STMA FOOTBALL FIELD OF THE YEAR:

GOING LONG AT FITTON FIELD

By Bob Tracinski

Commitment to excellence is the driving force throughout the campus of the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, MA. Perhaps it stems from the traditions of fierce determination established by those early settlers who carved their living from the New England wilderness. Surely it's been tempered by the realities of coping with the extremes of New England weather. But most of all, it's embedded in the spirit of the people for whom "good enough" means "the best that can be accomplished."

The College of the Holy Cross is a Jesuit, liberal arts institution, which was founded in 1843. Current undergraduate enrollment is 2,800. Its 175-acre campus is situated on the northern slopes of a modest hill named Mount St. James.

Commitment to excellence is also the driving force behind the 1993 Sports Turf Managers Association Football Field of the Year — Fitton Field, the varsity gridiron of the College of the Holy Cross.

This is the ninth national award presented to the grounds department staff — the 15 people who maintain those 175 acres. The four divisions do the "whole thing" in-house. The greenhouse and landscape division handles the landscaping for new construction, plant installation, and maintenance. All of the annuals used in planting and more than 3,000 house plants are raised in campus greenhouses. The general grounds division covers trash pickup and litter control, general maintenance, mowing, and hedge trimming. The motor pool services and maintains 60 vehicles.

Practicing at Fitton Stadium is a treat for the Holy Cross football team. One reason is that problems with the turf are solved by a team of dedicated specialists.

A remarkable three-man crew maintains and services the entire Holy Cross athletic grounds — foreman John Brosnihan, crew chief Sam Alcorn, and laborer Steve McCann. In addition to Fitton Field, these same three men are responsible for the varsity baseball field, the freshman baseball field, five natural turf practice fields, one artificial turf field, one intramural field, one softball field, one soccer field, 13 tennis courts, a running track, and a cross country track. The only assistance they normally require from the rest of the crew is for stadium clean-up the day after a football game.

Superintendent of Grounds James D. Long is in his thirty-fifth year at Holy Cross. A neighborhood kid, he joined the grounds crew as a laborer in the summer of 1958. Soon after, Father Gillis, S.J. took him under his wing. Gillis wrote to Pennsylvania for their agriculture program's reading list, and Long developed the routine of reading the books and giving a full report to Gillis. Long completed the Penn State agriculture program and absorbed "everything that was available" in extension training from the University of Massachusetts and through Holy Cross.

"Father Gillis made me resourceful," says Long. "He taught me to go out and get the answer. It was the best combination of practical training and technical experience. I loved what I was doing and the more I learned about it the more I wanted to know.

"Everything that happens on campus contributes to the excellence of the college," he continues. "It was that way when I started in 1958 and it's that way now. The work you do matters and how you do that work matters, whether

John Brosnihan refreshes paint on team logo in the endzone of Fitton Field.

you're on the board of trustees, part of the administration, part of the teaching staff, part of the maintenance crew, or the college president. The entire team is committed to excellence."

Long worked his way up on the grounds crew, then on the greenhouse crew. In 1977 he was named superintendent of grounds.

"We 'team solve' problems," he enthuses. "I meet with division foremen twice a day, in the morning and at noon. We all know what needs to be accomplished and how we're doing at reaching our goals. I meet regularly with my supervisor, Gerard A. Zimmerman [physical plant director] on the same team solving basis. That process is followed throughout the college.

"Although each department has its own areas of responsibility, everyone pitches in on any project when circumstances call for it," he adds. "Grounds maintenance jobs don't go by the clock. We were all out there moving mountains of snow in January."

Long is a strong believer in continuing the learning process. He's an active

continued on page 24

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The Holy Cross crew is able to provide a deep-green natural turf field despite severe winters in Worcester with a combination of tarps, fungicides, fertilizers, and charcoal chips.

STMA Football Field of the Year

continued from page 23

member of the New England Chapter and the national Sports Turf Managers Association and of the national Professional Grounds Management Society. And, he points out, his bookshelves "are loaded."

Long also believes in "giving back" to the industry. He's served on the national boards of both STMA and PGMS — he was chairman of the STMA scholarship and research grants committee for six years. He's written numerous articles for major trade publications and penned the chapter on "Snow Removal with Facility Management, A Manual for Physical Plant Administrators" for the Association of Physical Plant Administrators.

The Holy Cross grounds are terraced on five levels. Fitton Field is located at the base of the hill, on the lowest terrace level. The varsity baseball field is next to it, on the same level. Fitton Field, constructed in 1905, has played host to some of the greatest teams in college football history — Army, Harvard, Georgia, Syracuse, and Penn State, to name a few.

