

STMA PROFILE: THE RISE OF JESSE CUEVAS

By Steve and Suz Trusty



Imagine spending your work week with TV camera crews—and thus the eyes of sports fans nationwide—looking over

your shoulder. That's the reality just played out by Jesse Cuevas, the stadium superintendent of Johnny Rosenblatt Stadium, Omaha, NE, home of the College World Series.

With the opening and championship games broadcast on CBS affiliates and week-long coverage by ESPN, Cuevas and his crew gave viewers an "up close and personal" course in ball field preparation and grooming.

Whether it was perfect baseball weather or pouring rain, Cuevas was there with the crews, directing the action to keep things moving like a well-oiled machine. Would play be suspended during the downpour or continue to satisfy TV schedules? Whatever the call (and it was play ball), Cuevas and his crew were there to deliver the best possible playing surface under existing conditions. During a Friday night drenching, 27 bags of Turface (calcined clay), plus 10 bags of Turface Quick Dry, and lots of work, kept the field playable. Cuevas and crew presented players with top quality conditions for the Saturday CWS finals, won by the Waves of Pepperdine University.

Rosenblatt Stadium is the home of the Kansas City AAA affiliate team, the Omaha Royals, and the perennial host of the College World Series, an arrangement that began in 1950 and will continue through 1995. As part of the arrangement with the NCAA, the stadium has just undergone the first segment of an improvement program—the Rosenblatt 2000 Plan—which will entail the expenditure of \$8 million by 1995.

"We'll be a boiled-down version of a

major league park by the time we're finished with the expansion," says Cuevas. "Seating will grow to between 23,000 and 25,000."

The needs of the Omaha Royals and those of the CWS are closely intertwined—each benefits from the presence of the other. The AAA club gains a top-flight playing arena because of the improvements needed to retain the CWS action in Omaha. However, the short college series play alone could not justify the improved facility without the Royals season-long schedule.

Moving Forward

Juggling the needs of the Omaha Royals, the College World Series, and other city events is nothing new for Cuevas. In effect, he has "grown up" with the Rosenblatt routine. He started working at the stadium at age 16, and steadily moved up the ladder. He has worked at the stadium for 22 years, 15 with the city.

"I was fortunate to work under a real pro like Frank Mancuso," says Cuevas. "He made sure each step I took was a learning experience—about the facility, interaction with the crews, and the operations of city government. As I progressed, working under Frank was like having a safety net. If we ran into a problem, he'd scratch his head, think for a minute, and come up with a solution he'd discovered years before, to pull us out of trouble.

"I took over as stadium superintendent six years ago. It's amazing how smart you are when you're second in command, and how dumb you get when you're first."

Cuevas has worked the equivalent of two years of college into his hectic schedule by fitting classes in a bit at a time. He's concentrated mainly on business courses, attending the University of Nebraska at Omaha, Bellevue College, or Metropolitan Technical Community College. He reads "everything I can get my hands on" in turf management, attends turfgrass courses and conferences, and has been a member of the Sports Turf Managers Association since 1987. He's currently an STMA board member.

"I've appreciated being able to network with STMA members who were in the same situations, who related to the same problems, especially after losing Frank," says Cuevas.

He describes his position as that of a general manager. He says, "I may make the decisions, but it's the crews that make things happen. You're only as good as the people who work with you."

Cuevas has two permanently assigned, full-time people. His chief assistant is his brother, Terry, who started at the stadium 21 years ago as a "ball shagger." Terry covers overall maintenance, from work on the field to equipment handling, to plumbing. Mike Heidenriech, who serves as groundskeeper, has been with the stadium for 17 years. He started out as a bat boy. The three work closely together, coordinating activities. Cuevas calls it "running the place by committee." He has two other full-time employees that are not permanently assigned, and a part-time crew.

"With the shuffling of employees between three facilities, training and retraining are constants here," says Cuevas. "We like to start the part-timers in their late high school or early college years, so we can keep them for several years."

Cuevas has a hands-on, practical management style. Having come up through ranks has advantages. His staff knows he won't ask anything of them he wouldn't do himself.

At times, long hours are required. Cuevas says, "You've got to do what you've got to do. Usually, when the team is here we get into a routine. We do the more disruptive procedures when they are away. The day before a game is devoted to getting everything ready for play. During the CWS, we started at 7 a.m. on Friday and finished at the end of the game Saturday night—a 48-hour shift."

Making Improvements

A \$750,000 field renovation started at the end of the Royals' 1991 season. "Literally at the end," Cuevas notes. "During the last hour of the season on September 4, we took out the old bases



Rosenblatt field. Photo by Omaha World-Herald.

and the pitcher's mound rubber and sort of waved goodbye. The heavy equipment took over and started tearing things up that night. By noon on September 5, it looked an A-bomb had hit."

The original field was constructed in 1948. "The city didn't get its money's worth," Cuevas reveals. "We'd been told there was drainage tile, but none was found. Four inches of top soil was dumped over clay hard pan. It's a tribute to the skills of Frank Mancuso that the field held up as well as it did for all those years."

"The new field has a sand/peat growing medium, and though less than six months old, has grass roots five to six inches long and still going," he continues.

Cuevas and Greg Peterson, project director of the City Planning Department, knew they'd be on an extremely tight schedule to complete the renovation. Luck was with them, Cuevas recalls.

"We laid the last roll of sod on October 25 at 7 p.m., just in time for an Omaha Royals season ticket holder field preview party. Then temperatures dropped into the 20s and we got hit with a Halloween surprise—a freak storm that delivered several inches of ice and over a foot of snow. Even a one-day delay would have left us with bare ground in the infield and foul territory behind home plate."

An underground drainage system uses 1-1/4 miles of laterals, which drain into four six-inch storm drains. According to Cuevas, the system should be able to handle 10 to 11 inches of rain per hour right now.

"The most rain Omaha has ever received is 45 inches per year," says Cuevas. "So, theoretically, we could get the whole year's rain in five hours and still play ball 45 minutes later."

An underground sprinkler system replaced the old watering system of seven hoses and 12 hours of labor to put down 1/4 inch of water. "Now we can control when and where to water by pushing some buttons," says Cuevas. "We can put down three inches of water in five hours and be assured of complete coverage."

Some new equipment was included in this stage or renovation, including a tractor, top dresser, and sprayer.

"It was hard to coordinate equipment use and achieve the results we needed," explains Cuevas. "The city recognized that. Greg Peterson didn't want to spend a nickel more on the project than necessary, but he didn't want to spend a nickel less than needed to insure an excellent job."

Always planning ahead, he expects further improvements as the field matures. While TV commentators were singing the praises of the new field, he was making hands-on assessments.

"It will take two to three years to form heavy enough roots and a tighter knit surface to takes lots of punishment," he asserts.

Working before the cameras to a national audience doesn't bother Cuevas and his crews. They'll do the same job for the hometown crowd—keeping Rosenblatt Stadium looking great—because, as Cuevas says, "You've got to do what you've got to do." □

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