

What was once 34 acres of idle flood plain is now busy with soccer games year-round.

St. Louis Park Carries Torch For U.S. Soccer

There is a new spirit in St. Louis today. It's a devotion to soccer that brings out players and spectators whose enthusiasm has not been matched since Missourians welcomed back Charles Lindbergh from his solo trans-Atlantic flight in 1927. They loved Lindy and his monoplane aptly named the "Spirit of St. Louis."

Today a similar spirit is building in the community for the sport the rest of the world calls football. The city and the game are inseparable. Only two other landmarks approach soccer in significance, the 600-foot-tall arch on the banks of the Mississippi and the brewery that's headquartered there, Anheuser-Busch.

The riverfront city has a rich heritage as the once bustling port for paddlewheelers hauling cotton and slaves up and down the Mississippi. Mark Twain's legendary accounts of life on the "big muddy Mississippi" were written after he served as captain



Gardens, and Williamsburg, VA, it always claims St. Louis as its home in all its advertising and public relations.

The Busch family owns the St. Louis Baseball Cardinals and built Busch Stadium, which serves as the hub of downtown St. Louis. August "Gussie" Busch Jr. brought pennants and notoriety to St. Louis with baseball players such as Stan Musial, Ken Boyer, Curt Flood and Bob Gibson. When Sportsman's Park started to crumble after decades of use, he built a stadium that was not only practical for baseball and football, but attractive as well, to serve as a foundation for urban renewal. Only the Arch dominates the city more than Busch Stadium.

When the St. Louis Youth Soccer Association (SLYSA) approached Dennis Long, president of Anheuser-Busch, eight years ago for help in creating a soccer complex in St. Louis County, he did not hesitate. St. Louis has been recognized as a soccer city for decades. The Catholic Youth Council (CYC) in the city embraced the sport in the early '50s as a healthy, inexpensive form of competition for hundreds of parochial school students. Public schools and recreation departments in the city and county quickly responded to the growing popularity of this international sport. As a result, a harvest of talented kids growing up playing soccer have made St. Louis the capital of soccer in North America. St. Louis University's high ranking in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) tournaments each year is continuing proof of the city's dominance in the sport. Each year soccer teams from around the world come to St. Louis to test their skills against American kids who grew up like they did, playing soccer.

Anheuser-Busch's involvement with youth soccer started in 1971 when the Busch Soccer Club of St. Louis was organized by Long who was then with the company's Busch Gardens entertainment division. The club's 14 boys teams and three girls teams have captured numerous Missouri state titles, Midwest regional championships, North American titles and even international titles such as the Shamrock Games (Ireland) championship crown in 1984 and a tie for the London Cup in 1985.

Long has maintained his dedication to soccer since becoming president of the company. His international ties developed through the sport have contributed to the company's success in marketing to countries where soccer is the major sport, especially in England, Ireland and Scotland. Anheuser-Busch didn't have to wait for the National Football League to play exhibition games at Wembley Stadium to get its message out to British sports fans.

When Long had the chance to help create a soccer park in Fenton, MO, a southwest suburb of St. Louis, he did all he could to raise money and donated the use of Anheuser-Busch staff to make it a reality. Plans were drawn for a seven-field complex on donated land in the Merramac River flood plain. Everything was to be first class. It had to be to withstand heavy play and periodic floods during the fall and spring. Fruco Engineering of St. Louis specified a network of drain pipe on a graded base covered with 12 inches of selected sand topped off with a 4-inch layer of 90 percent sand and 10 percent soil. Soil scientists generally recommend at least 80 percent medium-size sand for sand/soil fields. The fields had to drain well to recover quickly.

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of one of these riverboats. Charles Lindbergh grew up here, flew mail planes out of the city and started the first leg of his famous trans-Atlantic flight at Lindbergh Field.

It was this heritage and the city's importance as a center of trade for the country's breadbasket that attracted many immigrants to establish businesses here. It was two immigrants from Germany who decided to establish a brewery here more than 125 years ago. Eberhardt Anheuser and his son-in-law, Adolphus Busch, took a small brewery in 1860 and built the foundation for what is today the world's largest brewery.

