

COLLEGE DIAMOND OF THE YEAR: REDBIRD FIELD SOARS

By Theresa Delia



When Charles A. Scott started as the grounds superintendent of Illinois State University, he was unimpressed with the baseball field. It was flat, uneven, and had poor drainage.

"It looked like any average field you might find," he recalls.

Luckily, plans for the new field installation were on the drawing board.

Today, after six years of careful maintenance, cooperative efforts by various school departments and successful experimental technology, ISU's Redbird Field is the Diamond of the Year in the College Division.

Scott is proud of the award, but quick to give credit where credit is due. He acknowledges his staff of workers, headed by athletic turf specialist Mike O'Grady and the baseball team. Baseball coach Jeff Stewart feels Scott and his department have done an excellent job in a difficult situation.

"The field was brand-new, but poorly conceived," Stewart says. "Home plate was 19-inches lower than the rest of the field. Through his (Scott's) leadership,

we became a premiere natural-surface baseball diamond."

Early Appreciation

Growing up with three brothers near Lake Bloomington, IL, Scott had an affection for sports and the outdoors early in life. "We spent a lot of time around the lake hiking, fishing for small-mouth bass and sailing," he says.

As a high school student, he spent summers working for a landscape company. This gave him the incentive to turn an interest into a career. He received his bachelor's degree in plant and soil science from Southern Illinois University. After graduating, he managed the garden centers of Greenview Companies in Bloomington, Champaign and Springfield, IL.

He began at ISU in 1985. Besides managing the baseball field, his department is responsible for 128 acres of turf on the 850-acre campus, including the football, soccer, softball and track fields. In 1986, ISU started building Redbird Arena, a 10,500-seat facility. The site for the arena was the existing baseball field, creating the need for a new field.

Although the baseball field construction project was contracted out, Scott contributed construction ideas. He knew the old field had poor infield drainage and that without changes, the new field would inherit these problems. A sand-based infield with drainage tiles was installed and, after "playing around" with several sprinkler heads, Scott and O'Grady chose Hunter I-20s with stainless-steel risers.

Maintenance Practices

Scott has a simple adage when it comes to field maintenance: "Competitive athletic turf facilities need to be treated as if they were someone's meticulously cared-for front yard."

Redbird Field hosts 75 games from March through November. It is used by ISU's varsity team, two collegiate summer teams and the University High School's varsity team. In addition, the outfield is used for football practice when their field is unavailable for play.

The skinned area consists of 89 percent silt, 7 percent clay and 4 percent special sand mixtures. It is dragged with a nail board and dragmat before each

game. The edges are touched up with hand rakes and the entire area is lightly watered. The skinned area and base-lines are wet lightly between double headers and dragged again after the game.

On the pitcher's mound, O'Grady applies a blue gumbo clay that is allowed to dry and sifted through a mesh screen. It is then watered and packed into place. It is covered by regular infield soil mix and raked level. Leftover gumbo clay is kept in a ziplock bag to keep it moist.

"This gives us the opportunity to rebuild the front of the pitching rubber between double headers in just a few short minutes," O'Grady says.

Fertilization consists of three applications of Par Ex 24-4-12 at two pounds per 1,000 square feet. An additional four pounds of potassium are applied per 1,000 square feet through the growing season just prior to high volumes of play on the field. Liquid iron is applied in early spring to "green-up" the field for the first game, and again in the fall to augment slow release granular fertilizers.

Applied Theory

Much of Scott's success with field maintenance comes from experimentation. He and O'Grady work with Dr. Hank Wilkinson from the University of Illinois on research projects. Monthly samples of freshly cut turfgrass are sent to Dr. Wilkinson for plant tissue analysis. "Based on the information found in the reports, we could adjust our fertilization program to provide us with the best quality turfgrass," Scott explains. "Dr.



Redbird Field infield under construction.

Wilkinson's analysis allows us to spoon-feed our turf in a manner that would be most beneficial both aesthetically and horticulturally."

Scott relies on integrated pest management to control weeds and insects. A single application of Dacthal is made at a rate of five ounces per 1,000 square feet in mid-April to control crabgrass. Trimec, applied in early May, controls broadleaf weeds. Both are spot-sprayed during the season where needed.

The appearance of sod webworms warranted an application of Dylox 6G in early June. One application at a rate of three pounds per 1,000 square feet provided Scott and his crew with good control.

