

**"I**t's impressive to see one of the new multi-field training centers that have become the trend in baseball," confides Dale Long, field representative for the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues (NAPBL), "but it's even more exciting to witness one of the older spring training centers in the country coming back to life." Long, who has been involved in professional baseball for 45 years, evaluates 88 minor league facilities east of the Mississippi River each year.

In 1986, when he walked out onto the field at Jack Russell Stadium in Clearwater, FL, he was immediately struck by the improvement. The once-tired 30-year-old field was responding beautifully to the attention of a new groundskeeper, Long was told by Dave Rowan, general manager for the Clearwater Phillies, the Philadelphia Phillies' Class A Florida State League team.

Long could see the joy on Ron Timpanaro's face when Rowan introduced him to the new field supervisor. Timpanaro was bubbling with enthusiasm and was full of questions. When Long filed his report to NAPBL on Jack Russell Stadium that year he wrote, "Under the direction of Dave Rowan this park has been whipped into shape and looks great! The playing surface is much improved over last season when I saw it. New groundskeeper, Ron Timpanaro, has done a good job."

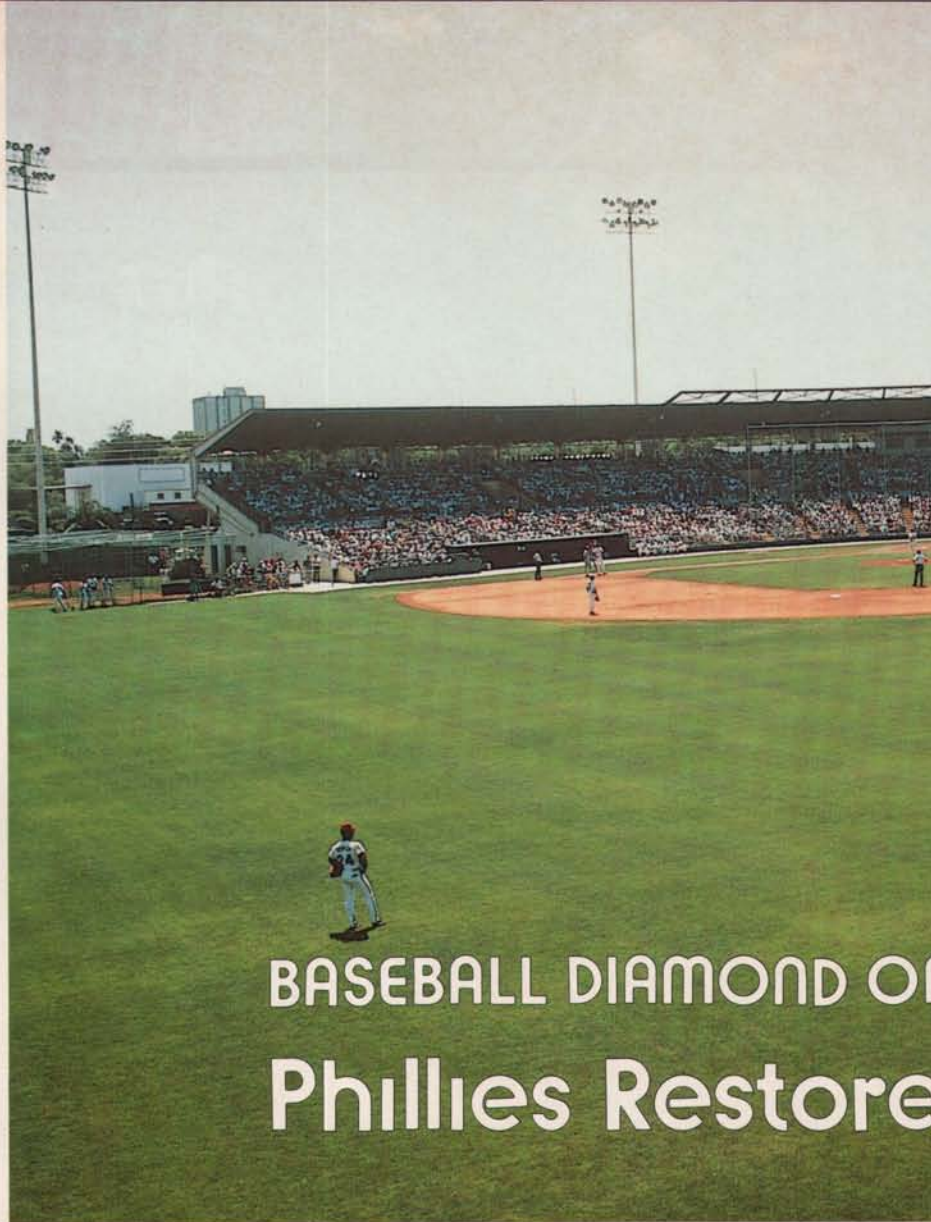
Each year for the past four years Long's reports about the stadium have been more glowing. Not only has Jack Russell Stadium taken on new life, Timpanaro has as well.

