



## STMA PROFILE:

# PAUL ZWASKA GROWS INTO THE JOB

By Steve And Suz Trusty

View from the bull pens, Oriole Park at Camden Yards.  
Photo courtesy Don Roberts, STN Sports/Southern Turf Nurseries.

Vines trail behind the center field walls of Oriole Park at Camden Yard because a 10-year-old boy got hooked on groundskeeping instead of baseball.

Baltimore Orioles' head groundskeeper, Paul Zwaska, asked that those vines be part of the design as a special tribute to Wrigley Field—the ballpark where he discovered what he wanted to do when he grew up.

“Dad took me to watch the Cubs play at Wrigley Field,” Zwaska says. “I was like a kid at Christmas, in awe of everything—especially the field and the way those fellows knew just what to do to get it ready for play. That fascination hung on. Years later, when all my high school buddies were snapping photos of the ball players, I was taking shots of the ground crews in action.”

Now Zwaska works with his own seven-man grounds crew, grooming the PAT system field of the new Oriole Park.

A few things happened between then and now.

### Turning Childhood Dreams Into Adult Reality

Zwaska got into groundskeeping in 1979, working for an apartment complex. Three years later, he shifted to a private

golf course in his home town of Madison, WI. While he enjoyed these positions and thrived on the constant challenge working with turf provides, the pro ballpark was his goal.

In 1981, he enrolled at the University of Wisconsin in the sports turf program, an option in soil sciences in the School of Agriculture. His advisor, Dr. Jim Love, had trained a number of golf course personnel in the area. Along with the classroom workload, Love arranged for those who entered the sports turf program to get well-supervised, hands-on experience working under former students.

The sports turf program provided Zwaska with his first taste of ballpark groundskeeping. He interned under a master, Harry Gill at Milwaukee County Stadium.

Zwaska graduated in 1984 with a bachelor's degree in soil science with a specialty in turf and grounds management.

### Playing In The Big Leagues

Following Gill's advice, Zwaska waited until fall to send out resumes to several major league ball clubs.

“I sent two resumes to each club,” Zwaska remembers. “One to the head

groundskeeper, and one to the general manager. All the clubs I targeted were in the north. I'd had stronger experience with cool-season grasses and besides, I don't like the heat.”

Zwaska received a “no opening” letter from Baltimore's general manager—and a call from Pat Santarone asking him to come in for an interview.

The interview was short and conversational, with little probing into his background and experience. Santarone closed with the statement that there might be an opening, but Zwaska didn't feel encouraged.

Shortly after the interview, he was offered the position as Santarone's assistant. Later he learned that Harry Gill has recommended him and filled in all the basic information—Santarone was basically checking out the compatibility of personalities.

“I couldn't have had better mentors than Gill and Santarone,” says Zwaska. “Their level of knowledge and experience, combined with their commitment to continual learning and dedication to professionalism in the sports turf field gave me the role models for my own goals. I worked as Pat's assistant from 1985 through 1990, when he retired.





'Almost right' was not Pat's way. That insistence on perfection was an excellent method of instilling the importance of doing whatever it takes to establish and maintain a strong turf program."

Zwaska is enthusiastic about "The Brickyard." This new stadium combines the latest in turf technology with an "old-time" look so natural, you would expect Babe Ruth to come out of the dugout. (Actually, Ruth's father once owned a bar on a spot near the current center field.)

"There are advantages in starting from scratch," Zwaska says. "We've definitely done better than we could have done before PAT (Prescription Athletic Turf)."

### **New System Rejuvenates The Old Field**

Laurel Meade of Turfgrass Services Company, Inc., Pueblo, CO, was issued the PAT system marketing franchise right by Purdue University. Only designated franchises are authorized to install the system.

Zwaska and his crew worked side by side with STN Sports, a division of Southern Turf Nurseries, the franchise who handled the PAT system installation.

Danny Woodall, field operations manager for STN Sports says, "Being on-site on a daily basis is the best way to maintain a good working relationship between

the architect and the owner—and to insure the best possible finished product."

Adds Don Roberts, agronomist for STN Sports, "We definitely want the groundskeeper on hand throughout the process."

It would have been impossible to keep Zwaska away even if he was asked. He knew every inch of the old field, how it functioned, and what was needed to keep it in prime condition. He's committed to the same in-depth knowledge of the new field. To miss any part of the installation process would have been unthinkable.

All three agree that it's vital to be on-site to develop a total understanding of how the system operates. Also, if anything is unclear in theory, the groundskeeper has discretion to assure that adjustments deliver what he needs.

