

STMA Profile: Steve Wightman Manages

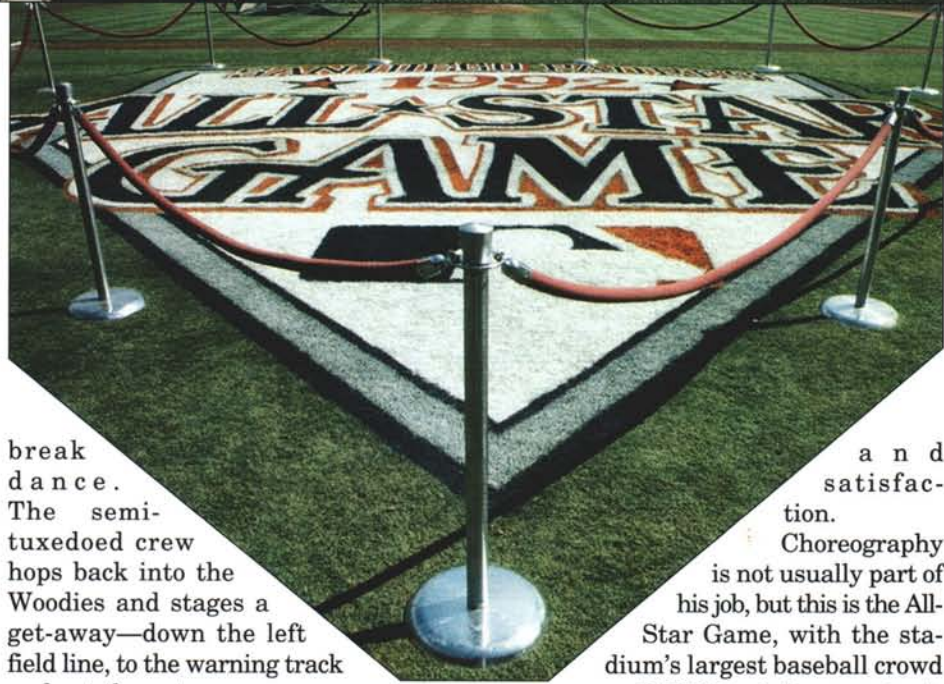


Above: The crew at Jack Murphy.
Right: All-Star Game logo.

By Bob Tracinski

You're seated comfortably at San Diego Jack Murphy Stadium watching the 63rd annual All-Star game. Suddenly, Beach Boys music fills the air. Two Woodies drive down the right field line and come to a stop behind second base. Out pop eight grounds crew members, appropriately attired in tuxedo shirts, ties, jackets and cummerbunds, bermuda shorts, socks and tennis shoes, topped off with sunglasses and Padres caps.

Each well-dressed crew member runs to a pre-assigned position to tackle the "5th Inning Drag" in style. Two more "crew members" appear in traditional garb—the white pants and blue shirts of the Padres' grounds crew uniform—and join in the task. As the dragging operation is completed, these two guys drop their rakes and start a wild and crazy



break dance. The semi-tuxedoed crew hops back into the Woodies and stages a get-away—down the left field line, to the warning track and out the gate.

Exactly two minutes have passed. Commercial breaks completed, TV audiences are back to baseball action. And on the sidelines, Steve Wightman, stadium turf manager, breathes a sigh of relief—

and satisfaction.

Choreography is not usually part of his job, but this is the All-Star Game, with the stadium's largest baseball crowd

ever, 59,372, and the opportunity for the Padres staff and Wightman to cook up a California-style treat for the fans that was too enticing to resist.

Major League play and working with-in the tight scheduling requirements

"The Murph"

of national TV coverage are common occurrences at Jack Murphy Stadium. But the All-Star Game is special.

"This was one of the biggest nights ever for us, and for me personally," says Wightman. "It was even bigger than the 1984 World Series, according to long-time crew members."

Other extra activities were connected with the game.

President George Bush attended with a friend, Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Since these two were part of the crowd, and because President Bush was going to make a brief appearance on the field, a few extra precautions were in order.

A week before the game, a crew of Secret Service men scouted the facilities, planning the logistics of the President's visit. At 11 a.m. on game day, about 100 Secret Service men appeared with dogs and special devices and went over the 10 sections of the stadium area on either side of the presidential seats—from the top of the light ring all the way down to and through the basement, including the locker room area. Even the ceilings and cupboards were inspected. The trash dumpster near the players' entrance was emptied prior to 10 a.m. and thoroughly searched. After that process, a Secret Service man was stationed beside the dumpster to inspect all trash added to it.

