

# Vineyarders for Grass Fields

**Grass for Life.**



***A comprehensive, pragmatic, organic approach to field management -- including upgrades and ongoing maintenance for all Island playing fields.***

## Vineyarders for Grass Fields

### Main goals:

- **A new track for MVRHS.**
- **A comprehensive, pragmatic, organic approach to field management -- including upgrades and ongoing maintenance for all island playing fields.**

### The issues we will address with our goals:

- A failed track
- Neglected, unsafe fields island-wide
- Title IX compliance
- Limited school and town budgets for field maintenance
- No comprehensive plan for field use or rotation

### Why grass?

There is no definitive, conclusive evidence that proves that synthetic playing fields are safe for both humans and the environment. We subscribe to the precautionary principle:

“When an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause-and-effect relationships are not fully established scientifically.”

We also believe proponents of an activity or substance, rather than the public, should bear the burden of proving its safety. The companies manufacturing these synthetic fields have not. And companies that swore by the safety and durability of their fields just a few years ago are now facing class action suits. No Federal or national health organization regulates the synthetic field components as children’s products.

Meanwhile, grass is a time-tested playing surface that offers a host of human health and environmental benefits. And when properly maintained, grass has proven to be safe and the overwhelming preference for professional athletes worldwide.

### Is it really possible for us to have healthy grass playing fields here on Martha’s Vineyard?

Yes. Just like any living organism, grass needs food, water and air. Our Vineyard fields have been deprived of all three – particularly air and water. Nothing significant has been done to any of our playing fields for years. So to expect them to flourish with no care is unreasonable. According to grass expert Jerad Minnick, “The fields are under maintained, not overused.” He also said the Island’s sandy soil is ideal for grass growing and drainage.

### What we need is proper care.

On his visit to the island Minnick assessed all the fields on the Island, checked the soil and tested for compaction. Given the soil/sand quality here, he said we will see vast improvement with some very simple steps:

- Aeration. Compaction is the reason over 90% of fields fail.
- Better seed selection and proper overseeding.
- Improved irrigation.
- Planning. Knowing which fields are going to need additional TLC at the end of the season.

There are bigger changes that need to be implemented as well: the grade fixes at the high school and the installation of a new track infield. In terms of the latter, our aim is to have the track and infield installed and ready for play by the spring of 2018, assuming MVRHS manages the bidding process efficiently.

## How would **Grass for Life** work?

We will work with you. We see this as a long term partnership. A lifetime!

**Vineyarders for Grass Fields** will underwrite the cost of the new track and infield, upgrade all the fields, purchase new equipment, and establish an endowed fund through the Permanent Endowment for Martha's Vineyard to create an Island grass superintendent position in perpetuity.

The Island grass superintendent would work directly with the schools and towns to ensure that this all-Island organic grass initiative is a success. This superintendent would be paid, trained, insured, and equipped by us. Jerad Minnick would serve as an advisor until the program is up and running. We would seek out Island mentors to work with her, and we would reciprocate that mentorship, offering the MVRHS horticulture classes opportunities to work with the grass superintendent and learn.

This said, **Vineyarders for Grass Fields** would expect a reciprocal relationship with the towns and schools where they would contribute as budgets and time allows. In the case of the track which is time sensitive, we will rely on MVRHS to provide the budget (necessary for our fundraising) and manage the bidding process.

Additionally, one great added advantage to overseeing the care of ALL the fields with a grass superintendent is that we can orchestrate – ISLAND WIDE – field use and maintenance. So if one field needs a break, we can make that happen.

## How does grass work?

Unlike synthetic surfaces, grass is a fairly simple process. As Minnick says, "Growing grass isn't hard. The one thing it [grass] is meant to do on this earth to do is grow."

## First there is seven step rehabilitation program:

1. Assess, retool and or install an irrigation system.
  - For the infield at the high school, we'd need to establish that a current well has enough gallons per minute to add another field to its load. Once this is established, a new 2" line would be trenched and installed.
  - Following this initial installation, the irrigation system would be installed. Off island, this process takes a professional irrigation company about 2 weeks. Here, we might double the time.
  - Minnick suggests putting the irrigation out to bid with several local companies and/or getting this work donated. Or having the labor donated and just paying for the materials.
  - NOTE 1: THIS FIRST STEP MUST BE COMPLETED NO MATTER WHAT SURFACE YOU CHOOSE AS BOTH GRASS AND GEOFILL SYNTHETIC FIELDS NEED IRRIGATION. Neither this process nor the expense is noted on Gale Associates' plan for their proposed synthetic field.
2. Assess the current soil and grade and then regrade and amend the soil with organic compounds as necessary.
  - For the infield, knowing there is a lot of junk in that field, it would mean taking a lot of debris out and bringing in some (but not a lot) topsoil. Perhaps adding some peat moss to hold moisture. Both of these could be procured from a local source. Minnick suggests that they might add some mycorrhiza to the sand. Briefly, mycorrhiza is an organic, natural fungus that has a symbiotic relationship with a plant's root and helps the roots of a plant established. Note that this is a common and smart practice that most professional grass growers and hay farmers incorporate into their soil or when they seed.
  - For fields like the football field and the soccer fields, amending the soil will be less of a story; regrading will be the larger issue. Off island, re-grading costs about 2 cents a square foot.
  - Minnick suggests that for the larger grading issues and installation of the infield that we use a company such as STS. Mike Taus has already connected with them. Minnick works with STS frequently and feels

they are the best in the business. He will follow up and has offered to facilitate this relationship if we'd like to pursue it.

