

1993 College Diamond Of The Year:

Mitchell Field Is The Real McCoy

By Bob Tracinski



Above: L. Dale Mitchell Field, home of the Oklahoma Sooners baseball team.

Below: Baseball field superintendent Monte McCoy (right) with Sooners head baseball coach Larry Cochell.



What makes a true winner? Is it talent and hard work, a tremendous work ethic and a drive for perfection? Or is it something less obvious, like a simple fear of failure? Perhaps it's all of these things, and *more*.

"Attention to detail is what separates a really good field from a great one," enthuses Monte McCoy, baseball field superintendent at the University of Oklahoma's L. Dale Mitchell Field, the 1993 Beam Clay College Baseball Diamond of the Year. "There's no aspect of the maintenance program that doesn't benefit from tending to the details.

"Field care is basically a lot of hard work," he continues. "You have to know what you want to achieve and have the dedication to keep working toward your goals. There's never a dead period. There's always more that we want to do than we can find time to do. We can see the results of our work and take pride in keeping the facility at the top level, nationwide."

The drive, reflected in the words of McCoy, is a long-standing Oklahoma "Sooner" tradition. It can be found from the school's administration, to its coaching staff, players, and maintenance crew.

Like McCoy, head baseball coach Larry Cochell is a "stickler for details." Under his direction, says McCoy, the grounds crew has become an incredibly detail-oriented group. The entire coaching staff, he adds, including hitting coach Pat Harrison and pitching coach Vernon Ruhle, understand the impact of a superior field on play, and they offer the crew hints, such as developing a major league mound. In turn, they depend on McCoy and his team to keep the diamond in top shape.

"This is the second year for my staff, student assistants Will Herren and Matt Lunnon," says McCoy. "They're dedicated guys, ready and able to put out what's needed to get the job done right. They'll both graduate this year and I'll miss them. The supervisor from the football athletic maintenance division, Don Hatcher, and his staff are also a great help. They've shared their equipment with us and that benefit will be even more important, since the football field is in the process of switching to natural turf. They also see to it that we get help with some of the time-consuming facility upkeep projects like painting the outfield railings and fences."

Yet another "plus" the program realizes comes from consulting agronomist

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Don Eckroat of Eckroat Seed, based in Oklahoma City.

Always In The Game

McCoy didn't start out in baseball with field maintenance in mind. Baseball, he says, was "the family game," and he played for two years at El Reno Junior College and "walked on" as an Oklahoma University player in the fall of 1989. At that time, his brother Gary, now head coach at Eastern Oklahoma Junior College, was an assistant coach at O.U.

When McCoy was cut from the team the next year, he couldn't stand being away from the game. His brother Gary helped him land a part-time position as student assistance coach, which also included hands-on experience working on the field. Field care, he says, became a passion and he read everything he could find on the subject. He also became active in the Oklahoma Sports Turf Managers Association, and traveled to observe other fields and pick up tips from fellow sports turf managers. In the fall of 1991, he was named baseball field superintendent at O.U.

Though an NCAA ruling that took effect in January of 1993 meant he could no longer coach at the university, McCoy remains active in the coaching arena. His American Legion Team in Norman, OK, placed third in last year's American Legion Baseball World Series in Roseburg, OR. This summer, he'll be head coach of a collegiate summer league team in the Red River College League at Oklahoma City.

Although McCoy will graduate from the university this May with a degree in health science, he intends to stay on as field superintendent.

"I try to keep learning, no matter which side of the field I'm on," he says. "Viewing the field as both a player and coach makes me even more aware of the importance of details as a field superintendent. The little things *do* matter."

On The Field

L. Dale Mitchell Field was completed and dedicated in 1981. Lights were installed in the summer of 1988. Named for former Sooner and major leaguer, L. Dale Mitchell, the \$1,270,000 facility was financed by a combination of private donations and athletic department funds. The field is located just south of the University of Oklahoma, Norman campus.



McCoy and his crew pay particular attention to the diamond's skinned areas.

The field is used 10 months of the year, hosting nearly 80 games and the Sooner All-Star Baseball Camps, along with six weeks of fall practice. The university team practice begins in January and play extends through May and "as far as we can go into the College World Series," says McCoy. The Oklahoma High School State Championships and the NAIA District Nine Playoffs move in the first two weeks of May; the Sooner State Games are held the last weekend of June; an American Legion Tournament takes place July 4; the Oklahoma All-State Games are held the last week of July; and various other American Legion games and tournaments are worked into the schedule. Some O.U. players come in for workouts in August, and the field needs to be back in top shape for full-fledged practices in September.

A new infield and foul ground were installed in the summer of 1991, raising the grade of the field and eliminating the low spot "bird baths." Native black top soil was used to create the two-percent grade requested by the coaches. This improved drainage immediately, and it has continued to improve with the addition of washed masonry sand as the infield top-dressing material.

During the first week of October, when most students head out for the O.U.-Texas game, the common bermudagrass turf is overseeded with 1,200 pounds of a perennial ryegrass blend of Boardwalk and Elegance. If necessary, the outfield is dethatched prior to overseeding. The seeding rate is 15 pounds per 1,000 square feet in the outfield, a little heavier in the infield. The staff overseeds the outfield in three different directions with a tractor-pulled drill seeder. The infield is covered in four different directions with a walk-behind dethatcher-drill seeder to ensure proper coverage. Following overseeding, the field is topdressed with screened and sterilized masonry sand. A pregerminated seed/quick-drying cal-

cined clay mixture is kept on-hand during the spring playing season to fix any divots or problem areas.