When it comes to sports, few companies are as deeply involved as Anheuser-Busch, Inc. Sports sponsorship is part of the company's tradition along with its dedication to the riverfront city where it was founded. Although Anheuser-Busch has played a large role in the development of other cities, such as Tampa, FL, site of Busch



One day after a 12-inch snowfall, the artificial fields at the soccer park were the only fields in the area available for games.



The subgrade of both artificial fields was covered with geotextile fabric before perforated drain tubing and sand were installed.

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The fields and stands were built by volunteers with some help from contractors. But, as construction proceeded and costs climbed, some of the original field specifications had to be compromised. The decision was made to increase the number of drain lines to make up for only six inches of sand and a topsoil that was 70 percent construction sand and 30 percent soil. A Rain Bird irrigation system with 24 heads on 60-foot centers was installed on each field. There were six zones per field, each controlling four heads.

Long arranged to have Lee Redman, superintendent of Bellerive Country Club in Creve Cour, consult on turf seeding and maintenance. Chuck Hutton, Scotts technical representative, also helped select seed and set up a maintenance program. Lights were installed on three out of the seven fields. Although things were tight, it appeared that everything was under control.

Then, in 1982, the Merramac swelled over its banks twice causing damage to two fields and upsetting plans for construction of a 10,000 square foot building for locker rooms and meetings. Without the floods, the SLY-SA volunteers may have been able to

manage the facility successfully. It was becoming evident that more compromises would be necessary.

Long could not bear to see the promising soccer center struggle. Anheuser-Busch's standards were high and sponsors had given generously of their time and money to make the center a reality. His experience with the company's entertainment division gave him an idea. What if Anheuser-Busch bought the facility and placed it in its entertainment division? It could become a conference center in addition to a top-quality soccer center for local, national and international games. It could serve as the home park for SLYSA, St. Louis University Billikens and the Busch Soccer Club. Suddenly the potential of the center took on new dimensions. The transaction was completed in November 1985.

Now the problem that had to be addressed was how one facility was going to withstand tremendous use and maintain the quality fields necessary to attract tournaments? Furthermore, soccer play was heaviest in the fall and winter when the fields were least able to recover from damage. The center needed a way to stay open in all kinds of weather without ruining the fields.

Long knew international soccer teams would not play tournaments on artificial turf. On the other hand, since Busch Stadium has an Astroturf surface, he was familiar with its advantages in bad weather. In fact, Monsanto, the manufacturer of the artificial surface, is headquartered in St. Louis and Anheuser-Busch has always made an effort to support other St. Louis companies. By replacing two of the fields with Astroturf System-90, some of the load could be taken off the natural fields during bad weather. The drain-through asphalt base, pad and carpet could withstand flooding and snow storms and be in play before the natural fields would be dry enough to play on.

"The fact of the matter is," says park manager Mike Krivonack, an eleven-year veteran from Busch Gardens in Tampa, FL, "we can play more than 1,200 games per year on each Astroturf field. We try to keep the number of games on the natural fields down to save the turf. Teams want to play here because there is good turf everywhere, including the goal areas and the center of the fields. By the time schools enter the playoffs, their fields are often worn-out. They know they can call us and be able to play their important tournament games on a good field. We had a foot of snow two months ago and played on the Astroturf fields the next night. Almost nothing stops us."

Two things drive home the point that the St. Louis Soccer Center hasn't abandoned its support of natural turf. Field Number One, the field directly in front of the conference center and site of all major tournaments is natural. Secondly, the soccer center hired Pat Gray, former superintendent of Paradise Valley Golf Course, as turf manager.

"I took a lot of kidding from other golf course superintendents when I took this job," admits Gray. "They thought maintaining ar-



The goal box is painted on one of the new fields.

tificial turf was beneath a superintendent." Gray has a degree in agronomy from Southwest Missouri State University in Springfield, MO. "I just felt that the artificial fields would enable me to make the five natural fields the best in the country. How many superintendents get a chance to have the best golf course in the country?"

