



A Football Field Fit for Champions

The turf management team at Denison's Munson Stadium includes (left to right) Jimmy Stout, Johnny Grimes, Jim Daniels, Ken Gardner and Stanley Brown.

Football is king in Denison, TX. This community of 23,000 north of Dallas near the Oklahoma border has rallied behind the Denison High School Yellow Jackets like New Jersey did for Bruce Springsteen. Ever since the Yellow Jackets became State 4A Football Champions in 1984 the city just hasn't been the same.

There's just one place to be on Friday nights in the fall, at Munson Stadium where under the lights the local teenage heroes have lost only one game in the past two years. The spirit generated by the team is spreading throughout the community and to other sports such as baseball and basketball.

It's a fever which has shown no sign of dropping. The players have it, the coaches have it, the school superintendent has it, the school board has it and so do the taxpayers. . What's so fascinating is that they all caught this fever from the maintenance director of Denison Public Schools, Johnny Grimes.

Although football is a fall sport, it takes a year-round management program to keep the fields in shape. By providing the Yellow Jackets with one of the finest fields in Texas, Grimes has brought new spirit to Denison.

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Grimes isn't even a native Texan. He moved to Denison 17 years ago from Laurel, MD, where he grew up and settled down after playing Class C baseball for the St. Louis Cardinals. Although he was an electrician and machinist, his first love was coaching baseball.

Grimes, as a coach, got deeply involved in American Legion ball in Denison. His enthusiasm spread to his teams. They started racking up wins in northern Texas. Players' families got hooked. Parents chipped in time and money to put lights up for the

Denison High School field where the American Legion played its games. They made the infield better than some Graves had seen while playing Class C ball. Mothers helped sew uniforms and team banners. Being a player (or even a batboy) for the Denison American Legion teams was something parents told their neighbors about.

This wave of enthusiasm spread across the community. Kids started practicing harder after school in hopes of making the team. Local banks donated money to build new dugouts, backstops, a scoreboard and fencing. There was no longer any doubt that Denison would support a sports program whole hog if it was inspired.

Munson Stadium field had not been improved since the WPA built it during the Depression. Called "mud field" by the coaches and players, the stadium seemed to prevent Denison's Yellow Jackets from being serious contenders for the state football finals. Parents wondered if Grimes could work a similar miracle for all the district's athletic facilities. They encouraged Grimes to apply for the maintenance supervisor position then open at Denison Public Schools.

"My family was comfortable in Denison and it was exciting to think about contributing to my kids' schools," says Grimes. "The

money wasn't great but the challenge was tremendous. I couldn't pass it up." Grimes decided to take the job.

"When I came on board in 1979," says Grimes, "the Maintenance Director had his system in place and major improvements took time to work out. Denison's tax base was not growing as rapidly as the tax base in Dallas. It already had one of the highest tax rates in the state so Grimes realized he would have to start slowly.

"Fixing lights and plumbing at the schools was not a problem," he says. "My main concern was Munson Stadium. Teamwork, donations and volunteers had made the American Legion field shine. Munson Field had to look as good or better. I had to learn as much as I could about sports turf and pick a crew that could do the job."

He selected two men specifically to care for athletic fields, Stanley Brown and Jimmy Stout. Stout had managed fields for another school district but Brown had no previous turf experience. "In a way, it's better to hire crewmembers without previous experience," admits Grimes. "That way they follow the program to the letter. It's one reason I think we have gotten the results where others failed."

"I called Texas A&M extension in Dallas and got a hold of Dr. Bill Knoop. He really surprised me by agreeing to drive 60 miles to see the stadium. We took soil samples, had them analysed and sketched out a plan. To this day, Dr. Knoop visits Denison once a month to check up on the field."

At Knoop's suggestion, Grimes and his field crew attended a Texas A&M seminar on sports turf management. They have attended the seminar every summer for the past five years.

As part of the seminar package, Knoop gave each field manager a booklet on managing common bermudagrass football fields which included a maintenance schedule. "We've found that athletic people are very comfortable with a regimented schedule," Knoop confides. "Without a clear cut schedule, they tend to slack off on maintenance after a few years. So we developed a publication called Guidelines for Maintenance of Athletic Fields which they could follow and put into a routine." A schedule was just what Grimes wanted.

"Knoop predicted our fields would be in good shape within five years if I stuck to a program of fertilization, aerification, weed control, overseeding and mowing. It took only two years. By keeping up with maintenance, our chemical budget has actually dropped in the past two years.

But first there were a couple of big ticket items to get through the budget process: a better mower and an irrigation system. Grimes thought he could soften the blow by having the school maintenance staff install the irrigation system. The strategy worked. The school board came up with the money for an irrigation system. Knoop's recommendation was all it took for the board to okay \$5,000 for a reel mower.

Knowledgeable about irrigation, Grimes installed a three-row, 16-head system using Toro 640 Series heads and a Toro controller. The capacity of the system was 950 gallons per hour. Travelling sprinklers, used prior to installation of the automatic system, are still used during heavy winds.

