

STMA Profile:

TONY BURNETT KEEPS THE MAGIC

By Bob Tracinski

In 1962, Washington, D.C.'s RFK Stadium seemed pretty impressive to 17-year-old high school graduate Tony Burnett. He was looking forward to starting his summer job under chief groundskeeper Joe Mooney and learning more about what made the stadium complex tick. At the end of the summer, when Mooney asked him to stay and work a year before going on to college, Burnett knew he had much to learn and jumped at the idea.

parking lots, and buildings. He oversees a grounds crew of 14 and can "pull from" the cleaning and maintenance crew of 24 when necessary to complete a project.

There's a special "magic" to a professional sports stadium — each has a unique personality and its activities seem to take on lives of their own. That magic comes across to spectators on site, as well as to television audiences. Each venue has its own *image*.

Maintaining that image, making sure

"Our turf program here is adapted to our transition zone," says Burnett. "We're a little too far north for the warm-season grasses, and a little too far south for the cool-season grasses. Over the years, we've found a formula that is workable. Still, it is a continuing battle due to the weather conditions. We go with the warm-season bermudagrass [Tifway 419] as a base for its strong root structure, then overseed with a blend of perennial ryegrasses to give late-season color.

"RFK's sand-based, Prescription Athletic Turf [PAT™] system field was installed in 1979," he continues. "We were one of the pioneers of the PAT system. I'd say that they sort of 'went to school' on us. So there were a few quirks that had to be worked out, some 'growing pains' that we went through. Initially, we tried to grow bluegrass, but with winters that can be icy cold — with or without snow — and hot, humid summers that experiment just didn't work. Once we developed the multiple-grass program we're using now, we were able to develop a top-quality field."

Feedback from coaches and players confirms that RFK is indeed "one of the better fields in the league." That's quite a feat, considering the competition found in sunny California and Florida.

The stadium's PAT system features suction pumps for removal of excess water as necessary, as well as underground heating. "We mainly use the heat to keep the ground and turf above freezing," Burnett explains. "When we tried to extend the growing season with the underground heating, we sent mixed signals to the turf. The warm ground and cool air opened the door for invasion by pythium and other fungi. The heat is an emergency tool to keep the turf viable through the ice and snow.

"Basically, we rely on good field-cover management to extend the growing season," he continues. "We've found the vented cover essential with shifting weather conditions. Even the bermudagrass stops growing here around the first of October. Covering nightly to protect the turf from freezes and frost

continued on page 18



Bermudagrass sod brought in on May 15 provided a perfect playing surface for World Cup soccer in late June.

"And I got so caught up in the job and loved it so much that I never left," he enthuses.

When Mooney moved on to the Boston Red Sox in 1970, Burnett was ready to take over his position. "My official title is program director/agronomy," he says. "But I refer to myself as chief groundskeeper. It doesn't make much difference what the title is, the job is the same — you just do what needs to be done. With this multi-purpose facility, my job is to make it all come together."

Burnett's responsibilities extend beyond the playing field to include all of the stadium — Armory complex, 120 acres of turf, trees, shrubs, flower beds,

the public sees the complex in its uniqueness and ensuring that coaches and athletes have first-rate playing conditions is the driving force behind the efforts of Burnett, as well as sports turf managers nationwide.

Transition Zone Challenges

RFK Memorial Stadium is part of the aura of the nation's capital. Event attendees range from dedicated Redskins fans and Washington, D.C.-area concert buffs, to elected officials, tourists and foreign dignitaries. For many, RFK is the only U.S. professional sports facility they will ever see "up close and personal." This adds a little extra pressure for Burnett and his crew.

Profile: Tony Burnett

continued from page 16

keeps the green tissue from going dormant. By late November or early December, the overseeded perennial ryegrass is up enough to take over. I'm most concerned about preserving the solid bermudagrass playing base. With TV coverage a vital part of the economic picture, looking good on camera is very important, too."

Keeping the perennial ryegrass thriving and disease-free takes constant attention from Burnett, especially during the prime fungi cycles of early spring and late fall. Once weather slips into its warmer mode, fertilization and adjusted mowing heights are used to control its growth.

"We're not concerned with phasing out the perennial ryegrass," Burnett reveals. "Washington winters consistently wipe out 70 to 80 percent of the bermudagrass, so we budget for replacing the field with new bermudagrass each year. The old turf is stripped out and replaced with big rolls of freshly harvested sod.

"Next year's field is grown to my specifications a year in advance. The fertilization schedule and maintenance program are set, so I know just what we'll be getting. We've worked with Turf Farms, 200 miles south of here in Virginia, for some time. So when the new field arrives, it's already been mine for a year."

