

STMA PROFILE:

KEN MROCK - SETTING TABLES FOR BEARS

Mrock's management responsibilities include McBubble, an air-pressurized fabric structure with an 80-yard artificial turf field that serves as the Bears' indoor practice facility.

By Bob Tracinski

When you talk about home turf, Ken Mrock's is Chicago. From caddying at the private Ridgemoor Golf Club at the age of 12, through supervising the park district's golf courses, to his present position as chief groundskeeper for the Chicago Bears, overseeing the Halas Hall premium practice facility and coordinating the Soldier Field program—Mrock has spent the greatest share of his life “on the turf.”

“I love the outdoors,” Mrock says. “Riding on a tractor is therapy for me. There’s just something about being out on the grass, working out the planning and procedures to make everything come together, that seems to be in my blood.”

Problems aren’t part of Ken Mrock’s vocabulary. Talk with him for a while and you’ll hear of challenges, opportunities, and interesting situations.

Mrock was born and raised in Chicago and has moved up steadily in the turf world. At age 16, he was working summers on the greens crew at Ridgemoor. After attending classes at Chicago’s Northeastern Illinois

University, he went to work for the Chicago Park District. By age 26, he was greenskeeper at Columbus Park Golf Course and rapidly developing his hands-on management style.

Learning Opportunities

In 1978, Mrock’s skill and dedication earned him the opportunity to work with Wadsworth Golf Course Construction Company on the Ken Killian and Dick Nugent designed Robert Black Golf Course.

“That was an unbelievable experience,” says Mrock. “To work with the course from the ground up, to bring the turf in from seed and get everything into playing condition, then to see the course do 50,000 rounds of golf a year.”

After four years, Mrock became superintendent of all six Chicago courses. With a crew of 70, he was responsible for close to 400 acres across the city. His hands-on style was an asset.

“Just getting around, getting to know all the courses and their individual crews was a challenge,” he says. Then there was the weather. “We have what we call the ‘lake effect.’ Temperatures at the lake can vary 15 degrees from those two to three miles away. There can be



Field at Halas Hall premium practice facility. Says Mrock, “They had never been able to use the field past October. The first thing I did (while still consulting part-time) was order tarps for the field.”

snow at the lake; sun within the city. But the crews were terrific and dedicated, a great bunch to work with. We always got the job done.”

At the same time, Mrock was working with the park district on the baseball and football field programs.

Mrock has long believed in increasing the level of professionalism within the industry. He worked closely with the University of Illinois to get a pesticide testing program established, and saw to it that all grounds related employees and all Chicago Park District exterminators became certified.

Mrock’s no stranger to Soldier Field. He was working the Field back in the Astro Turf days, handling the tarping, the heating and snow removal.

In 1985, Mrock met George Toma and a natural affinity developed. Through Toma's suggestion, Mrock began working with the Bears as a part-time consultant on Halas Hall. In 1987, he was one of a team of four original planners who undertook the conversion of Soldier Field to a natural grass PAT system field.

Keeper Of The Bears

January 1, 1988, Mrock left the park district to work with the Bears full time. With his increasing "bearing" on the Bears turf facilities and the ever-present park district responsibilities, something had to give. His upcoming advancement with the Chicago Park District would have made him director of golf course operations, a position heavily focused on the "paper-end" of management—the scheduling of use, the financial procedures. The Bears position offered more of the hands-on, outdoor connections on which he thrives.

The move did not mean less work, rather more work he enjoys. Twelve to 15 hours a day are the norm, with bursts up to 24. Mrock is never more than a phone call away.

"Without the love and support of my wife, Debbie, and kids, Jennifer, Timmy, and Kristina, I just couldn't do it," he

admits. "They make it great to be home."

Mrock is also responsible for McBubble, the air-pressurized fabric structure with an 80-yard Astro Turf field that serves as an alternative practice facility. When temperatures drop and the wind chill hits 20 to 35 degrees below zero, that 50 degree McBubble feels better to the players.