After overseeding, the field is saturated to a 1-inch depth. Following saturation, the seed is kept moist, but not saturated, until the seedlings sprout. The staff then starts irrigating more deeply and less frequently as needed to encourage deeper rooting.

The field is equipped with an 11-station Toro 8000 automatic sprinkler system, which averages four heads per station. The foul ground area uses spider heads to limit "overshooting." The system can be set automatically or handled manually. McCoy can "tie into" the main landscape department via computer to set up his irrigation program when he's off-site.

L. Dale Mitchell Field is fertilized at a 1- to 1 1/2-pound rate with 20-5-10 water soluble, quick-release fertilizer as needed from March to September. Generally, timing is every four weeks during the season — four to six weeks as field activity slows. Starting in 1993, Nutralene, a slow-release fertilizer, was applied in June to help supplement the deficient nitrogen used. McCoy has found that the slow-release fertilizer generates an even, sustained grass growth, producing a steady color response without excessive clippings. They'll continue to use both quick-release water soluble and controlled-release fertilizers.

Soil tests are run three times a year, usually in September, January and May. Additional potash may be added in June, July and August, depending on soil test results.

A water-soluble, high-nitrogen fertilizer is used during the transition period to help cause stress to the perennial ryegrass. This, along with the rising temperatures, will help stimulate the bermudagrass. An 11-11-22 winterizer fertilizer is applied in November, along with lime or sulphur to adjust soil pH if

soil test results indicate a need. Ferromec liquid iron supplement is applied prior to major events and two to three weeks after fertilization to provide aesthetic green-up without generating significant top growth.

The field is core aerated in April and June. Cores are dragged, broken, and redistributed with a drag mat pulled by a utility vehicle. For the last two years, the field has been aerated in July with an 8-inch tine spike aerifier. The aerator opens up the soil and fractures the hardpan that develops under the surface as a result of core aerifying. The deep aeration helps water and air reach the root zone, stimulates growth, relieves compaction, and improves percolation.

A preemergent herbicide is applied on or before March 15 to control grassy weeds. Broadleaf weeds and annual coarse grasses are spot-treated as necessary with the post-emergent herbicide Trimec Plus.

During the spring season, the ryegrass is mowed nearly every day, and double cut on game days. The outfield is maintained at a 1 1/2-inch height with a triplex reel rider mower. The infield is cut at 1 1/4-inch with a walk-behind reel mower. Mowing direction is rotated with each mowing from home to third, home to first, and home to second. This rotation keeps the grass growing vertically, combats tire compaction, and gives the field a striking "checkerboard" look.

In May, along with an extra kick of ammonium nitrate, the ryegrass is stressed by cutting back on irrigation and lowering the mowing height to 1 inch in the outfield, and 3/4 to 7/8 inch in the infield. The bermudagrass thrives on the lower mowing height, higher temperatures, and drier conditions. As the bermuda gains strength following the transition, the infield mowing height is moved up to 1 inch.

Every two weeks, the edges are recut between the turf and the skinned areas and between the turf and warning track to keep the bermudagrass looking good within dimensions. After each practice or game, the staff blows the accumulated soil and calcined clay from the edges with a hand-held blower to keep problem lips from forming. This eliminates the "wilt-over" effect on the ryegrass caused by broom treatment of the edges. Two or three times a week, the staff sprays off the edges with a high-pressure water hose.

In the fall of 1991, the existing clay-based skinned area was removed. The ren-

ovated skinned area consists of 70 percent topsoil, 20 percent sand, eight percent clay, and a two-percent combination of calcined clay and soil stabilizer. After practice ends in October, 30 to 40 tons of infield mixture is added to the low places on the skinned areas. This is worked into the existing soil, leveled, and then rolled with a 2 1/2-ton vibrating roller. Work begins again on the skinned area during Christmas break, gradually increasing to three times a week, then to every day.

During the season, the skinned areas are scarified and dragged daily. Scarification is done with 6-by-4-foot nail drag pulled behind a utility vehicle. The skinned area is groomed with a 3 1/2-inch-by-6-foot drag mat. Such high-traffic areas as the baselines and base areas are then rolled to ensure proper footing and groomed with a push broom. Once a week, the baselines, mound, and home plate area are sifted with a wire screen to eliminate clods.

The mound and home plate area are worked every day to maintain a smooth, firm, and well conditioned area. Holes in the landing areas are refilled with clay, wetted, and tamped to match the moisture and texture of the surrounding soil. Prior to the 1993 spring season, the staff resurfaced the landing areas of the pitcher's mound and batter's boxes with Beam Clay's pitcher's mound and home plate mixture. This has provided for less maintenance, extremely good footing, and a surface that all the players have preferred.

During the 1993 season, the park extended and lowered the dugouts,

extended seating, and added 800 theater seats. On the horizon are 3,000 more seats, a new outfield fence, new locker rooms to serve the home team (allowing the current locker facilities to be used for umpires and visiting teams), new storage buildings, and a players' clubhouse.

"The administration is great to work with," says McCoy. "They understand our needs and try to assist us as much as possible. But as with all universities, there are budget constraints. We're looking forward to the merger of the Big 8 and Southwest Conference as a means to increase the interest and emphasis on the baseball program. Ideally, increased funds will be generated."

True to the Sooner spirit of competition, McCoy and his crew will continue and even improve upon the program and commitment that made L. Dale Mitchell Field the 1993 College Diamond of the Year. □

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. The Beam Clay Baseball Diamond of the Year Awards are sponsored jointly by Beam Clay, the Sports Turf Managers Association, and sportsTURF Magazine in recognition of excellence and professionalism in maintaining outstanding, safe, and professional-quality diamonds. Winning diamonds are named in professional, college, and school/municipal/park categories.

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