Roberts says, "The project took six months. Paul, his crew, and the whole Orioles operation were great to work with."

The 117,000 square feet of natural bluegrass sod grows on 9,000 tons of sand above a 2.69-acre, five-millimeter-thick, cross-laminated, reinforced polyethylene liner. A complex, subirrigation network—including 10,000 linear feet of two-inch PAT pipe, 2,000 linear feet of four-inch drain pipe, and 2,000 linear feet of six-inch drain pipe—allows water to be released or absorbed automatically according to sensor readings,

or overridden manually to fill specific needs. A 78-sprinkler head irrigation system can supply above-ground watering on demand, either triggered manually or tied into the automatic system.

Over the last 18 years, the PAT system has continually improved along with state-of-the-art electronics. The Oriole Park PAT is the latest in design—a pits and vacuum system, using vacuum-draining to control moisture levels.

Roberts classified the project as "a huge undertaking." The two bullpens are raised above field level, giving the fans a view of the warm-up in process. There is also a 5,000 square foot elevated nursery growing the same bluegrass turf under the same conditions as the field turf, as a reserve for use in rejuvenation, if necessary.

"In effect, three separate zones for the bullpens and the nursery, on different elevations than the main field are all connected into the main drainage system," Roberts says. "It's the first time this has been done."

"So far, the system has worked like a charm," says Zwaska. "We used the water-absorbing vacuum for the first time during the early May home stand. The players marvelled at the field. At our old facility, the field would have been mushy all week."

Zwaska continues, "We installed an artificial warning track in combination with the natural turf field. This way, we have no stone to replace. At the old park, we washed away 100 tons of stone dust each season. The artificial track is neater, cleaner, much easier to maintain, and eliminating the dust-filled runoff is better environmentally. We are getting a few extra ground rule doubles because of the extra bounce, though."

### **Dedication From The Whole Team**

The Orioles groundskeeping crew normally works out about eight months of the year. Unless the Orioles make the playoffs and World Series, the season stretches from March 1 to November 1. During those working months, each crew member puts in from 2,300 to 2,500 hours—working day and night on game days. (That's the equivalent of 50 weeks at 46-50 hours per week.)

"If there's any downside to the installation of the PAT system, it's that our crew lost the winter off," says Zwaska. "But the opportunity for the groundskeep-

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Paul Zwaska (in black hard hat) awaits next piece of sod to be laid on the infield. Photo courtesy Ronnie Potter.



PAT lines over the polyethylene liner. Photo courtesy Don Roberts, STN Sports/Southern Turf Nurseries.

## Zwaska Profile

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ing team to be in on the field development from the ground up more than makes up for it. They're a first rate crew; eager to grow with the program."

Sports turf management is always complex, subject to constant change—including the whims of nature and the effects of play. As always, Zwaska is thriving on the challenge.

"With the PAT system, the sports turf manager has at his command a high-tech tool box containing all the tools," says Roberts. "The end results of the PAT system are not in the basics of the design, but in how the turf manager uses the tools. Paul is really on top of it all."

Zwaska adds, "This profession intrigues and excites me as much now as it did when I was 10. Even though I'm in the pro area, I'll keep learning until the day I die."

That desire to keep the knowledge growing is what lead Zwaska to the Sports Turf Managers Association (STMA). "STMA is an excellent organization in which to share ideas and trade secrets. There's no better way to get acquainted with people in the industry," he notes.

Besides the national interaction provided by STMA, Zwaska promotes the advantages of getting active at the local level. He's currently a board member of the Chesapeake Chapter, and involved

with designing the yearly awards ceremony, working with the quarterly meetings, which bring in high-level speakers, and the annual field day, which offers demonstrations and hands-on experience.

"If it weren't for the groundskeeper, no matter what the size of the facility, you wouldn't have a good playing surface," says Zwaska. "It's especially important at the local level to support and encourage anyone who does a good job, to get the word out about those people and their programs."

"STMA and its members have the information and 'ammunition' to help at

the local level. We can assist in convincing a board or the funding people that sports turf management is vital and resources must be allocated to do the job properly."

The realities of the workplace demand the best possible combination of knowledge and experience. It takes commitment and dedication to strive for perfection in your field. For many people, that constant expenditure of effort becomes a drain. Paul Zwaska has managed to capture the enthusiasm and excitement he had at age 10—and bring it to the job with him each day. □



The Orioles' grounds crew standing on the newly completed pitcher's mound. Photo courtesy Ronnie Potter.