainage is to rebuild each field properly and add under drainage as well as improve the sand content of the soil. This is what BMAC did. I am told BMAC soil content is 90% sand and 10% compost. This option would take a field out of commission for a season and cost approximately $250K to $300K per field or a total cost of $4.2M.

While improving the drainage of the fields at the complex would certainly improve the situation, I don’t think it would have had much impact on this spring. This spring has been especially difficult because of the weather. BMAC is arguably one of the best drained fields in the area. If I am not mistaken, out of the past 53 days it has only been playable for maybe 7-10 days more than the SLYSA complex has been this spring. We have had that much rain.

The most obvious option is to install artificial fields. If you look around the area, the facilities with artificial fields have pretty much been the only fields playable for most of the spring so far. We have contacted most of those facilities to see if we could rent them and they are all being used to help other schools which don't have artificial fields to get games in. Artificial fields are expensive. They range from $500K-$800K per field without lights. Lights are another $75K.

About three years ago, we looked into acquiring a couple of artificial fields. Even with the US Soccer grant, the financial commitment would have been over $1.5M. At the time we had about half the number of teams than we do today. We decided not to get the artificial fields, at the time, because doing so would have increased our fixed costs to a point that if a significant number of teams were to leave, then we might not be able to meet the financial commitments. In retrospect, we should have taken the risk. With the increase in teams we can now justify the investment in artificial fields and we are investigating the options to do so.

The long term goal is higher quality fields for training and league play.

The current SLYSA administration is committed to improving facilities for our kids to enjoy. While it may not happen in our lifetime, our very long term vision is to have enough lighted fields for all teams to train on as well as play league games on.

Frustration levels are high now because we have not played more games this spring. While we have taken some criticism for it, it really has more to do with the weather than it does our policies. There have been very few days when playability was questionable. The choice has been pretty black and white.

Some teams have not yet played a single game this spring, so we understand the frustration. Some have gone so far as to suggest that we “show SLYSA” by playing somewhere else such as tournaments. The suggestion is to essentially abandon the league. I think this is poor thinking for several reasons:

- The league and the complex are almost solely funded by the teams which play in the league. The teams over the years have made an aggregate investment of several million dollars. This investment should be protected, not imperiled.
- Because of the high costs, the only way that the facilities in the area can improve is to have a critical mass large enough to share the cost of the facilities over a large number of teams and to create a marketing power that matters. A single team for example, would not be able to afford to create a field for their training use, but 15 teams together could. The same is true with the league. With 600+ teams in the league there is about $100K-$150K that could be used for capital improvements each year. That number is large enough to be able to make significant improvements each year. If the number of teams is reduced, then so is the ability to improve the facilities.
- If you don’t like the direction I am taking the league then get rid of me. My term is up this year and the AGM is next month. It makes a lot more sense to me to do that than it does to abandon the investment you have made in the facility. Quality of field will remain a priority for me, because it is a priority for the players.
- If we’d had 2 to 4 artificial fields this spring, we would’ve been able to get the games in and keep field quality high. We should be able to do that for next year.

One of the more baffling comments I have heard is the suggestion that we have some ulterior motive for canceling games and are somehow motivated to cancel games. What possible motive would we have? We do not want to cancel games. There are only two possible outcomes from canceling a game. We either reschedule which means we have more work to do or we lose revenue because the game never gets played. And, the potential loss of revenue means a potential loss of the ability to improve the complex. Frankly, it’s a major pain to cancel games. We cancel games because we care about field quality and player safety.

Our current situation is very frustrating for everyone involved. There isn’t much we can do about the weather. We believe that most teams want quality fields. Over the next month we will be working on options to help alleviate the problem in the future and will present them to all the teams. The most likely option is the addition of some number of artificial fields. If you would like to be part of the process, feel free to contact me at uphoff@slysa.org.