

Harry Gill: Man of the Year



Gill on right with Brewer Robin Yount... and with Brewer's announcer Bob Uecker.

Sixteen years ago, Harry Gill knew he was about to lose his job as a golf course superintendent in Rockford, IL. To make matters worse, he and his family lived in a house on the course. For months, he had mailed resumes out to several courses in Illinois and Wisconsin. Christmas approached without another job for the 54-year-old self-made superintendent and groundskeeper.

Gill had no idea that his career was about to make a big turn, one that would take him away from golf into the rather exclusive and secretive field of stadium groundskeeping. For in 1975, Harry Gill became a Milwaukee Brewer and proceeded to change the world of athletic field management, not only for stadiums, but for colleges, high schools and parks.

In 16 years, he lifted the lid of secrecy, sought and developed new techniques in athletic turf management, and helped start an association for sports turf managers that

now has more than 800 members. He has brought the sports turf industry together more than any other individual, inspired universities to teach athletic field management, and unselfishly groomed grounds keepers for other stadiums across the country.

Selecting Harry Gill as the recipient of the 1990 Golf & SportsTURF Man of the Year Award was one of the easiest decisions we've had to make since starting the magazine five years ago. His contributions to both the sports turf and golf course industry are equalled by few. He brings as much honor to the award as the award brings him.

"When Gabe Paul Jr. [vice president of operations for the Brewers] called my house in January 1975, I didn't return the call for a week," chuckles Gill today. "He got my resume from someone else. The field at Milwaukee County Stadium had been called the worst in baseball. There was talk about

moving the All Star game, which was scheduled for July at the stadium, to another city. I knew turf, but I had only a good fan's knowledge of baseball."

Gill met Paul at the stadium the following Saturday uncertain that he wanted the job. He'd have to move his family to Milwaukee and learn an entirely new line of work. He now had an offer from a chemical company to sell fertilizers to golf courses. Golf had been his life for 20 years. At this point in his life, as it wise to change careers?

"I was cocky and could have blown the whole thing that day with my attitude," Gill recalls. Maybe the cockiness is what Paul liked. The job was to maintain the entire stadium. He had years of experience in building and park maintenance. Gill took the job under certain conditions. This fall, at the age of 69, he will retire but stay on to consult for the Brewers.

On April 3, 1975, Gill walked out onto the mound at Milwaukee Country Stadium and

stared at the infield dirt for nearly ten minutes. "The turf didn't bother me," he points out. "It was the dirt and all the field preparation that had me worried. Fortunately, I had a good older crew with lots of ideas they had been holding inside for years. We agreed that I would listen to them if they worked with me as a team. I knew then, and I am still convinced, that the people around you are your greatest resource."

Then Gill got on the phone to the major turf suppliers and sod growers in the area. He also called Dick Ericson with the Minnesota Twins and George Toma with the Kansas City Royals. "I picked brains as much as I could," Gill admits. "Not all stadium groundskeepers were willing to share their knowledge of baseball field management. That bothered me."

Time has eased the pressure of that first season, but Gill's description of his first eight months as a major league groundskeeper is enough to send chills up the spine of anyone starting out. The All Star game was July 12. In May, a Seals and Crofts concert wiped out 5,000 square yards of turf. Gill managed to locate enough Merion sod to repair the damage before the next home stand.

On June 8, the stadium hosted a Rolling Stones concert, followed two weeks later by a Pink Floyd concert. "I don't know why anyone puts chairs out on a field," Gill comments. "The 12,000 kids on the field for the concerts never sat down. They just stood, danced, and jumped up and down." The result was another 5,000 square yards of destroyed turf on the field, with less than three weeks to go before the All Star game.

This time, sod growers were fighting diseases on their Merion fields and couldn't help Gill. All they had was common Kentucky bluegrass.

"I couldn't have an infield that was half Merion and half common," Gill recalls with alarm. "The White Sox were coming in eight days, followed a day later by the All Star

game. On a Thursday we removed the damaged sod from the infield. That's when we noticed that there was a bubble of dirt four inches high, extending from the basepaths into the infield turf from first to third. The rock fans on the field had kicked dirt into the diamond turf and ruined the grade."