Rowan and the Phillies gave Timpanaro the opportunity to pursue a new career after 15 years as a ceramic tile contractor. In 1985, when the Clearwater Phillies leased the facility from the city and took over maintenance, he was looking for a change. Cut-throat bidding in the construction business had become more important than craftsmanship. When he read in the paper that the Class A team was coming to town, he applied for a job as a ticket taker for night games at the stadium. He expressed an interest in field work to Rowan and was allowed to apply his detail-oriented experience to groundskeeping.

"My only previous experience with turf was working for a landscaper in New Jersey as a kid," recalls Timpanaro. "When Dave let me work on the grounds crew, I knew that this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my career. Craftsmanship meant something again. I was determined to make Jack Russell Stadium the best field in baseball."

Rowan, who had once been a groundskeeper for the Phillies organization, taught Timpanaro the basics of baseball field management. But Rowan had his hands full improving the concessions, stands, and stadium in addition to the details of advertising, ticket sales, public relations and player development.

Timpanaro relieved Rowan of many of the details of field management. Within months, he was named field supervisor. Three short years later Timpanaro was



## BASEBALL DIAMOND OF Phillies Restore

awarded the 1989 Beam Clay Baseball Diamond of the Year Award in the professional category.

"The more I learned, the more I realized I had to learn," admits Timpanaro. He called Elmer Williams, the groundskeeper for the Toronto Blue Jays in nearby Dunedin, and Tom Burns, the field superintendent at the Texas Rangers' new spring training complex in Port Charlotte. Both men taught him the fine points of conditioning the turf and the infield dirt.

He started with the basics, restoring the edge and dimensions of the diamond, pitcher's mound, base lines, home plate, on-deck circles, bullpens and warning tracks. He implemented a new fertilization program and mowed the field daily. Plant beds surrounding the stadium were brightened with annuals and remulched, overgrown plants were replaced, and all fence-lines and sidewalks were trimmed.