In 1982, Grimes was promoted to Director of Maintenance. Although his duties increased, the sportsman in Grimes kept his attention from being diverted away from the stadium and practice fields. He promoted Jim Daniels to the maintenance supervisor position and stressed the importance of a regimented field maintenance program. Daniels shared Grimes enthusiasm right off the bat.

Every Monday morning Brown aerifies the stadium field. The knives are removed from a pull-behind aerifier and replaced with hollow tines. After marking each irrigation head with a flag, Brown makes two passes over the field. When asked if this was really necessary, Knoop said probably not, but the most important thing about the schedule is developing a routine and sticking to it. "If aerifying every Monday helps establish a routine, it's the right thing to do."

Grimes has another reason for aerifying frequently. "I wanted to make sure the water was getting down to the roots."

"During most of the year, we irrigate from midnight to mid-morning twice a week. Rather than running each zone for a hour straight, we run three cycles of 20 minutes each. We use the footprint method to judge when the irrigation should be shut down. If you walk across the field, turn around and see your footprints, the field is saturated and the irrigation should be stopped. Watering at night cuts down on evaporation and

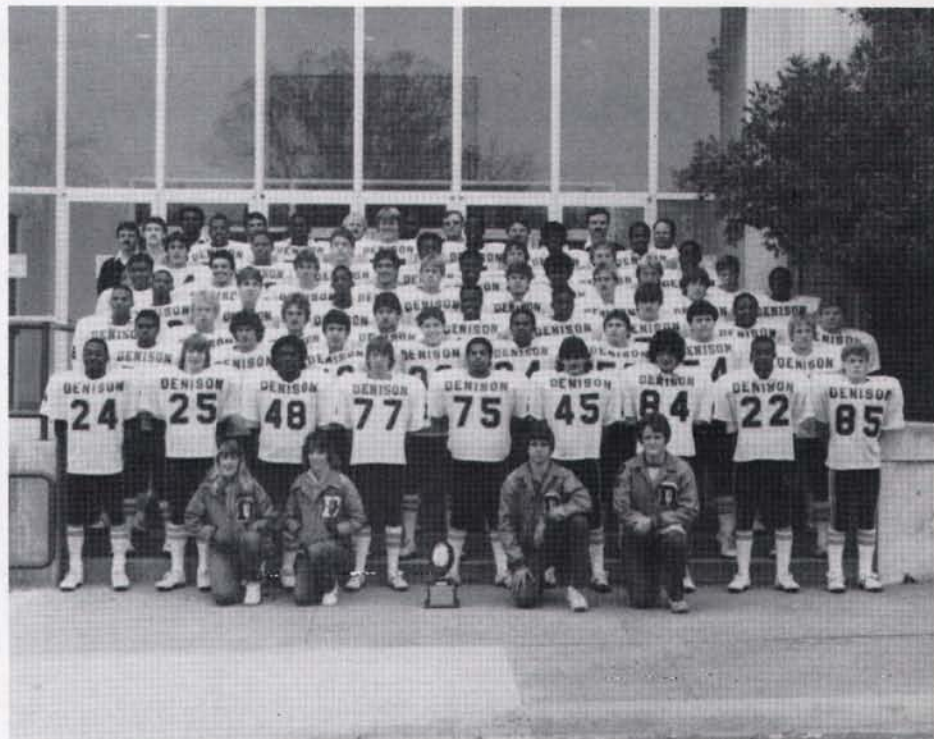
humidity during the hot Texas days." Every 28 days the entire irrigation system is closely checked and adjusted for proper operation. Any malfunctioning parts are repaired or replaced. "We keep on top of irrigation and maintenance of the field throughout the summer," Grimes stresses. "The schedule covers the entire year, not just the few months of the season."

After sprigging between the hashmarks in 1982, the field has been overseeded with common bermuda seed every April. Grimes plans to resprig between hashmarks every five years and worn spots as needed. In late November, an application of preemergence herbicide is made. In June the crew applies a postemergence herbicide. Four applications of fertilizer are made according to the schedule; April 15, June 15, August 15 and November 1. A 15-5-10 fertilizer is used at a rate of 1 lbs./1,000 sq. ft. of nitrogen. A week before we fertilize, the crew applies a liquid soil conditioner to help get the fertilizer to the roots.

Twice a week the stadium field is mowed at two inches. During the football season the height is dropped to 1½ inch. Grimes reports no problems with thatch on the field with the frequent mowing and irrigation schedule.

During the 1985 season, 37 games were played in Munson Stadium. "We try to accommodate every school team that wants to use the field," says Grimes. "Not only does the varsity use the field for games, so does the junior varsity, the freshmen, and the eighth and ninth grade teams in their playoffs. Last year the Boys Club had its playoffs on the field. The kids get excited playing in a stadium."

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The Texas State Champion Denison Yellow Jackets have not suffered a serious knee or ankle injury in the last four years on either Munson Field or the practice field.



Increased gate receipts enabled Denison High School to replace old wooden bleachers with aluminum stands, in addition to a new press box and locker rooms.