Between the two concerts, four player protests had been filed with the league about the field. Both the Brewers and the

American League initiated law suits against the county which operates the stadium. With league officials looking over his shoulder, Gill proceeded to solve the problem.

Gill's plan was to take healthy Merion sod from outside the foul lines (hips) and use it to fix the infield. Then he would sod the hips with the common. The crew started by removing the infield dirt and the bubble between first and second. "We hit the origi-

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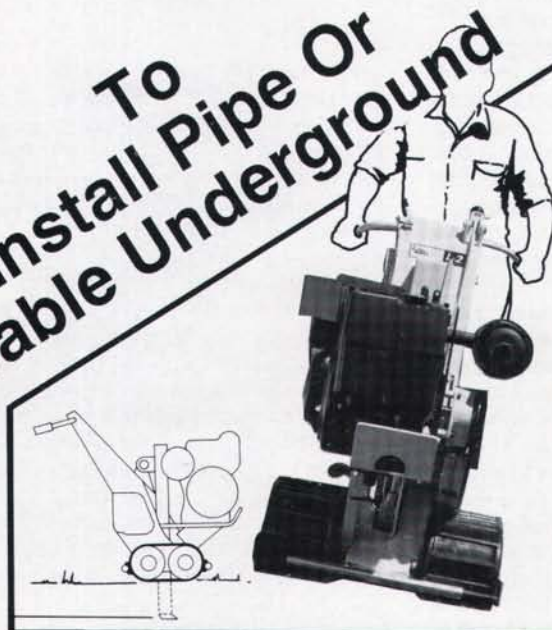
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nal stakes three to four inches below the surface," Gill recalls.

The clay mix was stockpiled while the crew cut the remaining healthy Merion from outside the foul lines. As the grade was restored between first and second, the crew began laying the Merion cut from the field. The process was then repeated between second and third.

The final step was to install the common Kentucky bluegrass sod outside the foul lines. "Each load of sod was a different color, from dark green to yellow," Gill laughs. "We ended up with a checkerboard pattern that was impossible to miss."

He called in the county painters on Wednesday, two days before the series with the White Sox. "I gave the painters one radio and took another radio to the upper deck of the stadium," he remembers. From his vantage point in the stands, Gill instructed the painters on the field where to spray green dye for a uniform appearance.

On Thursday, Brewers owner Bud Selig and two lawyers met Gill on the field. The question was simple and directed to the new groundskeeper: "Will the field be ready for the All Star game?" With the confidence of a person with 30 years' experience in turf, Gill replied that the field would be ready.

On Friday morning, a large headline on the sports page of the Milwaukee Sentinel read, "Groundskeeper Says Field Not So Bad." That night the series with the White Sox started without a hitch.

After the last Sox game on Sunday, Gill brought the painters back in to touch up the common bluegrass. The following morning hundreds of press and players poured onto the field for the traditional interviews. Meanwhile, Gill carefully outlined his strategy to the crew and painters.

As soon as the reporters, photographers and players left the field, the crew ran out to perform their assigned tasks according to Gill's schedule. He has become known for timing all field duties with a stopwatch, a practice which came in handy that night.

As the field was being mowed, Gill made several trips into the stands to check the pattern. When he was satisfied, the painters refreshed the white lines on the turf. Meanwhile, other crew members worked like a precision drill team on the mound, batter's box, bull pens, and basepaths. Each dirt area was wet down and covered upon completion.

At four o'clock the following morning, the painters returned to dye the entire field green one final time. As the crew was touching up the dirt and chalking the lines, Selig walked out onto the field accompanied by two giants in baseball, Commissioner Bowie Kuhn and American League President Lee McPhail. Upon looking at the field and a brief conversation with Gill, they dropped all lawsuits.

