



“The people of Farmington prove a small city can host a national event just as well as a big city.”

Both the field and stands were built by volunteers to attract the Connie Mack World Series to Farmington.

City Proves Amateur Baseball Can Be a Major Drawing Card

For a week each August, many of this country's finest baseball players from the ages of 16 to 18, and scouts from more than 50 major and minor league baseball teams, gather in remote Farmington, NM. The oil and gas community, tucked into the northwest corner of the state, is consumed by the sport of baseball — amateur baseball that is. Since 1963, when city volunteers built Orval Ricketts Park specifically for the Connie Mack World Series, the event has drawn more than 70,000 baseball fans each year to the stadium.

That's not bad for a city with only 33,000 residents. The closest large city is Albuquerque, a three hour drive away. It takes fans eight hours to reach Farmington from Denver or Phoenix, the next closest cities. “The World Series is the biggest thing that happens in this city every year,” says Park Superintendent Jeffrey Bowman. That makes Ricketts Park the most important facility he maintains during the year. That

importance shows. The park is the winner of the Baseball Diamond of the Year Award in the park, municipal and school category.

From the beginning, Ricketts Park has been a community project. Every foot of pipe, every yard of concrete, every bench, press box, scoreboard, concession stands, fences, land, bases and the Kentucky bluegrass seed were donated by community businesses and organizations. During the World Series, families provide room and board for the visiting teams as local hotels swell with scouts and Connie Mack team supporters from Puerto Rico to Seattle. The city has continuously supported the volunteers and managed the facility since its creation.

As the host city, at least one Farmington team gets to play in the World Series every year. Beginning at the age of seven, Farmington youngsters start playing baseball in hopes of one day competing against eight of the best teams in the country and pos-

sibly being discovered by a major league scout. Parents, city businesses and community organizations do all they can to preserve the baseball tradition of the city. It's no surprise that it consistently has some of the best out of 9,000 teams in the American Amateur Baseball Congress (AABC) each year.

“The people of Farmington prove that a small city can host a national event just as well as a big city,” says Joe Cooper, executive director of the AABC, headquartered in equally small Marshall, MI. “A reporter from *Sports Illustrated* once said that he was looking for Geronimo to come out of the hills as he drove into Farmington.” A large Indian reservation happens to be located on the outskirts of the city. In fact, Albert Eaton, whose primary job is to keep Ricketts Park in top condition, is an American Indian.

The annual average rainfall for the mountainous region located 5,300 feet above sea level is only seven inches. “All of our precipi-

tation comes from winter snowstorms and late summer thunderstorms," explains Bowman. The rest of our water is taken from three rivers that are fed by the snowmelt in the mountains. We have plenty of water, the problem is the rains come during August, right in the middle of the Connie Mack World Series."

The turnout in Farmington is greater than for any of AABC's six other league championships. In addition to the Connie Mack event, each year AABC sponsors the Stan Musial World Series in Battle Creek, MI; the Mickey Mantle World Series in Waterbury, CT; the Sandy Koufax World Series in San Juan, PR; the Pee Wee Reese World Series in Forest Park, GA; the Willie Mays World Series in Hapeville, CA; and an experimental league series in Fayette, GA.

"The difference is the people in the Farmington Connie Mack League who make sure the event runs like clockwork," said Cooper. "They have made it successful with things like foster parent programs to feed and house the kids, helping pay some of the travel expenses for the other teams with gate receipts and fund raisers, and the quality of Ricketts Park. There is so much support for the World Series in Farmington that they had to add a second deck on the outfield fence to carry all the advertising."

While volunteers do much of the leg work for the event, maintenance of the 8,500-seat Ricketts Park is the responsibility of the Department of Parks, Recreational and Cultural Affairs. "Ricketts is like a second job for us in the department," says Bowman. And it was a big reason why he left Pennsylvania in 1982 to take the job as park superintendent.

Bowman's involvement with sports started when he was a high school student in York, PA. He took a summer job with the city's park department. One thing led to another and he ended up working on Memorial Stadium, the home field for the Triple A York Pirates. He was hooked. For the next four years, he worked at the stadium while he attended Delaware Valley College of Science and Agriculture in nearby Doylestown. His goal was to be a major league groundskeeper so he pursued and obtained a degree in agronomy.

His first job out of college was on the crew at Philadelphia Country Club in Gladwine, PA. When the assistant superintendent of parks job opened up in York, Bowman returned to his hometown and was soon promoted to superintendent. The stadium satisfied his thirst for baseball. The Pirates installed one of the first AstroTurf infields in York before deciding to install one at Three Rivers Stadium. But, then the Pirates closed their franchise in York. Bowman started looking for ways to keep up his association with both baseball and parks.

The opportunity came in 1982, when Bob Hudson, the city's director of Parks and Recreation, was looking for a park superintendent with baseball background. "There was no doubt about Farmington's interest in baseball," Bowman says. "It also had a city golf course, 14 other softball and baseball fields and 900 acres of parks and municipal grounds. But, the best part was I didn't have to hide the fact that my main interest was baseball."

