

Aerial view of the renovated Genoa High School baseball diamond, home of the Comets,

By Bob Tracinski

an a graffiti-covered, weed-infested, worn-out baseball diamond be converted into a "Field of Dreams?" The answer, at least for Genoa High School in Genoa, OH, is yes, with the right attitude.

Positive attitude was the driving force behind coach Jeff Thompson's twophase, dream renovation plan. That same attitude launched a community-wide program that turned the baseball field at Genoa High School into the 1993 High School Diamond of the Year.

Thompson was deeply committed to Genoa and its baseball program. He'd been the assistant varsity coach at the school for seven years. When varsity coach Bob Baird resigned in 1990 after 25 years in the position, Thompson stepped up to the challenge.

And what a challenge it was.

Although the field was well-constructed initially in 1976 and Baird had kept it in good shape, there came a season where circumstances combined to cut off field care for a full summer and fall. Even with sod only a couple of years old at the time, an extremely dry season, hordes of turf-eating insects, and extensive vandalism reduced the field to a nearly unplayable eyesore. The skinned

The Comets, pictured here at Three Rivers Stadium during a high school tournament, pitch in on field maintenance at Genoa High. (Below) The field's skinned areas and mound were rebuilt with a mix designed to resemble red Georgia clay.

areas were rock-hard, crusted. and filled with weeds. Weeds also climbed halfway up the fences and crowded out the few tufts of live grass in the infield and outfield sections. The dugouts and scoreboard were covered with profane graffiti.

Blueprint For A Rebuilder

Thompson well-understood the connection between a quality field and quality play. He's played baseball for most of his life, beginning with Little League. Thompson attended the College of South Idaho, a junior college, and then moved on to Mercer in Macon, GA, a four-year Division I school, where he played baseball for 3-1/2 years. He was drafted in his junior year by the Baltimore Orioles, but opted to complete his senior year. He was then drafted by the Toronto

Blue Jays and played two seasons in the minor league.

In addition to putting in hours on the field as a player, Thompson started working part-time during his sophomore year in high school for Paul Riser, then-recreation director for the Oregon Recreation Department. Riser assigned Thompson to the tasks of field building and maintenance.

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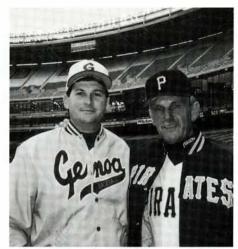
Diamond of the Year

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"I worked on fields part-time for nearly 15 years," says Thompson. "Riser provided me with hands-on training in the basics of field construction and maintenance, and the opportunity to see the way quality fields affect play and player safety."

After being cut by the Blue Jays, Thompson moved on to a teaching and coaching position with the Genoa School District. As a certified teacher in physical education and health, and with guidance counselor credentials, Thompson has filled varying slots with the schools. For four years, he taught physical education at the kindergarten to sixth-grade levels. For another four years, he taught physical education at the high school and served as a part-time counselor at the junior high. Currently, he's teaching physical education to seventh and eighth graders at the junior high, tenth graders at the high school, and counseling when he can work it into his schedule.

These moves within the system have benefitted the baseball program, Thompson observes. While it's "cool" for the younger kids to have a coach as a teacher, it also



Comet's coach Jeff Thompson (left) with Pittsburgh Pirates manager Jim Levland.

strengthens the connection when the idea of going out for baseball first hits. Thompson encourages that early connection by holding pitching and catching camps for youngsters in grades four through eight. This system-wide activity also makes him a well-known figure in the community and showcases his commitment to a quality program for student athletes.

The Plan

After assessing the condition of the field, Thompson approached Athletic Director Jeff Bunck with a two-phase plan to ensure player safety and protect the school district's investment in the field. Phase I included basic clean-up and field reconstruction. Since the infield would have to be torn up, Phase I included an underground irrigation system for that area.

Phase II called for adding green mesh to the outfield fence for better visibility and greater field definition, and artificial turf in front of the dugouts and for the on-deck circles. These steps have been completed.