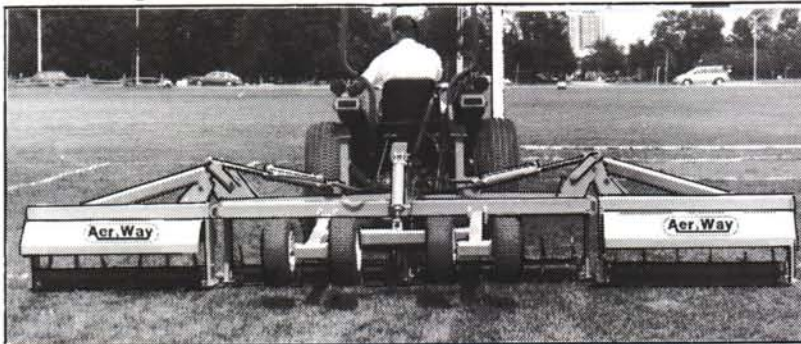
Wear patterns in the field promoted O'Grady to experiment with a seaweed derivative growth enhancer. Marked improvement in certain areas has limited resodding to the front of the dugouts and the pitcher's mound.

During the summer months, the infield is watered daily. Water is applied at 1-1/4-inches to 1-3/4-inches per week. The outfield requires only 3/4- to one-inch per week.

Overseeding high-traffic areas is vital. In the university greenhouse, O'Grady pregerminates the seeds for the procedure, using a five-gallon bucket on a heating mat. The seeds soak

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Redbird Diamond

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and stay in the heated bucket for three days. The ryegrass is then mixed into a rough soil surface. Sand and growth enhancement is added to promote faster root development.

To protect the turf in the infield during batting practice, O'Grady covers the area around home plate and the batters' cage with a geotextile fabric.

They use a rain tarp on the infield. Because ISU is a member of the Missouri Valley Conference, it is required to cover the field 24 hours before game time, if there is a threat of rain.

Scott and his crew aerify the infield with a Ryan Mataway. A Ryan Renovaire is used in the outfield. Aerification is done

four times during the playing season. Topdressing is added once a year. For the outfield, soil amendments are mixed with 30 percent bulk peat moss and 70 percent bank sand. For the infield, they use bank sand only. After topdressing, sand and peat moss are incorporated into the core holes.

Scott has purchased a Toro Pro 84 triplex for O'Grady, who operates all the equipment. Cutting height is easily adjustable, allowing the field sections to be "personalized." Infielders, for example, tend to like a shorter cut, which provides faster action.

The Team

Scott and O'Grady are not the only ones who play a role in the field's appearance and upkeep. Even the baseball players get into the act.

"There is good department communication," Scott explains. "Every day the players do their part to maintain the field with raking and edging. They like to do it and it gives them more pride in their field."

Scott and O'Grady speak with the coaches often. If the soccer field is too wet for practice, they will ask the coach to use the football field.

"The players tell us what they need and will assist in the maintenance," Scott says. "The third baseman takes care

of his area, the shortstop, his area. There are hundreds of eyes helping us."

Scott especially appreciates the "eyes" of O'Grady. Although his formal training is limited to a few horticulture classes at the college and STMA seminars, Scott says O'Grady treats the field as if it were his own. He devotes many of his personal hours to it. "Without his dedication, the field wouldn't look the way

it does," says Scott.

O'Grady has been at the university 17 years. His experience comes from the school of "hard knocks" and trial-and-error. He appreciates Scott allowing him to make his own decisions about the field.

"We have a good relationship," O'Grady says. "He allows me to do what I want with the field, even if he doesn't

agree. Sometimes he is right and sometimes I am right, but, I can always tap Chuck as a resource."

Support From All Camps

Response to the diamond from the school officials has been positive. "They all say, 'The field looks good,'" Scott says. "I have yet to hear a negative comment."

Spectators have found their own way of enjoying not only the game, but also the field. Although, permanent seating numbers only 500, up to 200 people crowd the hillside next to the third baseline on game days.

Eventually, that may change. Designs for seat expansion up to 1,500 are in the works. Included in the plans are a press-box, concession stands, an access area for the handicapped and new showers and lockers for the teams. Scott hopes construction will begin within the next few years.

As far as Scott is concerned, Redbird is already the best collegiate baseball field in Illinois. His maintenance techniques not only affect the safety of the players, but the field is also a sales tool for school recruitment.

Says Scott, "Maintenance of a field takes a community effort, and Redbird Field reflects that." □

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