You don't just walk into a strange community and start changing things. You have to prove yourself first. "Knowing how to deal

with coaches and parents is a big part of managing fields in a park system," Bowman points out. "You also have to work with the members of the department who have been doing things a particular way. When people have been nice enough to give the ball park fertilizer and supplies, you use them."

The first thing Bowman did was teach the grounds crew how to make sharp edges on the base paths and to set up the mound, batter's box and bull pens to professional standards. He surveyed and aligned the bases, made new patterns for chalking the batter's box, and asked that string be stretched down the base lines before marking the field. "Little things add up to make a big difference," Bowman points out. He has since added a clay stabilizer to the base path dirt that makes the sandy soil pack better and hold more moisture.

The second thing he did was put together a schedule for all cultural practices. "Mowing, fertilizing and irrigation were all assigned to certain crewmembers for certain times each week," Bowman adds. A special ball field crew for the entire park system was created and put under the watchful eye of Jim Henry. The condition of all the fields is now checked each day by the present foreman Jay Wilson.

Since Ricketts Park is busy from January through September with more than 132 games and nearly 200 hours of practices, there is little time to make major repairs. "Our biggest problem at first was just keeping the turf properly fertilized and irrigated," said Bowman. "We have to irrigate the sandy soil heavily. That causes the fertilizer to leach

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"A reporter once said that he was looking for Geronimo to come out of the hills as he drove into Farmington."

A second deck had to be added to the outfield fence at Orville Ricketts Park because of the demand for advertising.



Crew at Orville Ricketts Park during World Series Week.

City Proves

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out quickly. Quick-release nitrogen lasted only a few weeks before it was gone. We also had an old quick coupler irrigation system that needed constant attention."

To correct the problem, Bowman and his new assistant Jim Henry, a turf graduate of New Mexico State University, decided to switch to a 34:6:4 sulfur-coated urea applied monthly beginning in March. They

also started spraying the field every month with a solution of chelated iron with micronutrients. As the root structure of the bluegrass improved it was more tolerant of drought stress caused by the sandy soil.

Still, it became clear that the manual quick-coupler system and the labor it required had to be updated. Once again, the community responded and donated the money for an automatic Toro system with 1800 Series pop-up heads in the infield and

Super 600 heads for the outfield. "Now we had a handle on water and we could irrigate at night when the field was not in use," Bowman recalls. "Disease isn't really a problem here, except in August, since it is so dry most of the year."

The bluegrass started to respond. The next step was to remove a thatch layer that had built up over the years and to get improved bluegrass varieties into the turf that were more drought tolerant, more disease resistant for August, and a darker shade of green. For that, Bowman needed an aeroblade seeder/thatcher. The community came through with a Jacobsen seeder. The seeder was put to use that fall on both the stadium, the park fields and the golf course.

The other piece of equipment that Bowman and Henry fixed up and put to use was a drum-type aerator. New tines and a complete overhaul gave the old unit the ability to once again relieve compacted soil. Bowman also saw it as a way to keep thatch under control and to provide even penetration of water and nutrients into the soil.

To put a pattern into the turf, the outfield is mowed twice each week with a triplex reel mower followed by a riding rotary mower with a vacuum system. The infield is mowed with a walk-behind rotary mower that collects the clippings. "The teams like the field mowed as short as possible," says Bowman.

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City Proves

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The outfield is mowed at 1¼ inch and the infield at one inch.

Their final step to improve the turf during the busy season was to pregerminate perennial ryegrass seed to fill in divots after games. "We have a problem with the area in front of the mound and along the outside of the base paths," explains Bowman. "Grounders hit in front of the plate during games and practice really do a job on the turf. If you don't keep up with that area, it gets almost bare after a couple of months. We're going strong for nine months, so we have to do all we can to keep grass grow-

ing there. We usually resod this part of the infield before the Connie Mack World Series."

Despite all these basic improvements, Ricketts Park is used for three months in the winter while the turf is dormant and the irrigation system is drained. "We get freezing temperatures into March and can't risk damaging the pipes," explains Bowman. Still, beginning in January the high school is practicing five days a week. As the team plays its first games in March the bluegrass is just coming out of dormancy starved for moisture.

"As soon as we can, we aerate the field heavily, fertilize and irrigate to help the turf

come out of dormancy quickly," states Bowman. Any deficiencies revealed by soil tests during the winter are corrected. "We mow the stadium starting in March even though we don't make our first cut in the parks until April. The temperature still drops below freezing at night." By the end of May, the crew applies Trimec to eliminate broadleaf weeds that invaded the field in the winter and early spring.

During May, after just one month of strong growing weather, the Mickey Mantle and Connie Mack leagues start sharing the stadium with the high school. "We're busy seven days a week from May 1 to end of August, from 1:30 in the afternoon to 10:30 at night," says Bowman. "By June, the temperatures are into the '90s. We have both practices and games during the day and games almost every night."