Gray had just begun to work at the soccer center when construction started on the two AstroTurf fields. "We had the original specifications for the natural fields, but we didn't know how they were actually built." As Fred Webber Construction Company began excavating for the base of the artificial fields, Gray watched like an archeologist trying to discover what lay beneath the surface. That's when he learned the sand base and topsoil were shallower than planned and the drainage lines were closer together. "Knowing what's under the turf has been a great help in modifying field maintenance," Gray adds.

Webber graded the subbase to trenches running lengthwise down the fields 20 feet apart. Six-inch perforated drain pipe was placed in the trenches and both fields were completely covered with a geotextile blanket. A thick layer of washed, three-quarter-inch gravel was spread over the fabric and graded to be flat. Four inches of "pop-corn asphalt," were carefully laid over the gravel to provide a smooth-as-possible surface.

Sport Install, the division of Monsanto that installs AstroTurf, took over from Webber at this point. The two fields which appeared like parking lots, were sprayed with fire hoses to check for drainage through the asphalt. Specialized equipment was brought onto the fields. First the pad was carefully stretched and seamed, then the crew started installing the AstroTurf. The conversion of the asphalt base to acres of bright green carpet was dramatic, even for Gray. As the lines were painted on the new fields, people driving by the park stopped to watch.

Walking on the fields for the first time, Long and Frans Van Balkom, director of coaching for the Busch Soccer Club, felt that the soccer center would finally be what they had hoped for, a standard for other soccer centers to follow. Now, they could provide relief for the natural fields and keep both surfaces in play throughout the year.

Wasting no time, Gray immediately took one natural field out of play for renovation and "a rest" and asked the soccer center to reduce the schedule on all natural fields. "Each year the fields get better because we can control them better," says Gray. Players have learned to stay off fields that are roped off for maintenance. They are beginning to appreciate the difference in the quality of the fields resulting from controlled use.

Twice a year, Gray borrows equipment from Busch Stadium to scrub the artificial fields. A degreasing agent is sprayed on the field first. Then fire hoses connected to quick couplers on the edges of the field are directed in front of the machine with large revolving brushes as it scrubs the AstroTurf. The crew also goes over the field with a Tennant Sweeper after each game.

"We've had downpours and played ten minutes later," Gray says, almost in amazement. "I can't deny the artificial fields are pretty warm in the summer, but we can schedule nearly all games on the natural fields then. The point is we can use those fields when we need them most, in the winter."

Gray has ordered tarps for the two artificial fields in case of floods. "I want to make sure silt deposited by a flood won't enter the drain-through system. We can deep aerify the natural fields and topdress with sand after a flood. In a few instances we've had some minor resodding, but the natural fields drain and hold together well so far. It takes the river a few days to crest and that gives Gray time to remove the goal posts and bleachers and to cover the artificial fields."

Since the artificial fields take some of the pressure off Gray, he concentrates his efforts on the natural fields, especially the number one field. "We schedule about 50 games per year on the main field," says Gray. "After each game we touch up and overseed any divots. We use spade forks to fluff up the soil in the goal areas as recommended by a visiting soccer coach from the Dutch Sports Federation."

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The sandy natural fields are irrigated twice a day during the hottest part of summer.

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The other fields are used for up to 200 games per year. Once a month during the playing season all fields are aerated with a pull-behind drum aerifier. Once a year Gray uses a European machine called a Verti-Drain which drives solid tines more than a foot into the soil and provides a lifting motion to open up the soil below. He topdresses the fields with sand prior to using the deep aerifier to increase the percentage of sand in the soil.

In the fall, he overseeds each field with an Olathe slicer/seeder in two directions. Usually a combination of three Kentucky bluegrasses and three perennial ryegrasses

is in the hopper to limit the chance of diseases attacking any particular variety. The main field receives about 600 pounds of seed and the other fields get 350 pounds.

In the spring, all the fields receive an application of a starter fertilizer containing siduron, a preemergence herbicide that does not prevent turf seed from germinating. Every five weeks starting in May, Gray applies a 24:4:12 fertilizer containing IBDU, a slow-release nitrogen. "I avoid applications of fertilizer, especially ammonium sulfate, during hot weather," Gray states, "because the cleats on the kids' shoes can break up the fertilizer granules and cause the turf to burn."