Four weeks after the event, Gill was presented with an All Star ring for his dedi-

"Groundskeepers used tricks to give their team the advantage. Gill thought everyone should know what those tricks are."

cation and achievement. By then he had already survived another potential disaster. On August 8, the Green Bay Packers played an exhibition game at Milwaukee County Stadium in the rain. If that wasn't hard enough on the turf and dirt, 1,800 Shriners marched on the field during halftime. Having resodded twice that season, and with two months of baseball and four more Packer games, Gill was determined to repair the turf he had.

Gill knew from his work on golf courses and also from talking with Ericson, that perennial ryegrass could be overseeded into thin areas to bring them back to life quickly. He also recognized that core aeration provided holes to protect the seed while it germinated, relieved compaction, and produced topdressing. Before the first regular-season Packer game the stadium field was green, dense and soft.

That winter Gill made two trips which strengthened his belief that sports turf managers had to share their experiences. The first was to Fenway Park in Boston, where groundskeeper Joe Mooney had earned a good reputation with players. The second was to Purdue University in West Lafayette, IN, site of the Midwest Turf Conference. There, Dr. William Daniel shared his experiments with sand-based rootzones for golf greens and athletic fields with Gill. It was also where he met John Souter, a builder of sports fields from Scotland.

Gill asked Daniel if the university would provide a meeting room during the next Midwest Turf Conference to hold separate sessions on sports field care. Daniel suggested that Gill enlist the support of Erik Madisen, executive director of the National Institute on Park and Grounds Management. Madisen, who had begun to offer sports turf management seminars, promised to help.

When Gill returned to Milwaukee, he called Ericson, Toma, Barney Barron at Candlestick Park, Dale Sandin at the Orange Bowl, Roger Bossard at Comiskey Park, and Pat Santarone at Baltimore's Memorial Stadium for their ideas. They all agreed that it was time to remove the veil of secrecy hanging over athletic field maintenance. There were thousands of grounds managers at parks, schools, and universities who needed to know the elements of maintaining high-use athletic turf. These people may not have the budgets or staff of

a stadium, but they could still adapt stadium methods to help their institutions.

They all knew that time was something stadium groundskeepers had little of. They could barely handle the growing number of requests for help from schools and parks. A way to provide information on field construction and maintenance to those who needed it had to be developed.

Stadium groundskeepers also needed a way to prove that they were doing all they could for their teams. "If your team won on the road and lost at home, the players and coaches put a lot of heat on you," recalls Ericson. "There were no standards to follow, just vague guidelines. Groundskeepers used tricks to give their team the advantage. Harry thought everyone should know what those tricks are to make the game fair for the groundskeeper as well as his team.

"Harry was different," adds Ericson. "He let out all his secrets. He was always trying to improve things, not just for himself, but anybody who was interested enough to ask. He learned and he shared, so today he is one of the best groundskeepers in professional sports, especially when you consider he has an outdoor multipurpose stadium."

Before Christmas 1980, Gill wrote a note in each card he sent to his long list of groundskeeper friends: "What do you think about starting an association for managers of sports fields?" The response was overwhelmingly in favor. He invited everyone to attend the meeting at the Midwest Turf Conference that coming March to work out the details.

"When I walked into the room that Doc Daniel set up for us at Purdue, 150 seats were set up," Gill remembers. "I thought, no way are we going to fill this room. But we did. I think it surprised a lot of people. Most of those who came were school and park groundskeepers worried about keeping their fields in shape with increasing use. They needed answers right then and there to help them get through the coming year."



Milwaukee County Stadium.

Gill may have been the first stadium groundskeeper to use a helicopter to dry a field to prevent a rainout.

That night in Gill's hotel room in the student union, seven people gathered to work out the details of starting an association. Among them were Toma, Daniel, Ericson, Madisen, Purdue groundskeeper Steve Weisenberger, Wisconsin landscape contractor Roy Zehren, and Mike Schiller, park superintendent from Northbrook, IL. The Sports Turf Managers Association (STMA) was officially formed that evening with Ericson as president, Daniel as vice president, Weisenberger as treasurer, Gill and Toma as board members, and Madisen as the executive director.