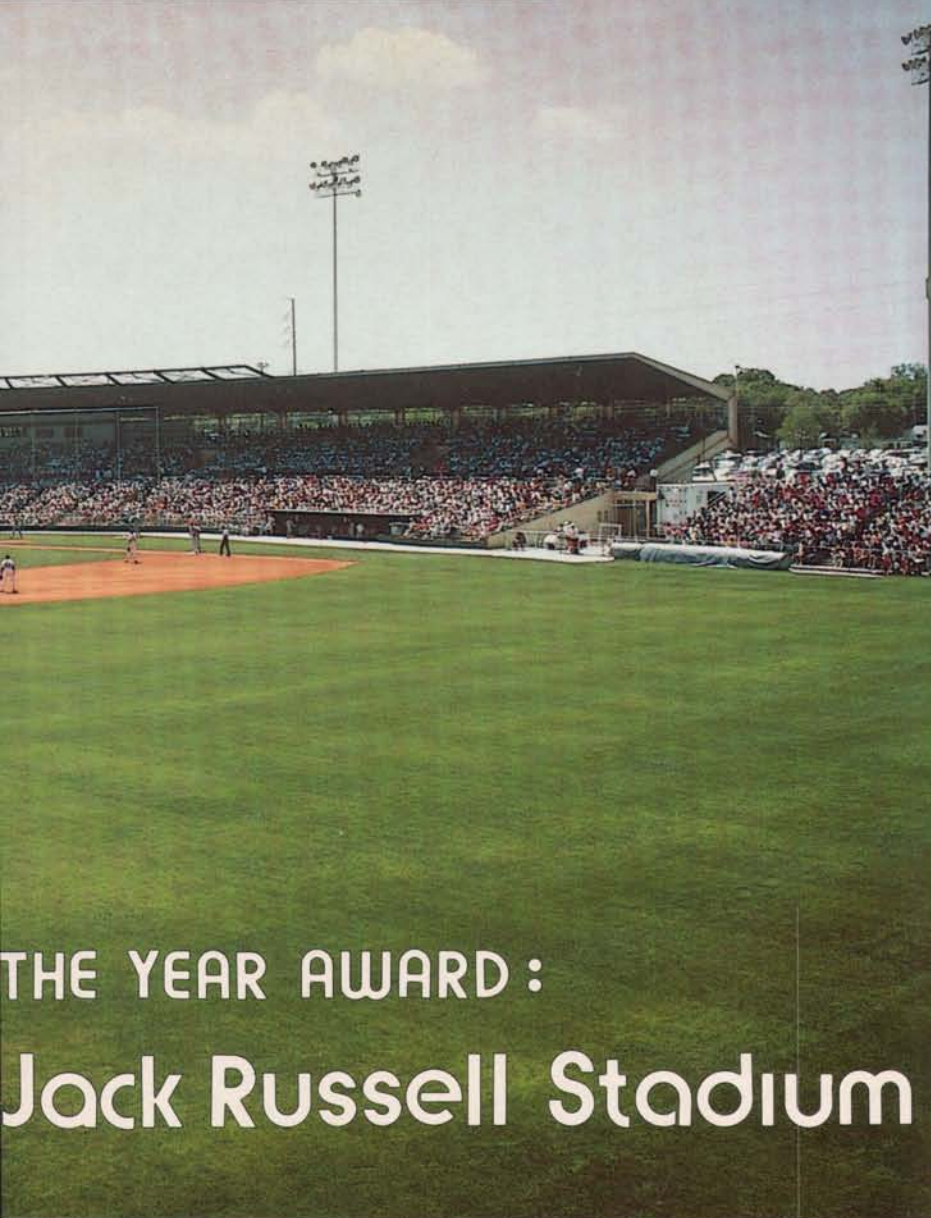
The stadium quickly became more attractive to fans and more professional for the players. Word started to spread that Jack Russell was a nice place to take the

family for an evening of baseball, whether it was the Philadelphia Phillies and the New York Mets or the Clearwater Phillies and the Charlotte Rangers.

However, it quickly became clear to Timpanaro that the stadium lacked much of the equipment necessary to follow Williams' and Burns' recommendations. "All we had at first was a small tractor, a three-gang reel mower, walk-behind rotary mowers, a Bush-hog and a nail drag," he remembers. The outfield had an old manual irrigation system with galvanized pipe. There was no irrigation for the sidelines or the infield.

Major renovation was required to restore the field to professional standards. For years, the infield grass had been stripped after spring training to convert the field to softball for the Clearwater Bombers. So much clay had been brought in for softball as time passed that the infield was almost four feet higher than the outfield and the clay had migrated 15 feet into the outfield. In the fall the city placed bermudagrass sod on top of the growing plateau of clay for the Phillies' spring training.





## THE YEAR AWARD: Jack Russell Stadium

Apparently, years ago a layer of crushed stone had been installed below a layer of clay to improve drainage. As more clay had been added season after season, this layer of stone was forgotten. When Timpanaro tried to take a deep sample of soil, the auger hit what appeared to be concrete ten inches below the infield surface. "Only a jackhammer can break through the concrete!" he quips.