In early spring a leaf-spot fungicide is applied, to protect the fields from any major

problems with diseases. Gray reports the fields have not experienced any problems with insects.

Twice a year, soil samples are tested at a laboratory. Gray is trying to get the soil pH down from its current 7.3 to 6.5 with applications of sulfur. "Right now the fields are at about 7.2," Gray reports.

The fields are irrigated daily during the late spring and summer and as needed during the remainder of the year. The sandy fields dry out quickly requiring two cycles on hot, summer days. Gray runs one zone at a time per field. Since there are six zones per field, each with four heads, cycles can be adjusted to keep the goal areas and center of the field from getting too wet. "These areas get compacted quickly if they aren't relatively dry during games," Gray points out. All water is obtained from a well on site.

The fields are mowed three to four times a week with a Ransomes 213D triplex reel mower. The main field is cut at 1½ inches and the other fields a little higher since more games are played on them. Thatch has not been a problem since the seeder provides a light verticutting action.

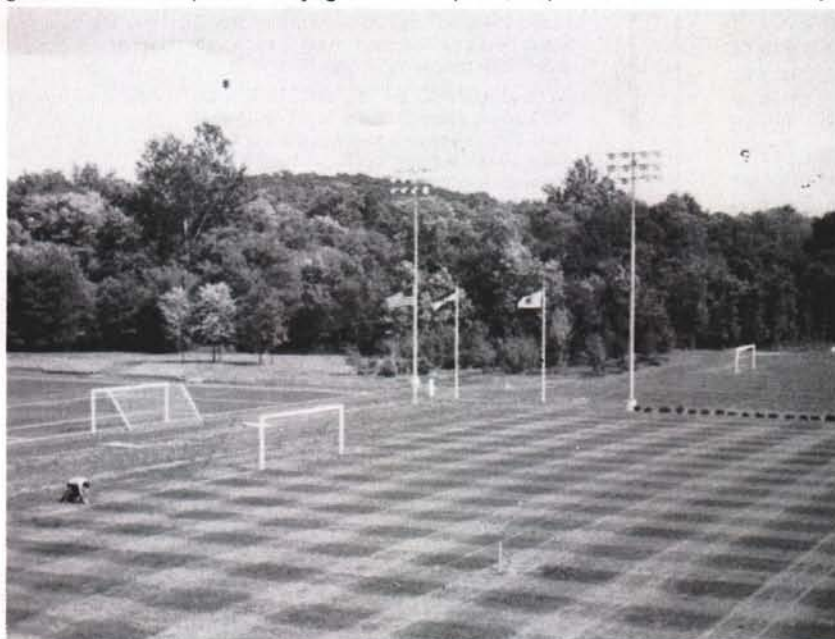
Gray plans to rest one field each fall for major renovation. He takes the field out of play in August, heavily aerates it, topdresses with sand, reseeds with the slicer/seeder, and drags it. The field is not returned to play until the following spring. "We can use the field if we have to for a few games on a heavy week," states Gray, "but in general the field is not scheduled for any games."

Major improvements have been made to the soccer center since Anheuser-Busch took it over. Diane Padgett, the company's landscape architect, adds more trees and shrubs to the center's 34 acres each year. Hundreds of white and Austrian pines, flowering crabapples and weeping willows frame the entrance to the park as well as the buildings and stands. Ewes are being planted between some of the fields to resemble soccer parks in Europe. The facility also hired Mark Johnson to work full-time on the grounds so Gray can concentrate on the fields. The soil removed when the two artificial fields were constructed has been used to create a landscaped berm which also serves to hold back flood water.

Long went so far as to commission a seven-foot high bronze statue of a soccer player from world-famous sculptor Rudy Torinni. The artist designed the statue after viewing video tapes of World Cup soccer matches. The work depicts a young player with his eyes riveted to the ball with his foot poised to kick the ball.

