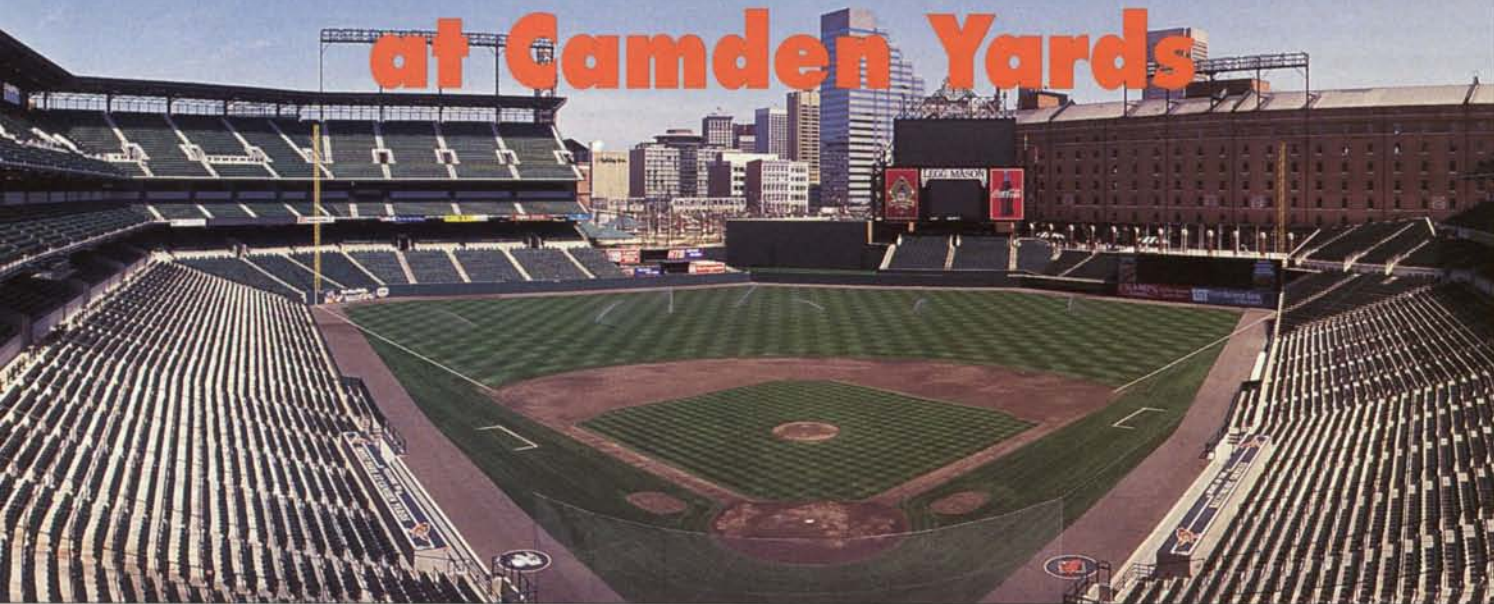


Spring Irrigation Tune-Up at Camden Yards



Irrigation in action at Camden Yards. Photo courtesy Rain Bird.

Working out the rough spots, discovering strengths and weakness, coming together as a team—that's what spring training is all about in Major League Baseball. It's a time of discovery and evaluation for rookies. A "hot prospect" may turn out to be lukewarm, a "sleeper" wide awake. Veterans come to polish their talents under the critical eyes of owners, managers and coaches.

But spring training isn't just for the "boys of summer." Professional field managers also must gear up for the coming season. As the Baltimore Orioles gear up for another season, so too must those who care for the team's field, Oriole Park at Camden Yards. With 81 home games played there at the park each year, which was constructed in 1991 and opened in 1992, the field takes almost as much abuse as a visiting team's mascot.

Paul Zwaska, head groundskeeper, makes sure the field can stand up to the grueling schedule in top condition at all times. Among the many ways he ensures field health — fertilization, aeration, mowing and more — is focusing on preparing the irrigation system for the new season.

Strictly Baseball

Oriole Park at Camden Yards is used strictly for baseball. Monster trucks, motocross and rock concerts do not "grace" this exceptional, natural

grass facility. Down to the green slat seats, the stadium is true to its "old-time baseball" roots.

Field construction, however, is anything but old-time. The field itself is a Prescription Athletic Turf (PAT™) system, which features positive drainage (see February 1993 *sportsTURF*). The irrigation system integrates Rain Bird R-70 and R-50 rotors to deliver even water distribution.

"Because the stadium is only used for baseball, we have a good window of time to prep the field for the next season," Zwaska explains. "In fact, we start immediately after the season has ended in fall to prepare for spring."

Winter to Spring

Camden Yards is subject to freezing. That means after the baseball season has ended, the irrigation system must be "winterized." The entire system must be drained of water, which would, if left in the system, freeze, expand and possibly burst the irrigation piping.

System drainage is accomplished by carefully pushing a large volume of air, generated by a compressor, from the point of connection through the lines. The air forces any remaining water in the pipes through each zone in the system. After the system is drained, Zwaska turns off the controller for the winter. For a few months, the field "rests."

As the spring season approaches,

the water is turned on and run through the lines without using the irrigation system's booster pump. At 50 psi, the city's water pressure is low enough to avoid bursting pipes, but high enough so Zwaska and his crew can detect any water distribution problems.

After running the water through the system at 50 psi, Zwaska checks out the system at 110 psi, using the booster pump. If all is well, the water will remain at 110 psi for the rest of the season.

Zwaska's years of experience help him fine-tune Oriole Park's irrigation system. He is, however, occasionally thrown a curve.

"You have to adjust," he explains.

His flexibility has been put to the test of late by the "Storm of the Century," which left snow piled high on the field just a few weeks before the start of the regular baseball season. "Right now, we're using the irrigation system to melt snow off the field," he says.

Oriole Park at Camden Yard is a showpiece of natural fields. As such, it has already come under intense scrutiny. Zwaska isn't fazed, but knows he is, in a sense, also under the spotlight, particularly when it comes to maintaining and managing irrigation.

"I better be a good water manager," he notes. "The club offices face the field, and every irrigation move I make gets noticed." □