Accommodating the World Cup

Perfecting this system over the years gave Burnett and advantage in preparations for World Cup play. (Games were held at RFK June 19, 20, 28, and 29 and July 2.) He's found that procedures using the big rolls of sod have evolved so that the turf becomes established in approximately two to three weeks. With standard sodding procedures, it takes at least six months for establishment.

Still, getting ready for World Cup did mean pushing things a bit. "We brought in the bermudagrass sod on May 15, which really is too early here," says Burnett. "Normally, we don't work with bermudagrass until we put down the 'new' field sod in July. By the end of the first week in June, the weather was just getting into the right pattern for bermudagrass. We overseeded the World Cup sod with blends of perennial ryegrass last fall, and again this spring, so we could bring it into the stadium with active growth. By June 8, the field was settled in and looking good enough to

have supported play."

To accommodate the wider playing surface of soccer, 102,000 square feet of sod were brought in, rather than the 90,000 square feet required for the football field. In many of World Cup venues, outside "turf technicians" were assigned to overseed final field preparations. World Cup officials decided that, after 32 years at RFK, there was no better turf technician for that field than Tony Burnett.

RFK has hosted some soccer play each year since 1968, when professional soccer was first played in the United States. Former professional soccer teams, the Washington Whips and the Washington Diplomats, called the stadium turf home. So Burnett and his crews are accustomed to the needs of soccer fields. Still, gearing up for World Cup offered new challenges.

"The World Cup is different," says Burnett. "Everything is more precise. Football is played on top of the turf surface. Soccer depends on the turf surface. The turf field has to be a little bit better, a little more consistent for soccer. It's the consistency of the turf that determines ball roll and playability.

Burnett and members of the turf portion of World Cup's Architectural, Construction, and Turf (ACT) team conferred during the weeks before the games were to begin to fine-tune RFK's turf. "Initially, we mowed at 3/4-inch while the sod was taking hold, then moved down to 5/8-inch for the games," says Burnett. "The ACT team wants the fields at all the venues to be as close to the same as possible, so we've all been making adjustments as we go along."

Add to that the daily media attention that converged on all World Cup venues and continued through the heat of play. "By the end of May, it was getting hectic enough around here that media personnel were screened to make sure that they were authorized to be on the field," says Burnett. "We looked at the pre-game hype very carefully and evaluated potential damage in view of the big picture. It was necessary to prioritize World Cup and media needs. The turf and the media had to co-exist because the point of it all had to be the games and the playability of the field."

Fine-tuned Turfgrass

Burnett has grown turf at RFK for so long, and understands its needs so well, that his regular turf maintenance program could be called fine-tuning. "We 'baby' the turf here, in part because

I have a super staff," he says. "They know the grass and really care what happens to it. It matters to them that we maintain healthy, highly playable, good-looking turf.

"For example, we don't have a set fertilization program," he continues. "Instead, we keep fertility about the same all the time, applying approximately a half-pound of nitrogen every two weeks. We vary all applications and watering patterns and intervals to meet the needs of the turf. During the football season, we mow the bermudagrass at 5/8-inch. Then, as the perennial ryegrass comes in, we gradually raise the mowing height to one inch. That is grooming it down pretty close for ryegrass, but with the underlying bermudagrass base, it provides an excellent playing surface."

Calling RFK a multi-use facility is an understatement. Besides World Cup Soccer, and the full schedule of Redskins football games, a few other activities are held at the venue. Two professional baseball exhibition games were held earlier this year. Then, after World Cup play ends, the grounds crew begins preparations for Pink Floyd concerts on July 9 and 10, followed by the Grateful Dead July 16 and 17, Billy Joel and Elton John on July 21, and the Rolling Stones August 1 and 3. The Redskins' first game is August 12, followed by two more, and then Eagles have a concert at RFK in September. Then there's a small matter of two college football games and the entire Redskins season.

Leisure time is not a part of Burnett's vocabulary. He's quick to credit his wife, Velita, for giving him the understanding and support he needs, as well as his two sons, now grown and on their own.

Though he does manage to work in some outside consulting when time permits, Burnett says, "I don't like to give advice unless I have the problem in sight. With turf, you don't really know all the circumstances involved unless you're actually looking at the problem and have access to the history of what's been done. Sports turf management is filled with variables."

Since 1962, Burnett has managed those variables. He has the drive to constantly seek a better way of doing things, the commitment needed to cope with constant change, and the ability to "make it all come together." □

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