Kick walls, practice goals and sand pits for goalie practice have been added for St. Louis University practices and numerous soccer clinics held during the year by Van Balkom. Few facilities offer the complete range of soccer training equipment that the soccer park offers.

The main exhibition field grandstand can seat more than 6,400 spectators. A press box on top of the grandstand with an up-



The main field is mowed in two directions and marked in preparation for a tournament.

per deck for filming or taping with complete communications hookups has been added for tournaments and international events. The main field also features an animated scoreboard and marquee that includes a message center. Digital electronic scoreboards have been installed on five other fields. Each scoreboard provides scores on all fields at the same time.

The St. Louis Room in the main building overlooks field number one. Local businesses use the facility for banquets and meetings. Full catering services are now available for weddings and private parties. Long plans to use the expertise of the Busch Gardens entertainment division to develop the soccer park into a full-service conference center. It is the only conference center in the city where conference attendees can watch the action on the field as they eat.

It's soccer that has made and will continue to make the center recognized internationally. In May, the center will host the Olympic qualification match between the U.S. and Canada. Canadian amateurs return to the center in November for the USA/Canada Select Team Invitational. The Tower Lions of London, the Gweedore Soccer Club of Ireland and the West German National University Champions has already played there to date.

In addition to international events, the U.S. Soccer Federation Open and Amateur Cup finals are scheduled for June and the McGuire and Niotis Cup finals for July. If the St. Louis University Billikens repeat their past performance, the center may host NCAA playoffs. In June, the best high school soccer players in the U.S. will compete in the North/South All-Star Game. All this is in addition to state high school tournaments, the Billikens home games, the Busch Soccer Club home games and numerous clinics and a summer camp presented by Van Balkom.

The 47-year-old Van Balkom, who played his first soccer in Holland at the age of ten, hopes he can consolidate more than 20 years of professional experience for the St. Louis Soccer Center. Working from the St. Louis Soccer Park with both young players and coaches, as he has in Japan, West Germany, Holland, Australia, Hong Kong, Iran and Indonesia, Van Balkom hopes to raise the level of soccer in the U.S. "Soccer has come a long way in this country," he states. "While there has always been outstanding soccer in St. Louis, it was players such as Pele, Carlos Alberto, Frans Beckenbauer and Johan Cruyff who really helped spread the sport over the entire country. Most U.S. coaches forbid players to be creative. The result is that many players work nonstop the entire game but lack the skills and the know-how to take on opponents. Very few players take their own initiative and try to be creative. Those are the very things that serve as the trademarks of the outstanding players."

By taking the game seriously and providing quality facilities for young soccer players to become creative, Van Balkom sees no reason why U.S. players can't inspire

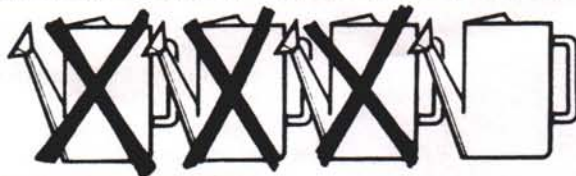
their own country to embrace the sport as European and South American players have. The Busch Soccer Club has begun to produce the kind of players Van Balkom talks about. They include Ty Keough, Jim Bokern, Greg Makowski, Greg Villa and Pat McBride, to name a few. They play for teams such as the St. Louis Steamers, Ft. Lauderdale Strikers, Kansas City Comets, and San Diego Sockers.

It's not just players the center wants to develop. It's also coaches to inspire and mold young players into world-class athletes. Many of the clinics at the park are for coaches.

The demand for soccer facilities is growing

rapidly. But, as Long and Van Balkom know, quality training and playing facilities are necessary to seriously develop soccer in this country. What started out as a plan to provide quality fields for St. Louis kids to play soccer on, has turned into a national launching site for soccer in the U.S. The difference is mainly in the scale which local organizations think compared to a company which thinks big all the time. Dennis Long has brought to the St. Louis Soccer Park an Anheuser-Busch perspective of soccer. This assistance in both the quality of the training and playing facilities might finally be the boost the U.S. had needed for more than 20 years. ☼

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