

1993 Professional Diamond Of The Year

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By Bob Tracinski

In the heart of Florida, amid the cluster of professional baseball's spring training camps, another star emerges. This one doesn't hold a batting crown or a multi-million-dollar contract, yet it promises to provide at least 20 years of top-notch play. This shooting star is McKechnie Field in Bradenton, game field of the Pittsburgh Pirates spring training facility and 1993 Professional Diamond of the Year.

As is the story of so many stars, success at McKechnie Field was snatched from the jaws of defeat. The field and stadium were built originally in 1923 and has served as the Pirates' spring training home from 1969. The facility and the urban section of Bradenton in which it is located gradually declined. The field itself was deemed "one of the worst playing surfaces in Major League Baseball." Visiting teams often declined to work out on the field, and some players even refused to travel to Bradenton to play.

Realizing the desperate need for change, Manatee County, the City of Bradenton, and the Pittsburgh Pirates joined in a renovation project that has sparked life back into the surrounding community, as well as generating a valuable asset to the area. The program was laid out in a two-year, two-phase format to avoid disrupting the Pirates' training schedule.

Of course, once the decision to renovate was made, the field needed a hands-on supervisor with the background to know what the process required to produce a high-quality ballfield that could

withstand heavy play — McKechnie Field needed someone with the drive to make sure the work would meet and exceed expectations.

Enter Mike Hurd, an energetic, forward-thinking groundskeeper with a down-to-earth attitude — a man who loves a challenge.

Young Talent Evolves

Hurd was working part-time as a landscaper at Circus World when development of Baseball and Boardwalk, now called Baseball City, began. Baseball and Boardwalk company officials named him head groundskeeper and encouraged him to research other fields and training facilities in the area to help determine the needs of the new complex, "from the ground up."

Armed with a drive to learn, a camera, questions, and determination, He put together a small book of photos and reports of fields in the area, which he still carries with him. He was 18 years old at the time, and he balanced working 40-plus-hour weeks on the project with finishing his last year of high school. During the process, he had the opportunity to work with some of the top sports turf managers in the industry.

Hurd eventually moved on to take a positions as head groundskeeper at the Cincinnati Reds spring training camp in Plant City, FL. The position was equally challenging, he says, since it involved an established field with a number of problems that needed to be solved. He stayed there for nearly four years.

Yet his most significant challenge to date began on December 15, 1991, when he was hired as grounds superinten-

dent by the Pirates for the job in Bradenton.

"The Pirates signed a 20-year lease here," 26-year-old Hurd explains. "Part of the agreement, along with the new field and stadium, was that they take over the grounds care. My goal is to make this the best stadium in baseball."

Team Efforts

The stadium field is in downtown Bradenton. The 4-1/2-field, cloverleaf-style practice complex is located about 3-1/2 miles away. In addition, Hurd and his crew manage a 72-room dormitory, inside and out.

Hurd views the success of the facilities as a cooperative team effort. He is quick to credit county and city interests, the Pirates' administration, the general manager and staff, his boss director Jeff Podobnik, and business manager Sandra Dengler with being supportive of the grounds crew and their goals. Hurd has a six-person crew including himself — one person assigned specifically to McKechnie Field and four people at the practice fields.

"This was a 'we' effort — certainly not a 'me' effort," he insists. "I can't say enough about our grounds crew. Gary Lackey, assistant superintendent, grounds maintenance, has been terrific. The entire group is great. Throughout this whole project, they've really delivered. Whenever new 'challenges' came up, they'd all pull a little harder and make sure whatever was needed got done.

"Photographer Marty Morrow of Bryn-Alan Studios followed the project all the way through for us, documenting each stage," he contin-

The Rebirth Of McKechnie Field



ues. "That's been a great help."

Hurd also credits his "personal" support staff, his wife Melinda. "She's both my cheerleader and biggest critic," he says. "She loves pro ball, understands the importance of groundskeeping, and helps keep me focused on my goals."

That "focus" must be working. Hurd was recently named Gulf Coast League Groundskeeper of the Year.

Rebuilding Process

Phase I — the new playing field, outfield fences, and the scoreboard — began in January 1992. Facilities needed to be ready for play by March 3 of that year.