For two years, STMA provided educational sessions at both the Purdue and the NIPGM conferences. Other stadium groundskeepers joined the cause to help the association keep up with the demand for field information. Steve Wightman from Denver Mile High Stadium, David Frey from Cleveland Municipal Stadium, Tony Burnett from RFK Stadium in Washington, DC, and Sam Newpher from the Atlanta Braves pitched in to take some of the load off of Gill.

Many state extension services started to include sports turf management in their turf programs, including Ohio, Massachusetts, Nebraska, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Maryland, and California. The most successful of these was the Sports Turf Institute at California Polytechnic Institute in Pomona. Professor Dr. Kent Kurtz, groundskeeper Mark Hodnick, and the department of horticulture organized the conference and exhibit, attended each March by more than 300 area turf managers.

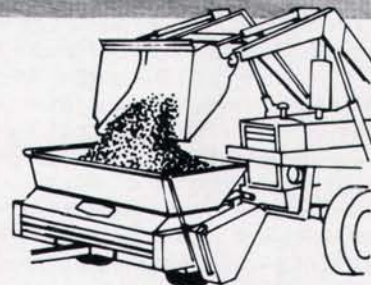
Kurtz, an Illinois native, shared Gill's vision of what STMA could be. He started helping Gill and the rest of the STMA board on evenings and weekends from his home in Ontario, CA. In 1984, the board voted to make Kurtz executive director and turn it into an independent association. Within five years the membership increased from 60 to 800, before Kurtz had to resign for health reasons in 1989.

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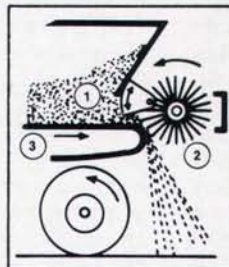


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Gill's part in the creation of STMA too often overshadows his other accomplishments. From his first job at West Bend Aluminum Company in 1944, he has always sought extra responsibility and showed a knack as a problem solver. His willingness to try new things took him from the production line outside to the landscape of the corporation, and then to its golf course (West Bend Country Club) as superintendent.

"I used to polish aluminum kettles in the factory during the winter and then plant trees, turf, and flowers around it during the summer," reflects Gill. "I loved being outside and getting involved with all sorts of things from landscaping to blacktopping roads. One day I was called to the boardroom by Bernie Ziegler, chairman of the company. The board was meeting and I thought they might be having a problem with lights or a projector.

"I walked into this fancy paneled room with a big mahogany table surrounded by all the bigwigs. To my surprise, they wanted to talk to me! The professional at the country club had quit and they fired the superintendent. They wanted me to take over. All I knew about taking care of a golf course was what my son, the caddymaster there, had told me."

The first thing Gill did was call in all the area equipment distributors to suggest what he needed and give him a bid. "Bob Reinders (Reinders Turf Equipment Co.) was just starting out," Gill laughs. "His bid was lowest but he didn't have a place to put the equipment together. Jacobsen sent all the equipment to the course in boxes and we had to put it together ourselves."

Gill immediately sought advice from other Milwaukee superintendents. He read every book on golf course management he could find, and then put together a list of 30 questions. He asked the same list of questions of every superintendent he could reach within 40 miles. From their answers he obtained important information about cutting heights, fertilization, weed control and irrigation. He also shared the results with everyone who had helped him.

Two superintendents were especially helpful to Gill: Frank Moosebach at Blue Mound Country Club and Lester Ver Haalan at Brentwood Country Club. In October 1963, the three superintendents organized a two-day seminar in Milwaukee in conjunction with the Wisconsin Golf Course Superintendents Association. Both days were devoted to one subject. Every October since, WGCSA and Milorganite have sponsored the two-day seminar.

Gill may have been the first stadium groundskeeper to use a helicopter to dry a field to prevent a rainout. "A cancellation can cost a stadium hundreds of thousands of dollars," he points out. "Some people might not think it's too smart to spend \$150 per hour for a helicopter to hover over the field, but twice it has saved a cancellation at Milwaukee."

Gill has become close friends with celebrities of all types, from players and managers to movie stars and announcers.