The city built a smaller stadium for the Bombers in 1985, eliminating the conversion to softball. The Phillies then moved their summer Carolina League team from Peninsula, VA, to the Florida State League and Jack Russell Stadium. At the same time, the Phillies moved their fall instructional league to Jack Russell from Carpenter Field, another city-maintained baseball complex a few miles away.

At Long's suggestion, Timpanaro started to remove some of the built-up infield clay in the fall after the instructional leagues. "When I measured from the pitcher's mound to the back of the infield, I discovered that the outfield grass had grown into

the infield clay by as much as five feet in some areas," he recalls. "We cut out the excess grass with a sod cutter, removed up to six inches of clay with a Bobcat, and regraded the infield to take out the huge lip that had built up over the years."

At the same time, Timpanaro contacted an excavation contractor about removing the concrete and built-up clay. The estimate was nearly \$250,000. "What we needed most was a new irrigation system and more field equipment, so we put off the excavation work," he says. But he looks forward with anticipation to the day the concrete layer can be removed.

Because the clay was hard and got slick when wet, Timpanaro purchased tons of bunker sand and mixed it into the clay until it was about 80 percent clay and 20 percent sand. At least once a week the infield dirt is spiked with a nail drag to keep it soft. Every day the dirt is dragged and watered. Leaf rakes and a high-pressure hose are used weekly to prevent lips from forming. Twice each month the edges are recut after the dimensions are checked. String is

stretched along the base lines and diamond for a straight, sharp edge.

The sand improved the appearance and condition of the dirt, but it still got hard rapidly and stayed wet for too long. So Timpanaro experimented with Terra-Green soil conditioner in one spot behind first base last year. Pleased with the results, he mixed the conditioner into the top two inches of all the infield clay this past winter.

The first items Timpanaro repaired were the pitcher's mounds on the field and in the bullpens and batting tunnels. He removed the old clay on the front of each mound to a depth of six inches and replaced it with Beam Clay Pitcher's Mound Mix and a special clay from northern Florida called gumbo.

After each practice or game, the loose dirt is swept from foot holes, the depressions are wet down and successive layers of mound mix are applied, moistened and tamped down. The mounds are then watered and covered until the next game. Timpanaro has since amended the dirt in the batter's boxes and follows the same routine he uses for the mounds.

One dramatic change Timpanaro has made to the appearance of the field is replacing the clay on the warning tracks with crushed white shell. At the same time he installed new drainpipe along the outfield foul lines. The combination of the wrapped perforated pipe and the crushed shell has improved drainage considerably.

In 1986, it became clear that something had to be done about the antiquated irrigation system. The old galvanized pipe was deteriorating and leaking. "We were having two blowouts a week and the coverage was bad," Timpanaro adds. He was able to convince the Phillies and the city of Clearwater to invest in an automatic system for the entire field.

With two months to go before spring training, PVC pipe was pulled into the outfield at a depth of 14 inches so that it would not interfere with aerating. However, when the contractor tried to pull pipe into the infield, he could not get the blade of the machine more than six inches deep. That's when Timpanaro took the core sample and discovered the concrete.

Without time to remove the concrete, the pipes were laid directly on top of it, just four to six inches below the surface. There wasn't even room to install swing joints. Timpanaro decided to use the same heads he had before, but he wanted them slightly below grade.

The old manual system only had three zones in the outfield. The new system has 11 zones, one specifically for the infield dirt. Each zone has between seven and eight heads. Quick coupler heads for infield hoses were placed in the grass in front of second base and on the foul side of first and third base.

At extra expense, Timpanaro had all the valve boxes located together near the sideline fence, away from the playing field. A

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Rain Bird controller was placed in the same area.

