

# CHALKBOARD

## Coach Knows Practice Fields

Coach Howard Schnellenberger is used to winning. He knows what it takes, including the need for championship level football practice fields.

Schnellenberger has been associated with championship football since beginning his career at his alma mater, the University of Kentucky, as an assistant to Blanton Collier in 1959. Next, he spent five years as assistant to Bear Bryant at the University of Alabama. During that period, Alabama won three national championships and four bowl games.

He spent several years with the Los Angeles Rams, with Don Schula and the Miami Dolphins when they went undefeated and won the world championship in 1972, and as head coach of the Baltimore Colts in the 1970s.

Returning to college coaching, he led the University of Miami Hurricanes to the national championship with a one-point win over Nebraska in 1983. In 1985, Coach Schnellenberger returned to his hometown of Louisville to take over the struggling football program at the University of Louisville.

When he came to Louisville, the university did not have a practice site. Building one was one of his first priorities.

"We carved out 14 acres next to a parking lot here at the fairgrounds," says Schnellenberger. "We had to bulldoze down some cattle pens, take out some trees, even blast out some rock."

Cardinal Stadium, where the University of Louisville plays its home games, is located on the grounds of the Kentucky Fair and Exposition Center, a 425-acre site six miles from downtown Louisville. Renovated in 1982, Cardinal Stadium is also home to baseball's Louisville Cardinals, a major farm team of the St. Louis Cardinals. For football, the stadium seats 35,000 people.

With the main University of Louisville campus only about two miles away, and



Coach Howard Schnellenberger (right) and Tico's Grady Stone.

space available on the grounds, it made sense to locate the practice fields at the Exposition Center.

"We put in two top-of-the-line full size practice fields, each with an 18-inch crown in the center and french drains along the sides," Schnellenberger says. An additional 180-yard field also was put in, where offensive and defensive backs can practice running their routes.

"We put the entire 15-acre site under sprinklers, then sprigged-in Midiron Bermudagrass," the coach says. "This is about as far north as Midiron will grow, so it's been a tedious process. Bermudagrass goes dormant after the first frost, usually in November, so in October we overseed the fields with perennial ryegrass. That gives us a green field through the season and on through the year. In winter, we blow straw onto the field to 'bed it down' and give it some protection."

The practice fields get a lot of wear and tear, not only from spring football and the fall season. Coach Schnellenberger and his staff host a youth football camp during the summer. And, during the six home football games, the practice fields are used for a "tailgate" area.

"We get tents on them, trucks driving on them, thousands of people tramping around on the practice fields. At least one irrigation line gets broken every home football game. Somebody manages to drive a tent stake into one."

Keeping his practice field in top shape takes patience, along with plenty of topdressing and a good aeration program, Schnellenberger says. "Bermuda loves sandy soil—but we have heavy clay here, so we're forever putting more sand on the fields. Because the heaviest wear and tear during practice is between the hashmarks, we have to keep adding sand to maintain the center crown."

In past years, groundskeepers aerated the practice fields twice, in spring and fall. This season, Coach Schnellenberger worked out a special service arrangement with local Cushman dealer, Tico, Inc. to aerate the practice fields at least three times, and more if needed.

"With their new GA 60 Aerator, we can aerate the practice fields in four to six hours," Schnellenberger says.

"Before, it took at least four days and sometimes longer to get over the fields. It will allow us to aerate as often as needed.

"We plan to aerate at least three times during the year, but we'll do it an extra time or two if necessary. With the soil we have and the wear and tear the fields get, I don't think eight times would be too much."

Aerating and topdressing go hand in hand on the practice fields. Besides helping the bermudagrass grow healthier for a better playing surface, the aeration holes provide extra area for the topdressing to infiltrate the turf.

"It's a personal goal of mine to have the best practice fields north of the Florida state line," says Schnellenberger.

"I'm out there just about every day making sure they are kept in shape. The beauty of it is, the fields have gotten better every year, in spite of the tough conditions."

Like his practice fields, Coach Schnellenberger's University of Louisville Fighting Cardinals keep getting better too. They finished with a 10-1-1 record in 1990, beat Alabama 34-7 in the 1991 Fiesta Bowl, and wound up 12th in the final national collegiate rankings. □