Bullet-proof glass was installed on both sides of the box area where the presidents were to be seated.

Steve Wightman and his crew members were issued special identification cards to wear with their uniforms. Anyone else who would be on the field floor was issued a special wrist band so that they could be screened.

Airline-style security devices were set up to check all players, officials, umpires, and personnel, other than grounds crew members, who would be entering the locker room or going onto the field.

Not all events went entirely as planned. San Diego native and baseball great, Ted Williams, was scheduled to throw out the first ball. A special presentation covering his history in the area had been prepared. But, when President Bush chose to accompany Williams to the field, the crowd's response was less than the outpouring of applause expected for Williams.

Another surprise caused a bit of excitement. The former San Diego Chicken, now "The Famous Chicken," had purchased a ticket and attended the game fully feathered. Since this was unexpected, a few security guards (about 12) "ushered" the Chicken from the stands for a lengthy discussion of proper All Star Game etiquette. The Chicken returned to roost in his seat without further incident.

"Except for creating some nervousness among our usually quiet, collected crew, these added events had little effect on our functioning," says Wightman. "At this level, grounds crews put out an incredible amount of work and I have a terrific crew. This isn't just a field to them, but *their* field, and they enjoy keeping it in top shape. When the field looks its best, it's a reflection on them personally."

Marketing To Managing

This isn't quite the career Steve Wightman anticipated

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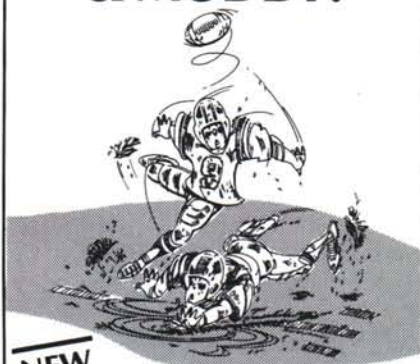
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STMA Profile

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when he completed his bachelors degree in marketing, economics, and finance at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley. But that background has proved highly beneficial, with its emphasis on organization, planning, management, budgeting, and interaction with personnel.

"I didn't grow up planning to get into sports turf management," says Wightman. "I always enjoyed sports and, as opportunities developed in this area, I was lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time."

From 1973 to 1976, Wightman was in charge of ball field maintenance programs for the Denver Parks and Recreation Department, plotting the care of 250 baseball, softball, rugby, football, and soccer fields.

When Mile High Stadium was undergoing its \$25 million dollar improvement program in 1976, the city asked Wightman to take the position of field manager to work with the installation of the new PAT system. Always ready for a challenge, he agreed.

Wightman says, "I grew up with the Broncos in Denver. Along with the football program, we had AAA baseball, but the outlook was dim for a major league team. I wanted that experience. So when the San Diego position was offered in December of 1988, I opted to expand professionally to work with major league baseball and warm-season grasses."

Life At "The Murph"

Jack Murphy Stadium management is divided into two segments. The field segment, Wightman's domain, covers the first row of seats down. This includes the playing field, 10 acres of landscaping, 4-1/2 acres of the San Diego Chargers practice facilities, including a 60-yard Omni-Turf synthetic field, and a one-acre sod nursery. The structure management segment covers everything else, including the electrical and carpentry areas.

Wightman oversees a full-time staff of nine: a seven-person grounds crew, a landscape person, and a mechanic, who though included in the field budget, handles the maintenance of both field and structure equipment.

In addition, Wightman manages an eight-member Padres ground crew, which works only on home game days. Referred to as the "fluff" crew, because they reap the glory while the full-time crew handles the bulk of the field maintenance, this contingent begins work

at 5 p.m. for evening games. They remove batting cages and pre-game equipment, complete final preparations for the game, do the 5th inning drag, and spend about an hour on Post-game activities.

Schedules are coordinated between the field and structure segments. During the overlap at the end of baseball season and the beginning of football season, this gets even more complicated. Wightman says, "We have 25 people involved in double overnight conversions where we go from a baseball game to the next day's football game, and back to baseball the following day. After a night baseball game, we have approximately 13 hours from the last out until the gates open for the football crowd, to complete the task."