The area that is now Fitton Field was originally a marsh bordering the Blackstone River. The football and baseball fields were created by filling in the marsh with cinders from a nearby steel mill. That cinder layer is approximately four feet deep. It provides the drainage for the grassy areas.

A heavy clay soil covers the cinders. For Fitton Field, this clay is topped with an 18-inch layer of loam. The original turf was established by seeding and seeding is used during the annual renovations. The field has never been sodded.

Maintaining a college athletic field in New England presents many challenges. One major problem is the late winter flooding that occurs when the snow melting on Fitton Field is joined by the runoff from Mount St. James. Since Fitton Field is at the lowest point on the campus, it becomes a natural repository for all drainage, so much so that an early thaw followed by a freezing of the water sometimes gives the field the appearance of a natural ice skating rink.

The stadium stands tend to block sunlight from the field, extending the icy conditions in open winters. To alleviate this potentially damaging situation, the ice is fractured with an aerator. Then a mix of approximately 50 percent 1/4-inch charcoal chips and 50 percent urea fertilizer is spread to cause melting. This procedure, along with the November application of a fungicide to prevent snow mold, helps see the field safely through the harsh New England winter.

Other conditions have contributed to field maintenance problems in the past. During the 1980s, Fitton Field served multiple uses. Junior varsity football, lacrosse and field hockey were played there, as well as varsity football. The field was used for such non-athletic events as rock concerts, an Evel Knievel stunt show, and a national drum and bugle corps competition.

The field was irrigated using a mobile water cannon. The cannon was pulled to the field and hooked to a hydrant. It was capable of delivering one inch of water to an acre in one hour.

These conditions now have been alleviated through the implementation of a five-point plan, completed over a period of six years, to upgrade the athletic facilities of the college.

A new policy eliminates non-athletic events from Fitton Field.

Five new turf practice fields have been added at the "top of the hill."

A new artificial turf outdoor practice field was constructed, also at the "top of the hill." This field is a resource for all sports, which keeps play off the turf fields when conditions are poor, avoiding excessive turf damage.

Irrigation systems, incorporating Toro 640 heads, have been installed on all turf athletic fields.

As part of the plan, the Fitton Field stadium was equipped with all new aluminum seating in a horseshoe shape and a new VIP box.

Fitton Field use is now limited to varsity football's five games a year, though it's possible a Canadian Football franchise may make use of the field in the future.

In the 1970s, when Long became superintendent, there wasn't much choice in grass varieties. Maintaining quality turf sports fields was a constant battle. There was little consistency in the grasses. Discoloration was a major problem when turf was cut short for fall play. In 1977 and 1978, Long incorporated herbicide weed control and the new Manhattan perennial ryegrass into the athletic field program.

The 1990s seed mix is an athletic blend containing a combination of Kentucky bluegrasses and improved Manhattan Perennial ryegrass. Prior to spring fertilization, Fitton Field is topdressed with a 50:50 mix of screened loam and washed brick sand, aerated, and vertically sliced and seeded.

The grass is cut at 2-1/2 to three inches during the summer months to devel-

Jim Long credits Father Gillis for making him resourceful.

op a strong root system. In late August and early September, the grass is cropped down to 1-1/2-inch for seasonal play.

Depending on the weather, the initial cropping may cause discoloration and burning. In this event, an application of nitrogen and iron fertilizer at half-rate, followed by heavy watering causes the grass to green up within a week.

Fitton Field requires an average of 1-1/2 to two inches of water per week during the season. Hot summers and areas of compaction, such as those along the sidelines and bench areas, make it necessary to guard against crabgrass and knotweed. Grubs, especially Japanese beetles and chinch bugs, are familiar invaders.

The treatment program established for athletic fields includes applications prior to May 1 of crabgrass control, broadleaf weed control, surface insect control, and a balanced fertilizer delivering one pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet.

A second treatment includes broadleaf weed control, surface insect control, and another balanced fertilizer application. The third treatment combines a balanced fertilizer application with broadleaf weed control.

A fourth fertilizer application rounds out the fertilization program. In late November, a fungicide for snow mold prevention is applied to Fitton Field and the varsity baseball field.

The football field is aerated a second time during the fall season. The adjacent baseball field, which doubles as a parking area for home football games, receives more frequent aeration.

The now consistently excellent quality of the athletic fields provides the safest possible turf conditions for the college's athletes. And safety, which has always been a major consideration, is even more so now in these times of greater concern over liability.

Long attributes much of the program's success to the Holy Cross administration for its outstanding support of excellence in the quality of the college grounds and athletic facilities. "The whole secret is teamwork and a commitment to excellence," he says. "That support has to come from the top."

To grounds managers who have the capability but are frustrated by lack of administrative support for their efforts, the College of the Holy Cross serves as an example of the benefits that can be derived by investing in a sound grounds management program. ❑

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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