Maintaining that facility has added to Mrock's work load.

"It takes a lot of babysitting," says Mrock, who stops daily to make sure the pressure is correct.

Then there are the Chicago snow storms, during which McBubble must be constantly monitored. In order for pressure to be properly maintained, McBubble has to stay domed. Too much snow on top could bring down the bubble. As snow melts on top, it runs down the sides, building up around the base and pushing in the structure, changing the shape and threatening the proper pressurization. A six-inch snow can easily translate into 10 feet of melted ice buildup. A front-end loader is used to scoop this potential threat away.

Tim LeFevour, director of administration for the Bears, is in charge of all stadium operations at Soldier Field. Mrock "helps." He makes all the calls on

the field—handles all the pre-game field preparations, including calls on tarp placement and removals, last minute painting touch-ups, setting up the bench areas, cooling and heating equipment, for both teams. Then he oversees a few other "minor" tasks, like transporting injured players to the locker room for X-rays, monitoring the weather for any changes, referee and chain-gang needs, and even getting the players from both teams lined up for their pre-game T.V. introductions, and seeing to it that the V.I.P.s are all comfortably in place.

Mrock says, "With the very capable assistance of Soldier Field groundskeeper, John Nolan and Jim Duggan, Soldier Field stadium manager, these jobs all get done. These guys do a terrific job."

On September 5, Notre Dame and Northwestern played. The next day, the Bears held their season opener. A switch had to be made from the college hash-marks and field design to the pros. The field had to be put back into shape and the stadium prepared for the arrival of the next crowd. Because both games were televised nationally, the next set of T.V. crews needed to set up.

Says Mrock, "I called George Toma and Steve Wightman, the masters of change-

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overs, for some pointers on this one.”

Mrock is an active member of the Midwest Chapter of STMA and serves as treasurer of the national STMA.

Year-Round Preparations

“When I first started here [at Halas Hall], the Bears never had a groundskeeper before,” Mrock says. “They had never been able to use the field past October. The first thing I did (while still consulting part-time) was order tarps for the field.

“Then we concentrated on getting the turf back to a strong, healthy state. We covered the field when needed, blew heat under the tarps to keep the ground from freezing, and kept the rain and snow off.”

Mrock has continued to build on that program in his current position. He credits the support of assistant groundskeeper, John Berta.

“We use the covers a lot more now,” he explains. “By early January, the center of the field has nothing left. We reestablish the turf each year. Traditionally, along the lake we con-

tend with Northeast spring winds about 40 odd degrees, which greatly affects the soil temperatures. We use Evergreen Turf Blankets, which are greenhouse-effect covers, early in the year so we can establish a good foundation.”

The Bears football program goes year-round, which means the practice field must too. Athletes start workouts in the beginning of February, preparing for the mini camp and the upcoming season. These workouts are conducted in the McBubble. In the beginning of April, they're back outside. Then comes mini-camp, with 80 guys on the field for three days. Mrock then has three weeks to whip things back into shape. This year's program consisted of some spot regrading, aeration, the addition of calcined clay and starter fertilizer, the application of pre-germinated seed, and the help of the turf covers. This season brought a late spring and early summer drought, adding to the 'challenge.'

Mrock is always looking for a new and better way of doing things.

“We're trying out a new seed from Germany, *Poa supina*, a grass they are using in parks, athletic fields, practice fields, even Olympia stadium,” he says. “It's more drought-resistant and it seems that the more traffic it takes, the more aggressive it becomes. We've added 18 percent of it to our regular 50/50 mix of bluegrass and perennial ryegrass.”

