

# THE FRONT OFFICE

OPINION PAGE

## A GREAT BENCH



**T**he success of any high school, college or professional team depends heavily on the bench. A coach can't play his first string all game, every game. He needs skilled reserves for players who get injured at the height of the season or fatigued in the middle of a game. There must be a capable, fully-drilled backup for each position on the team.

The bench is just as important to those taking care of sports turf as those playing on it. Fortunately, the sports turf management bench has never been stronger. The number of highly qualified assistant superintendents and assistant groundskeepers is at an all-time high. I can think

of a number of facilities that have three very capable individuals on the grounds crew that could fill in for the head groundskeeper at a moment's notice.

A big step forward for the golf course industry was when universities started graduating a large number of turf students in the '60s. Nearly all of them wanted to be superintendents. Now, the first crop of college-trained athletic field managers is entering the market. David Mellor is a prime example. Dave graduated in December from the turfgrass management program at Ohio State University. For the past three summers and on his college breaks, he worked on the grounds crews at Milwaukee, Kansas City, San Francisco and Anaheim. In addition to his professors at Ohio State, he has studied under Harry Gill, George Toma, Barney Baron and Don Marshall. I can think of no one else who has made such an effort to learn both the academics and the practical aspects of stadium field management. In January, without a break, he became an assistant to Harry Gill at Milwaukee County Stadium.

At the same time, there are people like Tom Burns (story on page 12) who have worked their way through the ranks to gain a superintendent's position with a professional baseball franchise. He started out with desire and a rake in his hand and used the off season to get as much experience as possible. At 29, he has been able to surpass some of his more experienced peers just by his drive and determination. He turned down the head groundskeeper's job at Dodger Stadium last year.

Many of these young professionals don't sit on the bench as assistants very long. They know what they want and figure out how to get it... quickly. This becomes apparent when you visit some of the prestigious resort and tournament golf courses in California and Florida. I'm amazed at the age of some of their superintendents.

In fact, the bench is so strong, some of the veterans are a little worried. Recently I was shocked to hear that one highly-respected superintendent at a private club in the Midwest was laid off after 20 years because his assistant, whom he had taken great pains to train, could do his job at a lower salary. Fortunately for him, he was able to beat out younger superintendents for a good position in the state, but he had to move.

The days are over when a backup catcher becomes the groundskeeper or a golf pro who wants more responsibility becomes the superintendent. These jobs should be filled with professionals trained to meet the challenges thrown at them by athletes and nature. It's not accurate anymore to say such professionals don't exist. They do, many of them are assistants waiting for their chance at the big time.

Big time to them may not be a professional team or championship golf course. There is no reason why a college, park or school needing a sports turf manager can't lure some of these assistants to work for them. They have a choice today and are inclined to try out new, challenging areas.

A team, or an industry, with a strong bench can play harder and longer. It can raise the standards of play just by having the reserves to try more things. That is exactly where the sports turf industry is today, in a press with a strong bench. And that's the way it has to be until sports facilities balance with the demand for them. That won't be soon.

*Bruce F. Shank*

# EVENTS

CALENDAR

## MARCH

22

Sports Turf Institute, California Polytechnic University, Pomona, CA. Contact: Mary Giles, STMA, 400 N. Mountain Ave., Up-land, CA 91786, (714) 981-9199.

26-28

National School Board Association Exposition, New Orleans Convention Center, New Orleans, LA. Contact: NSBA, 1680 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314, (703) 838-NSBA.

27-31

American Society of Golf Course Architects Annual Meeting, Princess Hotel, Hamilton, Bermuda. Contact: Paul Fulmer, ASGCA, 221 N. LaSalle St., Suite 3900, Chicago, IL 60601, (312) 372-7080.

## APRIL

7

South Florida Turfgrass Exposition, Ft. Lauderdale Research and Education Center, Ft. Lauderdale, FL. Contact: Dr. John Cisar, 3205 SW College Ave., Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33314, (305) 475-8990.

11-12

Southeastern Turfgrass Conference, Coastal Plain Experiment Station, Tifton, GA. Contact: Dr. Glenn Burton, Coastal Plain Experiment Station, Tifton, GA 31793, (912) 386-3353.

12-15

Missouri Park and Recreation Association Annual Meeting, Clarion Hotel, St. Louis, MO. Contact: David Ostlund, MPRA, 1203 Missouri Blvd., Jefferson City, MO 65101, (314) 636-3828.

19-20

Southern California Turfgrass Conference, Anaheim Convention Center, Anaheim, CA. Contact: Ed McNeil, SCTC, 2492 E. Mountain St., Pasadena, CA 91104, (818) 798-1715.