"The portable seating for football must be moved from storage on the parking lots onto the field. With such tight scheduling, we have no time to place plywood for protection, so forklifts must drive directly over the turf. We dry the field out to prevent excess damage by the machinery needed to complete the conversion. Even so, during such situations, we aren't able to offer ideal conditions for either football or baseball play."

Besides the double sport schedule, concerts and other special events are held at the stadium.

"Because so much takes place here, we've learned to consider it an 'entertainment facility' rather than just an 'athletic field,'" says Wightman. "Agronomically, we do our best to prepare. Aesthetically, the field suffers the consequences. We try to minimize the detrimental effects of any activity."

The top quality turf that greeted All-Star Game players, attendees, and TV viewers was the result of extra effort. As part of an intensified maintenance program, Wightman scheduled an application of potassium and nitrogen, along with a trace elements package of iron, manganese, and zinc, approximately eight days prior to the big game.

The field has a loamy-sand base, with 8 percent silt-clay and 92 percent fine-to-medium sand.

"We converted the field from Santa Ana to Tifgreen 328 hybrid bermuda this year," says Wightman. "We can mow lower and get a better base surface since the stems are not as stiff. Because of our high maintenance schedule and fertilization program, there's a lot of grain in the grass. Out outfielders complained that the ball "snaked," (followed the mowing patterns in the turf) making it harder to field. With the new Tifgreen and few cul-

tural changes, the "snake" has been virtually eliminated and the players are happy, especially Tony Gwynn."

Help From Others

Wightman worked with fertility consultant Mark Altman of Altman and Altman Consulting, Marshall, MN, on the pre- and post-game dress up, as part of a long-term relationship. Altman conducts soil and tissue analysis on the Jack Murphy Stadium sand-based field three or four times each year. Since the 7.5 pH and elevated phosphate level tie up nutrients, the resulting deficiency must be addressed on a continuous basis. Nutritional recommendations are adjusted to "minimize the damage" on the heavily used field.

With nine play-free days following the big game, Wightman's crews renovated the field.

"We scalped the bermuda from 9/16 to 1/2 inch, verticut, dethatched, and core aerated to a depth of 3-1/2 inches," Wightman explains. "Then we topdressed with pure fine-to-medium sand and fertilized with a heavy feeding of potassium, some nitrogen, and a trace elements package. We deep watered, followed by a second deep watering over the weekend preceding the resumption of play."

The constant challenge of the sports turf field, monitoring, testing, the exploration of new techniques, are as intriguing to Wightman now as they were when he entered the profession.

"Since Tifgreen is the least cold-tolerant of the hybrid bermudas, I'm anticipating that it will go dormant two to three weeks sooner than Santa Ana's typical early December dormancy," Wightman says. "We'll still overseed with perennial rye the first part of October and monitor the results."

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Wightman credits several, well-known

sports turf experts with helping him "to learn along the way," including Dr. Jim Watson, Steve Cockerham, Dr. Bill Daniels, Dr. Kent Kurtz, and the late Dr. Jackie Butler of Colorado State University.

Wightman says, "Dr. Butler was just a phone line away. I'd call about a problem, and at 7 a.m. the next day, he'd meet me for breakfast and a review of the field."

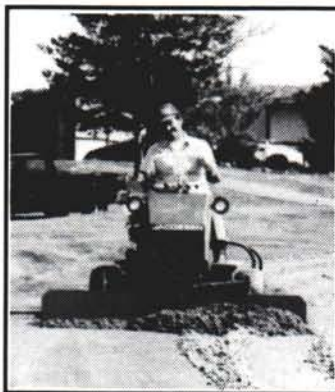
The Sports Turf managers Association is another avenue he credits for information exchange. He served on the board shortly after joining the national organization, spent one year as treasurer, served two terms as president (1985-86 and 1986-87), and spent two more years on the board as past president. He is currently a board advisor.

He also teaches at Cuyamaca College in El Cajon, CA, sharing a 16-week golf course and sports turf management program with a golf course superintendent. Each teaches an eight-week curriculum, which combines classroom sessions with four Saturdays of hands-on experience.

So far, the All-Star Game choreography isn't part of the program. □

Editor's note: Bob Tracinski is manager of public relations for the John Deere Company in Raleigh, NC.

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