The city helped strip everything from the existing field. The clay and dirt on the entire surface were excavated. Pirates' Manager Jim Leyland didn't want the "Georgia Red" surface typical of Florida-area fields. He had his sights set on a dark brown clay soil located "behind a church in Lakeland."

When Hurd first saw the proposed materials, he thought it looked like "rock." He even double-checked to make sure it was what the Pirates wanted. They did, and Hurd recalled a quote from George Toma, one that has stuck with him, which bolstered his spirit: "It's not the dirt; it's the man who works it."

"Actually, this native Florida material has a good sand content and is working out very well," he says. "Sixty tons of it have been shipped to Pittsburgh for the pits and the mound."

"If you do the research and ground work properly, you can get what you need in field renovation," he adds. "You have to know what you want to achieve, what the budget is, and make it work."

The new infield mix consisted of 80 percent of the clay-like soil and 20 percent sand, with the standard fall of one-inch per 100 feet. There isn't an underground drainage or tile system. An automatic irrigation system was installed with Hunter I-25 sprinklers, Rain Bird valves, and a Rain Bird RC12 controllers. The skinned area is topdressed with Pro's Choice soil conditioner and crushed brick dust, and this material is worked into the existing soil.

The basic infield and outfield grass is Tifway II, which was planted by Tifton Turf Farms of Tifton, GA. The padded outfield walls was constructed and the its signage placed in the for the March 3 deadline.

Phase II took place the following year. An intimate park was designed with new grounds, wide access ramps, concession stands and kiosks, and better sight lines. The park was ringed with palm trees and traditional Florida baseball materials were used including masonry, stucco, structural steel, and aluminum. Outside, McKechnie Field was pulled back from the street, creating a public plaza around the park. Inside, fans were moved closer to the field and the seating was expanded 50 percent — from 4,200 to 6,500 seats.

The ballpark's architects designed it to mirror the Spanish Mission-style architecture that is so prevalent on the Florida Gulf Coast. They also felt it was important to retain one of McKechnie Field's finest qualities—a quality embodied by many of the nation's older ballparks—intimacy.

"We see McKechnie Field as an inte-

gral part of reaching out to and upgrading the entire community," says Hurd. "For example, there is a Boy's Club right behind the stadium. Before the renovation, there were problems with kids climbing the fence and throwing things at the players. During the renovation, we knocked out a section of fence and put in a set of bleachers to provide free seats for the kids that make use of the Boy's Club. We call them the 'Knot-Hole Gang.'"

The 1993 season wasn't exactly "easy going" for Hurd and his crew. During Phase II, portions of the field area were disturbed and required reworking. The weather was both cold and unusually wet, and they don't as yet have a tarp.

"But we didn't have any rain-outs," says Hurd. "Because of the way the field was constructed during the renovation program, and our maintenance program, we were able to play when surrounding facilities weren't."

Maintenance Program

A daily maintenance program is followed to keep the McKechnie Field in top shape. Baselines, homeplate, the pitcher's mound, and all clay edges are hand-raked, packed, and dragged to keep down lips. The infield skinned area is nailed and watered to keep consistency. The fine, crushed brick warning track is dragged.

The bermudagrass infield and outfield are kept at 5/8 inch. The entire field is mowed daily and the infield is mowed twice on game days.

The infield grass is hand-watered at night before home games to ensure con-

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sistent moisture levels in the clay areas where sprinklers overlap. Three sets of freshly painted bases are used during every home game. Foul lines on the outfield grass are painted for every home game.

The field is inspected daily for turf problems. All field maintenance equipment is cleaned and checked daily before use. Field is overseeded in mid-November with Ph.D. perennial ryegrass at 12 pounds per 1,000 square feet. The field's fertilization program includes applications of high potassium fertilizer (10-20-20) from October to December to ensure hardiness prior to winter. From January to June, and 18-2-14 formula is used, with iron added periodically to improve color. The June to September fertilization uses a 14-1-14 formula.

The field is aerated four times a year; once with a drill system to 12 inches, and three times with a 4-1/2-inch quadra-tine coring unit. Cores were picked up once and dragged in twice. The field is verticut twice a year and topdressed. The sand portion of the topdressing mix has been adjusted to improve quality and drainage.



