

# Bucky Freeman Field: The Stuff of Dreams

By Matthew Trulio



Less than four years ago, Steve Johnson was sitting in a turfgrass management seminar sponsored by the New York State Turf Association in Rochester, NY. Several prominent industry leaders spoke that day, including George Toma and Jim Kelsey. However, it was John Liburdi, winner of the 1987 Beam Clay Diamond of the Year Award in the professional division, who captured Johnson's imagination.

"I was inspired," says Johnson. "I told the guys who were with me, 'One day, I'm going to win that award.' They all kind of laughed and said, 'Yeah, right.'"

Today, Johnson is having the last laugh, but it's a rather good-natured one. Under his care, Bucky Freeman Field at Ithaca College in Ithaca, NY, has earned the 1990 Beam Clay Award in the college division. Although he no longer serves as groundskeeper for the school's diamond and seven other athletic fields, having taken a position as physical plant supervisor, he is the man most responsible for Bucky Freeman's success.

Ithaca College is a private, largely liberal arts-oriented institution. Founded in 1892, the school has a student body of less than 5,000. It is located in the Five Finger Lakes region of New York, which is as noted for its vineyards as it is for its waterways.

Johnson, 36, can trace his love for baseball diamonds back to Minot, ND, as the seven-year-old son of an IBM electrical engineer. The nature of his father's job had

the family on the move every year-and-a-half or so, and Johnson and his family lived in a number of states during those years.

"When I was a kid in North Dakota, we used to go out and build our own baseball fields," Johnson recalls. "Minot was a pretty barren place. If you wanted to play baseball, you had to build your own field."

By the time Johnson was earning his associate of arts degree in business administration from Thompkins Courtland Community College in Dryden, NY, his dream of working on fields as either a player or superintendent had all but died. A self-described "sports freak," he had played center field during high school and later played American Legion Baseball. But it was clear to him that he would never make it as a professional ball player.

Johnson took the position of groundskeeper at Ithaca College six years ago. He had been looking for a way to work at the school, and figured the job was a good start. When he saw the 24-year-old diamond, named for the school's first baseball coach, Bucky Freeman, it was love at first sight.

"Bucky Freeman has outstanding beauty with its breathtaking contrast of plush bluegrass and red clay against the beautiful background of Cayuga Lake," says Johnson. "It's kept to look like the 'definition of a baseball field.'"

"I didn't work on the field originally," he continues. "I just hung around and tried to help out. When the groundskeeper in

charge of the field decided it was time to get out, I became the groundskeeper for the diamond and seven other athletic fields. He sort of faded out, and I kind of faded in."

The field is situated on a hillside. It is home to the Ithaca Bombers, who play NCAA Division III baseball. Approximately 160 college games and practices are held on the field annually. The diamond also hosts championship games of local high schools, a three-week baseball camp for grade-school-age children, Babe Ruth League championship games, and collegiate championship games. In 1989, the Empire State Games were held there. All games are played in the day because the field has no artificial lighting.

Since it started its baseball program more than 50 years ago, Ithaca College has established an impressive record. The Ithaca Bombers have had 52 consecutive winning campaigns, and only one season below .500. The team has been in NCAA post-season 25 times, and has made 15 consecutive post-season appearances going into this year. It won the NCAA Division III championship in 1980 and 1988. It has a total combined record of 861 wins, 285 losses, and eight ties, which translates into a winning average of .750.

To call the diamond "scenic" would be an understatement. The red brick headquarters of National Cash Register company can be seen behind centerfield.

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## Bucky Freeman Field

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Cornell University is also nearby. About four miles and 334 feet down the left field line are the deep blue waters of 38-mile-long Cayuga Lake.

"I took over the field in 1986 and it became my baby," Johnson enthuses. "More than once I was even accused of spending too much time on the baseball field and not enough time on the others."