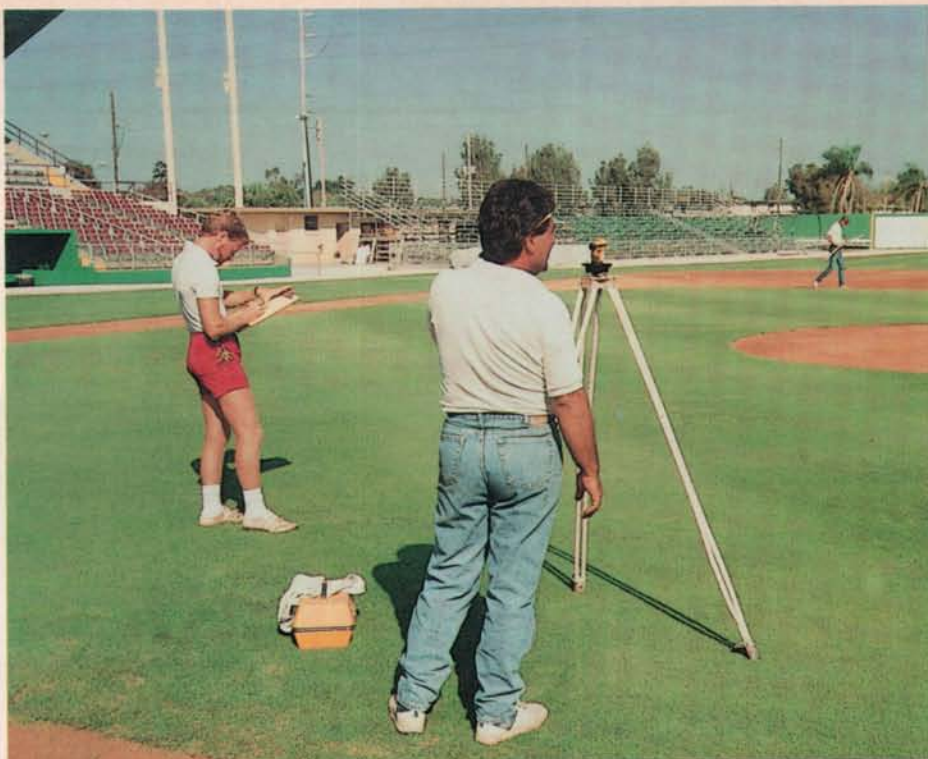
Soon after completion, the trouble began. Nozzles were sticking and water was leaking out around the nozzle and seal. The cause was traced to sand fouling the seals. After checking the water pressure, the decision was made to change to Toro 640 Checkomatics.

"At this point it was too late to make the changeover," said Timpanaro, "because the overseeded ryegrass was already in and I only had two weeks until opening day of spring training. After spring training, we had only one week until the opening day of the Florida State League season. So we had to wait until the end of the season."

In November 1987, Timpanaro was able to change the heads everywhere except in the infield. This past November he brought in a jackhammer to break open holes big enough in the concrete beneath the infield for the heads and swing joints. The entire irrigation system was completed in time for overseeding this past December.

One of Timpanaro's most important advisors is Joe Clay, superintendent of Clearwater Country Club. Clay was recommended to Timpanaro by a local chemical distributor for two reasons, his knowledge of turf and the fact that his part-time consulting business could provide much of the equipment needed for spraying and turf maintenance. "Ron teaches me baseball while I teach him turf," explains Clay. "There are big differences between golf turf and baseball turf."

First Clay helped Timpanaro create a sound fertilization program. Since there are long stretches when the field is used almost constantly, Clay recommended that at least half of the nitrogen be slow-release IBDU.



Timpanaro (center) checks infield elevation with transit.

Together they worked out a schedule of monthly applications of 16-3-11 from April through October. Before overseeding last winter they applied a greens mix fertilizer (10-2-10) with 75 percent IBDU due to the forecast for another warm winter.

Since the Phillies play on artificial turf at Veterans Stadium in Philadelphia, they want the ball to come off the grass fast. "The Phillies want to judge the players' talents on a fast surface to simulate AstroTurf," explains current general manager Tom Mashek.