Mike Hurd: "My goal is to make this the best stadium in baseball."

"We want superior drainage and turf, but we don't want the field too loose," says Hurd. "We want a solid, consistent surface for better footing."

Hurd applies Ronstar for preemergence weed control and uses MSMA and Trimec for post-emergence weed control as needed. Weeds that attempt to invade the warning track and fence lines are treated with Roundup. Fungicides are applied only as necessary.

Hurd stages an on-going battle against mole crickets, which seem determined to

invade the fields. He's winning the war by rotating control products, never making back-to-back applications of the same material. An initial nematode problem on the practice complex was easier to eliminate. All fertilization and chemical applications are done in-house, with detailed records of each application kept on-site.

The practice complex is "built on a dump." It has no drainage system, and natural drainage is not as good as that of the McKechnie Field, but according to Hurd it is adequate. Irrigation at the practice facility is done manually, which adds another challenge to the maintenance program.

Even at the Major League level, funds can be limited, so Hurd has learned to improvise. "You can trade, borrow, swap — whatever it takes to cover the field needs," he notes.

The facility has a busy schedule year-round. "The Pirates hold a one-week 'Fantasy Camp' in January," says Hurd. "A Korean professional baseball team, the Pacific Dolphins, move in for their spring training starting the last week in January and ending March 2. In mid-February, when the Pirates come in for spring

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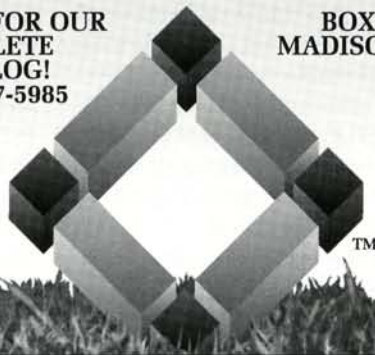
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training, the two clubs overlap. The Pirates hold morning workouts and the Pacific Dolphins hold afternoon workouts. There are 14 to 17 spring training exhibition games in March, plus workouts and practices. The extended spring training season that follows ends the first week of June, when the Gulf Coast League begins. This runs through August 31. The Florida Instructional League season begins in mid-September and runs through the end of October. The two-man crew tackles renovation during the month of November. And finally, in December, a two-week baseball camp, the Mickey Owen Winter School, is held. Come January, the cycle begins anew."

During this period, the practice facility handles overflow from workouts, practices, and games. Little League games are also held at the practice complex — three games a night, five nights a week.

"There's so much going on that teams can't always use the field they want," Hurd says. "We strive to keep the practice fields in 'game field shape' so there's consistency throughout the complex. And we strive for consistency throughout the Pirates facility. I also now go to the Buffalo AAA and Welland A league fields so we can compare notes and keep all the fields at the top pro-level."

Hurd believes in pooling resources. He appreciates the assistance and hands-on education he's gained from those who looked beyond his youthful exterior to the curious, eager, and dedicated person within and gave him the chance to prove what he could accomplish. He's checking out other fields every chance he gets, and keeps in contact with sports turf managers around the country. He continues his own outreach efforts by working with local community colleges, county, and Little League teams to improve the quality of their fields.

He also urges sports turf managers to confer with each other and other grounds care professionals, university personnel, consultants, and vendors — to never stop learning and growing in professionalism.

"If the industry is going forward, we're going to do it as a group," he asserts. "We all need to be on the same page to succeed. Organizations like the regional and national Sports Turf Managers Association help unite our efforts."

One of Hurd's goals has been to host a national STMA meeting. That goal

will soon be realized, as the STMA board has selected Bradenton as the site for its 1995 Conference and Exhibition, slated for February 4-8.

His dreams are even more far-reaching. "Some day I'd like to see a groundskeeping academy here, with a combination of courses and hands-on learning under actual conditions," he reveals.

One thing seems certain: For Mike Hurd, the challenges continue and he's more than up to facing them. □

Editor's Note: The Beam Clay Baseball

Diamond of the Year Award is 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 baseball diamonds. Winning diamonds are named in three categories: professional, college, and high school/municipal/park.

Bob Tracinski is the public relations chairman for the national STMA and the manager of public relations for the John Deere Company in Raleigh, NC.

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