Dedication and enthusiasm aside, managing and maintaining a baseball diamond and seven other fields on a \$5,700 budget is a bit more tricky than building your own field as a boy in North Dakota. Johnson realized quickly that he had a lot of ground to make up. Fortunately, he had three allies in his corner in addition to his intense interest and willingness to learn: Bombers' coach George Valesente, Bob Macgaffik, superintendent of grounds, and fellow groundskeeper John Salemme.

"I'm basically self-taught, and I would never claim to be anywhere near an expert in horticulture," Johnson admits. "I learned about maintaining a baseball field in bits and pieces, in dribs and drabs.

"George [Valesente] has probably been the greatest force behind my motivation," he continues. "He's supported me, passed on literature, comments and compliments, and made suggestions. He took me on road trips to other ballparks so that I could learn and get ideas."

"The field always had the makings of a beautiful facility, but it had never been 'fine-tuned,'" Valesente recalls. "Steve was hired on the grounds crew, and slowly



Special touches like event logos make Bucky Freeman Field stand out.

worked his way onto the field. He evolved into being the field maintenance man. He took a special interest and personal pride in the field.

"He did all the little things—edging, filling in the basepaths, cross-cutting the grass, maintaining the mound and homeplate areas—he really dedicated himself to the finer points of field maintenance," he continues. "What separates Steve from most others is that he's meticulous and conscientious. Because of the quality of our field, people were anxious to come here and play, and that made us proud and happy. From my standpoint, our relationship was more of a friendship than anything else. We worked so well together."

The players also appreciated Johnson's efforts, and the team bought a gift for him and his wife, Karen, an assistant to the school's dean of arts and sciences, three years in a row. And when the team won the national championship in 1988, Johnson also received a championship ring.

After a year of working on the field, Johnson says, his boss Bob Macgaffik rec-

ognized his desire to make the field shine and gave him the freedom to do it. John Salemme, Johnson says simply, had patience and dedication.

"John does all the mowing for the entire campus, and he mowed our outfield," says Johnson. "He had a really hard time in the beginning, because at certain times in the day the sun hits the field at an angle which makes it tough to mow in a straight line. He actually got to the point where he would time his mowing to when the sun was at an angle where he could see better. He rearranged his schedule so he could mow his field at the best time possible."

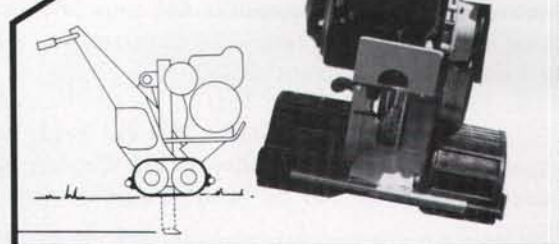
During the season, the outfield was mowed two to three times per week, in two directions to create striping, at a height of 1-9/16-inch. A Jacobsen F-15 rider mower was used for the job. The infield is mowed daily at 1-1/4-inch using a modified 18-inch Jacobsen rotary walk-behind.

"We put a roller on the back of the walk-behind so we get it to create a pattern," Johnson explains. "Each time we mow, we do it in a different direction—from home to first, from home to third, from home to second, and from first to third."

The field was fertilized in the spring and fall with a Scott's 32-3-10 fairway fertilizer at 2-1/2 pounds per 1,000 square feet, although Johnson describes the fertilization program as "not too stringent." Aeration was also performed twice a year using a Ford 4601 tractor and a rolling aerator followed by a drag mat to break up the cores. Overseeding and topdressing were also performed as needed.

"We overseeded with Touchdown blue-

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grass at seven pounds per thousand square feet, which was double what the manufacturer recommended," Johnson explains. "We were working within a limited time frame, so we figured the grass would fill in a little bit better with a little more seed. We also topdressed with regular soil using rakes and shovels. Originally the field was a crown, but much of that had been lost over the years. In some areas, we had to bring the field up as much as two inches."