3. Re-seed the field.
  - According to Minnick, we can plant seed anytime. So, if the infield is ready to be seeded in July, then that is when we will do it. His seed of choice are Kentucky bluegrass with ryegrass in it.
  - For fields that are being reworked, but not completely ripped up, they will just get overseeded.
4. The new seed germinates. This takes 6-8 days.
5. After about 20 days, the grass needs to be cut.
6. After 8 weeks, the field is ready to be played on! Assessments are made.
  - Does the field need more or less water? Does its growth need to be supported by an organic fertilizer?
7. Begin a regular maintenance program.
  - NOTE 2: If the irrigation system is healthy and working and the grading is not an issue (as it is at the West Tisbury School), and the field just needs a little topsoil and overseeding, we will move from evaluation and small fixes right to regular maintenance.

### **Moneywise, what would this comprehensive, organic rehabilitation plan cost?**

The cost of fixing each field will be different. There are some fields, such as the West Tisbury School fields, which are already well-irrigated and in pretty good shape. This will not require much in terms of refurbishment and large expenses. Whereas, the football field, the softball field and the infield for the new track will require much more. Minnick estimates that if we plan on spending about \$50,000 (for irrigation, re-grading, seeding, etc.) on each field it will all balance out -- some needing more and others much less. He estimates that the infield would be about \$200,000 off island (so double it to \$350,000-\$400,000. for the island). He does not anticipate that the initial upgrades will total more than one million dollars. That's at least 10 fields getting a real upgrade and a new infield!

### **The regular maintenance program for a field:**

- Mowing 2X per week (in high season), this takes approximately 40-60 minutes per field
- Aeration once a month
- Fertilize 5 times a year
- Seeding and overseeding – 2-3 times a year
- Make sure irrigation is running properly and mower blades are sharp. Healthy equipment = healthy fields!

### **To effectively and efficiently maintain the fields we would need to invest in the following equipment:**

- Mower SPECIFICALLY for fields: \$60,000 [Jerad suggests that it would be better to lease to defer payments and then replace with a new machine in 5 years], preferably a 60" or 72" model
- Hydrostatic 48" walk behind with an aluminum bagger: \$7,500
- Self propelled belt mower 18-22" inches (for less accessible spaces): \$750
- 2 Backpack blowers: \$1,500
- Tractor: \$50,000 [Lasting 10 years]
- Slicing aerator: \$10,000 [Lasting 10 years]
- Decompaction aerator: \$20,000 [Lasting 10 years]
- Trailer for mower: \$7,500
- Mower blade sharpener and extra mower blades: \$2,000

**Cost of a field superintendent to coordinate, oversee all maintenance:**

\$75,000 base salary, plus health insurance.

**TOTAL INITIAL COST for 12 fields & the labor & equipment to maintain them: \$1,185,000 [Track estimate pending]**

\$350-400,000 for a new grass infield with irrigation

\$500,000 for total rehabilitation of 11 new fields [while we are saying \$50,000 per field, several need ½ that]

\$160,000 for equipment

\$75,000 for field superintendent

\$50,000 for Jerad Minnick advisory position

**Estimated annual costs:**

Estimates of around \$200,000 for seed, top soil, irrigation costs, field paint, equipment maintenance, etc. for ALL fields on the island.

\$75,000 for a field superintendent.

**Is Grass for Life financially realistic?**

Yes. We were skeptical too! We talked with Michael Stachowicz, Turf Specialist for Washington, D.C.'s National Parks Service. He oversees hundreds of acres of organic grass. He reaffirmed that natural grass is more financially prudent. Every year he gets offered "gifts" of synthetic fields. The reason he turns them down? While grass and synthetic turf cost about the same to maintain year to year, he cannot justify the replacement costs, often one million dollars per field every 8 years. Likewise, if we opted in for synthetic turf, MVRHS would be looking at another million dollar expense in 7-10 years. And it is still not clear how the school would pay for this. This would mean they'd have to start saving about \$70,000 per year for ONE field, which is nearly half the budget for taking care of ALL the fields on the island in one year.

Additionally, this plan allows the schools and towns to improve their playing fields without any significant budget increase on their end.

**Last thoughts:**

**Vineyarders for Grass Fields** believes this approach reflects the deep-rooted passion for athletics, conservation and community that this island's raw landscape inspires and is known for.

**Going forward:**

Were we to pursue this plan, our next steps would be:

- Offering a unified commitment to the community
- Fundraising for the track, fields, endowment and superintendent position
- Hiring Jerad Minnick and MVRHS-approved contractors to facilitate these projects
- Soliciting in-kind donations from local contractors
- Hiring a grass superintendent
- Coordinating with all the Island schools and Park and Rec departments as needed/wanted

Fields currently included in the **Grass for Life** program:

MVRHS fields

Elementary school fields

- West Tisbury - 4 fields
- Oak Bluffs - The 1½ field behind the school
- Other schools as needed/wanted

Town Fields

- As needed/wanted