Ericson at the Metrodome in Minneapolis thinks the efforts of Gill to increase communication among groundskeepers led to more specific standards for field maintenance. "The old rules said the mound had to be about 15 inches higher than home plate," says Ericson. "Without rules, the pitching rubber would be anywhere from 10 to 18 inches high, depending on where you played. Sometimes the catcher couldn't even see second base.

"The rules also didn't say anything about the slope of the mound. If you had a power pitcher, the groundskeeper could build the mound up to provide a steeper slope in front. If the pitcher was sidearm, you'd lower the mound to ten inches and decrease the slope. Today, the league requires that the mound is ten inches high with a slope of one inch per foot. This helps the groundskeeper by eliminating last-minute changes to fit certain players."

Gill is a teacher as well as a manager. His willingness to share is greatest with those just starting out. He can detect if someone is dedicated to being a good groundskeeper. "If someone really wants to learn, I tell them to come to the stadium to watch the guys work," he says. "But I also expect them to be here at eight [a.m.] sharp, not a minute later."

He takes pride in the fact he helped mold students into groundskeepers in their own right. "I didn't have an assistant the first year, but then I hired a graduate of the University of Wisconsin named Rod Adel. He had a master's degree in soils. He taught me about soils and I taught him about groundskeeping during the three years he was here."

Gary Vandenberg joined Gill in 1979 and is his assistant today. "Gary was a superintendent on a golf course in town," Gill recalls. "Other candidates were better qualified, but I had a good feeling about Gary. I'm positive I made the right choice 11 years ago."

Paul Zwauska, a former member of Gill's crew and a graduate of the University of Wisconsin, is now Pat Santarone's assistant in Baltimore. Gill also helped Steve Wightman perfect his baseball preparation when he was at Mile High Stadium. Wightman is

now turf manager at San Diego/Jack Murphy Stadium in San Diego, CA.

"A few years ago, Dr. John Street at Ohio State University called me up and said he had a turf student that wanted to be a stadium groundskeeper. I didn't have any openings at the time, but I told him to send the student up to work that summer," says Gill. His name is David Mellor and he is now Vandenberg's assistant at the stadium.

During his career, Gill has managed the stadium through many special events. Beside rock concerts and dirt events, he has directed the care of the field and the stadium through a World Series and the filming of motion pictures ("Major League" to name just one). In the process he has become close friends with celebrities of all types, from players and managers to movie stars and announcers. "They all like to visit my office under the stadium to get away and shoot the bull," he reveals.

Another of Gill's big challenges involved Compadre Stadium, the Brewers' new spring training facility in Chandler, AZ. In December 1984, General Manager Harry Dalton approached Gill and said, "Can you get away for a few days?" Dalton wanted Gill to look over different parcels of land in Chandler for the complex. A site was selected and plans were reviewed that summer by Gill.

Chandler presented the Brewers with a tough challenge. A city ordinance restricted the height of any building to one story. To meet this requirement, the field had to be built 40 feet below grade.

Just before Thanksgiving, Dalton came to Gill with a problem. The job wasn't on schedule and he wanted Gill to fly to Chandler and check things out. He was alarmed that the project was eight weeks behind. With only three months to go before the opening of spring training, Gill was given the assignment of making sure the complex would be completed on time.

Faced with the near impossible, Gill remained in Chandler that fall and winter, finishing the job on schedule. To make matters tougher, the week before opening a fire broke out in the clubhouse. The complex is a finalist in the 1989 Baseball Diamond of the Year Award.

This month Gill returned to Chandler with an easier assignment: to give the crew at Compadre Stadium a little advice and take it easy before the season opens in Milwaukee in April. "I've got good crews in both locations," he boasts. "They know I'll back them up on new ideas that can improve our fields."

When he retires this fall, Gill will still be there to share ideas with the Brewers management and crew. Maybe he'll have more time to help sports turf managers at other facilities solve problems, advise students on entering the field, and help advance the quality of natural turf outdoor stadiums. These have been his goals from the first day he stood on the mound at Milwaukee County Stadium. They will continue to be his goals into retirement. 