Neither the infield nor outfield have irrigation systems. "Our field is watered by natural rainfall only," Johnson points out. "We have to worry more about too much rain than we do about irrigation, particularly in the shortstop area. For some reason, that area consistently sinks a little after a heavy rainfall. Whenever it rained, I always had a lake out there. I just kept drying it out as best I could and filling it in with Beam's infield mix."

Johnson was particularly finicky when it came to the field's skinned areas, which he says take a beating because of the often severe winter frost. Five days a week, and sometimes six or seven when games were coming up, they were scarified with a Smithco Diamond Machine to a one-inch depth. The groundskeeper would then drag

these areas in a circular motion to texture the surface. After that, he raked all the skinned areas by hand so that they looked "smooth and soft as a fluffy cloud." Johnson also took care to brush away excess clay from the grass that borders the skinned areas, and edged to avoid creating lips.

Striping was done shortly before each game. Johnson used a hand liner to chalk the infield. In the outfield he used a Lineking unit to put down Jay Dee Premium Field Marking Paint.

Of all the field's skinned areas he is particularly proud of its mound. "Our mound is unique," Johnson asserts. "I haven't seen anything like it anywhere else, and I traveled with the baseball team a lot."

The mound at Bucky Freeman Field is not circular. Instead, it is shaped like a teardrop, with its tapering end pointed directly at homeplate. It is constructed of a Beam Clay mound mix.

"The reason our mound is shaped that way is because when guys throw batting practice, they rarely stand on the mound," Johnson explains. "That can be rough on the infield grass right in front of the mound, particularly in the spring when the grass is still a little soggy. Having that little dirt

extension in front of the mound keeps them off the grass. Of course, I can't take credit for the idea, it was done before my time.

"So many mounds at the college level are not kept up," he adds. "There's some dirt and rubber and that's about it. When the players walk out on our field, the mound is ready to go. The mound is *shaped*-the slope is even and the top is flat."

The on-deck circles have an artificial surface, as do the fungo circles which are hand-painted for games with the Ithaca logo. Ithaca's colors are yellow and blue, but white and blue are used in the logo so that it is more visible from the stands. From that vantage point the logo, which features the name "Bombers" with a baseball coming through it, actually appears to be green and white because of the color of the field.

"We also try to keep the coaches' boxes neat and well-defined," Johnson comments.

New dugouts were installed in 1990. A press box was also installed above third base, as well as an equipment storage shed which is accessible to the field and the batting cage area. Between the bleachers behind home plate and the grandstands, on a small sidehill behind first base, there is

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### Bucky Freeman

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seating for approximately 700 persons.

During the season, Johnson says he usually put in 60-hour weeks, and enjoyed every minute of them. "I just loved working on the field," he says. "I *wanted* to be there."

"Steve did a great job with baseball, but he also did a great job with football and our other fields," says Robert Deming, director of athletics for Ithaca College. "He called me the day after he found out he'd won the [Diamond of the Year] award. I wasn't aware he'd entered us, but I also wasn't surprised he won. I'm extremely pleased to

see him get the recognition. Visiting teams think very highly of our facilities—they show pride."

Johnson's philosophy of field maintenance is simple. "I always tried to leave the field a little better than when I'd walk on."

In August 1990, Johnson walked off the diamond as a groundskeeper with a passion for improvement for the last time. His wife, Karen, says his decision to leave for his current supervisory position was agonizing.

"Leaving the field really tore him apart," she remembers. "His whole heart and soul were in that field."

His position has been filled by two men,

Randy Snyder and Dave Keeler, and Johnson does not interfere with them. He knows what it takes for one man to do the job, and even two will have their hands full. Still, he can't resist taking a look from time to time.

"One of the buildings that we take care of is above the side of the field, and every now and then I take a walk down there to check it out," he reveals. "I reminisce a lot—an awful lot."

Some dreams never die, especially those that start when we're very young. Golf & sportsTURF salutes Steve Johnson and Bucky Freeman Field, the 1990 Beam Clay College Diamond of the Year.

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