"To speed up the bermuda you need to

keep it thin and short without a lot of thatch," Timpanaro advises. "The surface can't be puffy and it must be smooth." When Timpanaro explained this to Clay, the answer was obvious—verticutting and top-dressing.

But Jack Russell Stadium didn't have a verticutter. Timpanaro and Clay rented Ryan Mattaways and cut both the infield and outfield turf in two directions. It was also aerified to a depth of three inches.

The debris was removed with a Turf Vac purchased for the AstroTurf infield located next to the stadium. By hand they top-dressed the infield with a mixture of 90 percent bunker sand and 10 percent peat and dragged it into the remaining bermuda. The process was laborious, taking more than 100 man hours.

"When we were done the infield was brown," recalls Clay. "Fortunately, the past two winters have been warm and the bermuda bounced back up within weeks. We wanted a good base of 419 before overseeding in December." After verticutting, Timpanaro was able to lower the height of the infield turf to 9/16 inch.

The outfield was a bigger problem. More than an 1 1/4 inches of thatch had built up over decades. It is primarily common bermuda that has been left untouched for as long as anyone can remember. Instead of verticutting, Timpanaro and Clay chose to heavily aerify the outfield and work the soil cores mixed with sand into obvious low spots.

"Ron has had problems with *Helminthosporium* in the overseeded ryegrass in the outfield and along the sidelines during the past few winters," Clay remarks. "I think



Ornamental plantings around the stadium were renovated.





Jim Kelsey (left), president of Partac Peat, presents award to Ron Timpanaro.

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it is largely caused by the thick layer of thatch and mat that has built up over the years and the consistently warm temperatures over the winter. The rye is rooting in thatch instead of soil." Timpanaro asked Clay to treat the outfield every two weeks with Lesco Mancozeb DG. He intends to use Chipco 26019 as a backup fungicide.

The other two problems Timpanaro faced

were mole crickets and fire ants. Again, warm weather kept the mole crickets active most of the year. Clay suggested an application of Oftanol in the spring, followed by summer treatments with Orthene. While fire ant mounds are treated with aerosol bombs, Timpanaro has found that Amdro bait and daily mowing have chased the ants away. "When you disturb their mounds every day, they finally give up and move," he reveals.

Ironically, Timpanaro depends so much on Clay because he can perform many of the tasks with his own equipment at a lower cost. But Timpanaro still has a standing request for an aerator, verticut reels and topdresser. "You've got to have them to really keep on top of the thatch," he remarks. He also hopes to buy a conditioning machine for the infield clay.

Timpanaro has made great strides with mowing equipment. The infield is mowed daily with walk-behind greensmowers with baskets to pick up clippings. For the outfield, he now uses a Jacobsen Tri-King and anxiously awaits verticut reels. The checkerboard pattern stands out to fans and players. "You can't mow twice a week and expect the same results," he advises. Mashek has been instrumental in helping Timpanaro obtain the equipment he needs since Mashek became general manager in 1987.

Not only does Timpanaro take care of the field, he assumes many of the responsibilities that would normally be handled by the

stadium operations manager of a major league stadium. This includes researching, ordering and maintaining all field-related accessories, along with coordinating almost all events to make sure everything clicks. "When you work for the club and the club operates and maintains the facility, the groundskeeper or field supervisor has to perform many of the same duties as a stadium manager or head of parks and recreation," he points out.

Dale Long sees the rising investment in minor league facilities as a sign of new life for the farm system. "I'm aware of at least 20 new parks in the minor leagues!" he exclaimed recently.

"Minor league teams attracted more than 20 million fans last year," Long remarked. "We need the farm system for major league expansion in the next few years. Instead of building new major league teams by robbing players from existing teams, owners can start out by developing players at the farm level. Buffalo is a good example of this." Long thinks a farm system may be a prerequisite to major league expansion in the future.

If Long's theory comes true, the need for professional quality baseball facilities will grow, along with the need for skilled, dedicated groundskeepers like Timpanaro.

"I may not be getting rich," says Timpanaro, "but I love what I'm doing now. That's what counts the most for my family and me." 🍀

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