"For each game day there are five practice days, so we have upgraded our maintenance on the practice fields too," states Grimes. "The crown of the practice field had to be built back up and the field sprigged. We started aerifying it every two weeks, in-

creased the number of irrigation heads from 10 to 16 and followed the same schedule of overseeding, weed control and mowing we use at the stadium. Both fields are treated in October for grubs when needed.

In 1982, the miracle started to happen.

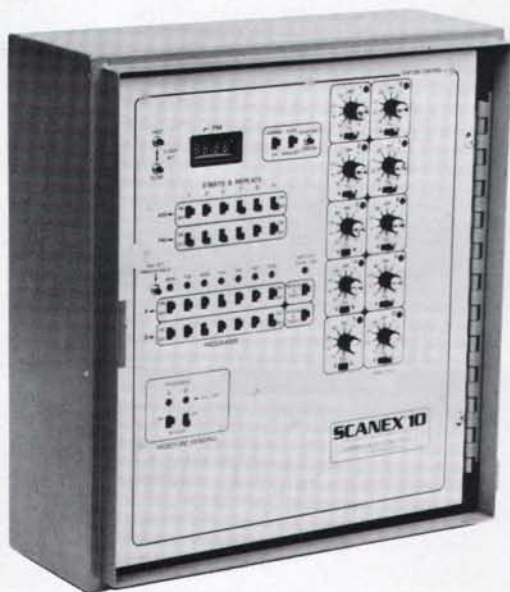
"We have not lost a player to knee or ankle injuries in four years," boasts Grimes. "Reducing injuries was the main purpose of upgrading the fields. Improved team spirit and building champions are really the side benefits of safer fields."

"Visiting teams and their coaches started asking questions about Munson Field," he states. "They wanted to know why our common bermuda fields looked so much better than theirs. Yellow Jackets would come back from an away game and tell others how much better our field was. Everyone in the football program was getting excited."

"As the turf program started to get results, Denison hired Coach Marty Criswell," Grimes points out. "With his interest in maintenance the program took off. Without the cooperation of our school board, coaching staff and administrators, this kind of program could not have been achieved. We also have strong support from our local fans. With Coach Criswell's support we have also helped other schools and colleges in our area. By doing so, Denison gains an image of helpfulness and cooperation."

Although the team had never made the finals in the 5A Division, they entered the tougher 4A Division. Suddenly the team was winning more games than it lost. "We had the talent and the talent was healthy, not sidelined with injuries like many teams," Grimes summarizes.

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Finally, the Yellow Jackets did something they never before thought possible, they made the finals in the tough 4A Division. "These young men found themselves traveling to Dallas to play in the state finals in huge Texas Stadium, home field of the Dallas Cowboys. They joked afterwards that Denison's common bermuda field was better than Texas Stadium's AstroTurf," said Grimes.

"The true reflection of our athletic program is seen in the overall achievements of not only our coaching staff, administration, field preparation and player dedication, but the statistics themselves," says Grimes. The Yellow Jackets were 16-0 in 1984 and won the State 4A Championship. The next year they made the finals with a 13-1 record.

One of the extra benefits of having a strong team and making the finals is significantly greater gate receipts. The school district is now getting back its original investment in Munson Stadium. The old wooden stands were torn down and replaced with aluminum and concrete stands. The press box was also rebuilt. Work has begun on new dressing rooms, concession stands and restrooms. Every time the home team scores a touchdown, a new scoreboard flashes jubilantly and sirens go off.

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The school's notoriety assisted in the passage of a bond issue to construct a new all-weather track. As the school develops its track and field program it finds its baseball and basketball teams now making the state finals. Many of the baseball players come from the American Legion team Grimes coached for 17 years. Since his school duties had become so great, he was forced to give up coaching two years ago.

What started on the American Legion field has spread to every sport at Denison Public Schools. Grimes knows that the condition of the field has a major impact on a team's performance. With the support of the school administration, coaches and fans he can provide the type of facilities that not only make winners, but keep them winning. As Knoop noticed, "Johnny Grimes is not the kind of athletic field manager who will lose interest and drop the routine that is so important to success."

The reward to Grimes is the success of his former players. His son recently made the U.S. Marines All-Star baseball team.

Fourteen out of 15 players on his American Legion team won college baseball scholarships. The fifteenth was a junior who was the best short reliever Grimes has ever coached. Grimes recruited him from the basketball team after he noticed the young man had "quick wrists."

Many of the American Legion players also play for Denison. "The only time kids aren't playing baseball in Denison is during football season," points out Grimes. Many of the players who help the team make the American Legion finals have now achieved the same honor for the school team, winning the state finals for the first time last year."

But Grimes is not finished. He recently installed an irrigation system at Austin College in nearby Sherman, TX. He's still helps the American Legion when he is not running the maintenance of ten school campuses and 101 acres of turf. Of the city's 23,000 residents, 71 are on his staff in the maintenance, transportation, custodial or grounds departments of Denison Public Schools.

His enthusiasm is as great as ever. His engineering ability combined with his strong interest in sports drive him to fix things and make them better so others can enjoy them. That's the spirit that drives an entire community. 🍌

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