The activity on the city's 13 other softball and baseball fields is just as intense, not to mention the golf course. Adding to the work load the past four years was construction of new neighborhood parks. As new subdivisions are completed, land set aside for parks has to be converted into playgrounds. "You'd think with the depressed oil and gas market, everything would stop," Bowman said. "But not here. The community has backed parks all the way, even passing a five year, \$7.2 million sales tax. We're going to build another 18-hole golf course, a four-field soccer complex, a swimming pool and develop the riverfront into a large park."

But as August rolls around, the entire community focuses its attention on Ricketts Park. Two weeks prior to the Connie Mack World Series the park is closed for preparation. Bowman pulls up to eight crewmembers from the park field crew over to Ricketts to help Wilson and Eaton. "We resod worn areas, overseed with pregerminated seed and cut new edges," he states. "The mound and batter's box are rebuilt after we realign the bases. After doing another soil test, we usually give the field a shot of liquid chelated iron to green it up. Members of the Connie Mack Homerunners Club come over at night to prepare the concessions. With the proceeds of the concessions the club helped provide the facility with a new scoreboard in center field. It's a real community effort."

Park Director Hudson also devotes his full attention to Ricketts working with AABC to promote the event across the nation. Homes are lined up for the players. Press boxes and hotels are readied for sports reporters from across the country. A 16-game, double elimination tournament is carefully scheduled to allow 30 minutes between games for field work. Billboards and the scoreboard on the outfield fence are touched up. The stadium gets a fresh coat of paint while the concessions and restroom facilities are polished. By mid-August, Ricketts Park and field look almost new.

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place. "Since that is our rainy season," says Bowman, "we tarp the infield at night when clouds move in and leave the covers on the bases, mound and batter's box except during games. We baby the dirt, wetting it down two or three times a day. We also watch closely for any signs of disease since humidity is up and temperatures hang in the 90s. So far, the bluegrass hasn't let us down. The vacuum system on the rotary mower puts a nice pattern on the outfield even if we don't mow that day."

After a month of constant hustling and the championship game, the park crew has one more assignment at Ricketts—to get it ready for a circus. That's right, elephants, horses, clowns, acrobats and all their paraphernalia. "The circus makes for a nice end to a busy year," Bowman remarks. "The only thing hard to take is seeing the elephants and horses tromping across that



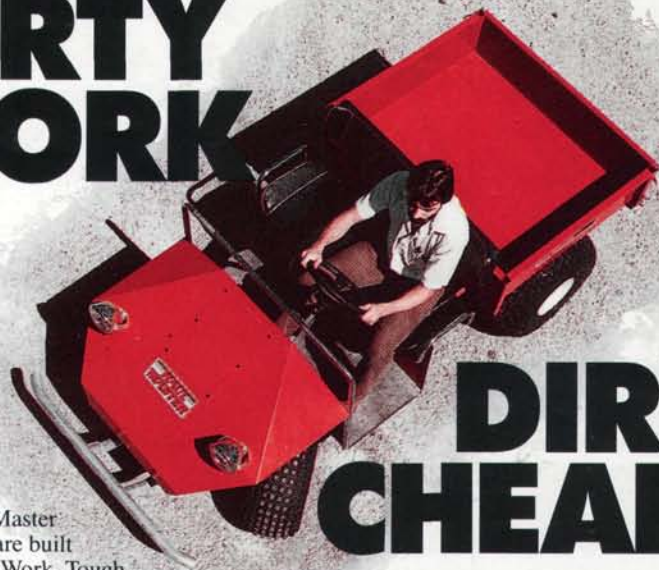
Jeffrey Bowman with Baseball Diamond of the Year Award.

beautiful field. Fortunately, we have three months of good growing weather with no events to let the turf recover."

In September, the field is aerated, fed with a complete fertilizer, drill-seeded with a mixture of perennial ryegrass (75 percent) and Kentucky bluegrass (25 percent). Irrigation continues two to three times each week until temperatures fall in November and the system is drained. "We try to avoid lush growth in the fall to let the turf go dormant slowly," Bowman explains. "We want the turf to develop roots instead of foliage so it can withstand the late winter practice schedule. We make sure the micronutrients are there for the roots."

Farmington's position as a central figure in amateur baseball is secure, according to AABC's Cooper. "The Connie Mack World Series in Farmington is one of the finest amateur baseball events in the country played on one of the finest diamonds," he boasts. "Maybe the guy from *Sports Illustrated* was right, maybe the spirit of Geronimo is there watching over Ricketts Park."

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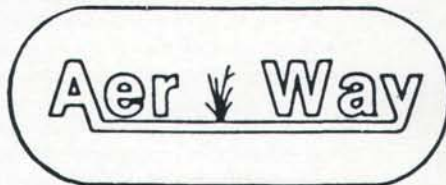
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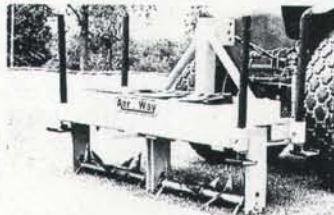
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