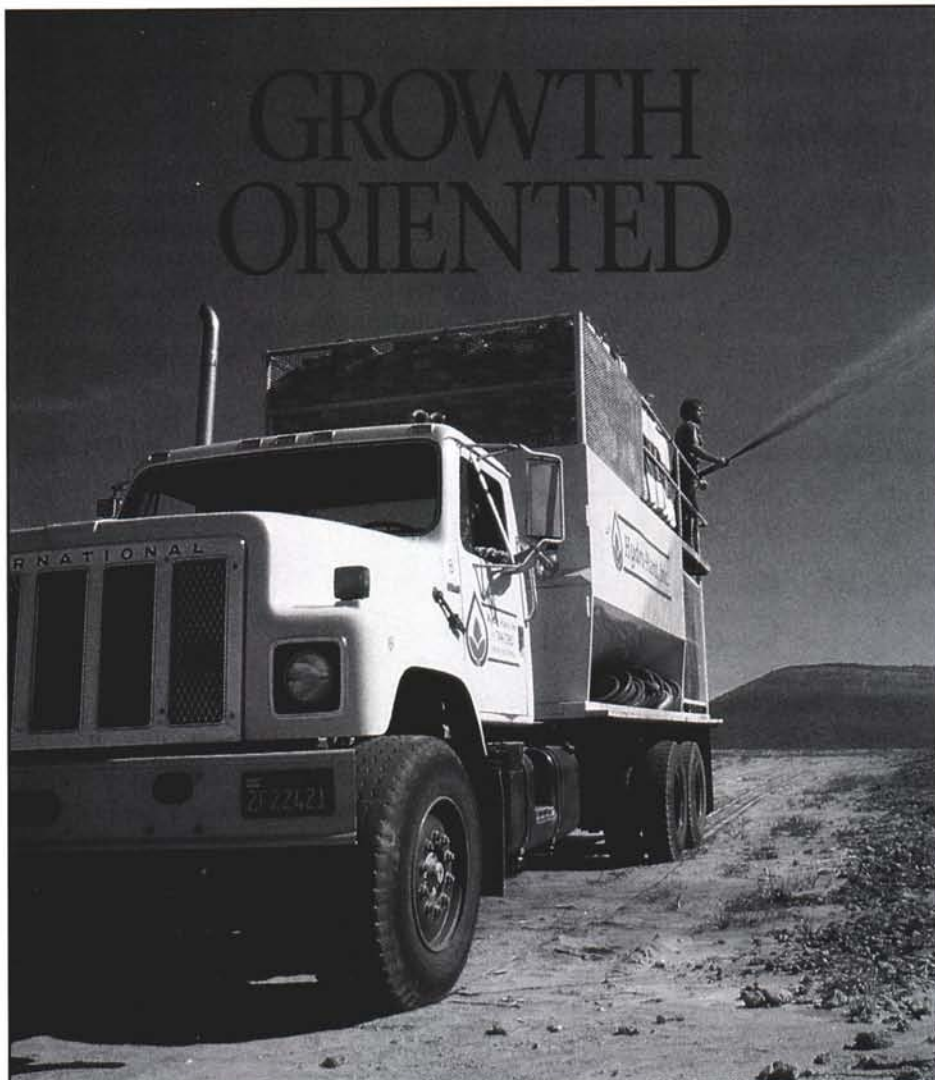
Once the three weeks of renovation are completed, the off-season football program begins again. Thirty to 50 guys spend two hours a day conditioning and running patterns. Mrock says, “It's not as intense as practice, but it still gives the field quite a workout.”

On July 22, the players headed out, giving Mrock and Berta a chance to “beef things up” for their return and the regular season action, which will last into January. In addition, five college games will be played on this same field. The “beef-up” program included knotweed control, aerification, hand work, and spot seeding.

Does the premium practice facility, McBubble, and the improved Soldier Field make a difference? In the past seven years, the Bears have made the play-offs six times.

Mrock says, “We set the table for the athletes. It's our job to get that table perfectly set.” □

Editor's Note: Bob Tracinski is the manager of public relations for the John Deere Company in Raleigh, NC, and public relations chairman for the Sports Turf managers Association.



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