Still to come in Phase II are a new scoreboard for left center field, a two-story press box/concession stand combination to be located behind home plate, an underground irrigation system in the outfield, and a warning track.

Bunck took the plan to the school administration and to the school's boosters to get the ball rolling. When current Athletic Director Dennis Spisak came on board, he continued to give full support to the program.

People were skeptical when Thompson first proposed the two-phase plan. The

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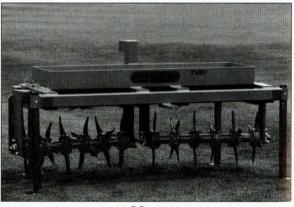




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original outlay of dollars sounded expensive, but the idea of saving money with a lower long-term budget and reduced liability exposure were strong selling points. Once the original concept was sold, there was nothing but positive response from the entire school system and surrounding community.

Looking ahead, the Board of Education decided to run a four-inch water line from the school to the field to supply water to the football, softball, and track complex, rather than attempt to continue operating the existing well system. The new pipe is sufficient to support the infield and projected outfield irrigation systems, as well as supply water for the athletes, and may eventually support the water needs of a stadium — still in the "dream" stages. This all fits into the plan Thompson was working hard to sell, a plan that was, in essence, an investment in the future.

The athletic director, athletic department, and boosters agreed to fund an infield underground irrigation system using Toro 700 series rotary pop-up heads. Costs were split equally between the athletic department and boosters.

Assistant coaches Keith Belcik and Gary Nissen also share Thompson's commitment to the field. Belcik and Thompson have known each other since kindergarten and played baseball together throughout their school years. Belcik played at the professional level for two years with the New York Mets farm club. Nissen, a graduate of Malone College in Ohio, is a Genoa High alumnus and was the team's starting pitcher as a senior in 1988. He lives directly across from the school, so he ends up as the "prime monitor" of the irrigation system.

Putting It Together

When the field was initially constructed in 1976, an underlying tile drainage system with a stone and sand base was installed. This tile system runs beneath the field with extensions to a neighborhood creek for controlled removal of excess water. Because of this system, field drainage is excellent.

In the fall of 1991, the field's existing infield soil was removed and trenches were put in for the irrigation system. The four-inch pipe from the school to the field and a two-inch line to the outfield will be used to operate a water wheel until the Phase II outfield irrigation system can be installed. Don Williams, a Genoa High graduate and owner of DW Greenlawn, handled the renovation, working closely

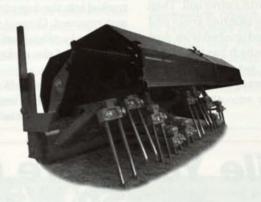
with Thompson each step of the way. Once the excavation was completed, the irrigation system was installed and the soil was brought back and graded with a 1-inch to 100-foot slope.

The weeds and remaining grass in the outfield were chemically eliminated and low spots were filled. Then, both the infield and outfield were overseeded with approximately 200 pounds of Scott's Pro-Turf Mix, a combination of bluegrass and perennial ryegrass varieties. To keep as even a surface as possible and avoid ridges, Thompson left an unseeded area

equal to a five-foot radius around the mound, and a two-foot radius around home plate. The field was fertilized and then topdressed with a layer of clean straw to discourage hungry birds that gather in the area.

At that point, fall weather turned wintery so quickly that Thompson realized it would take the entire next year to get the turf established. Again, looking to the future, the administration and student athletes accepted the decision and agreed to a full year of "away" games.

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Diamond of the Year

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Thompson and Chris Mathews, a former Genoa High baseball player and current trainer for the Ohio State University football teams, directed the final stages of renovation. "Chris is as picky as I am," says Thompson.

For the precise dimensions of cut-outs around the mound, home plate, and the bases, Thompson had contacted the Columbus Clippers, the Yankees farm club. They wanted to create an infield look similar to that of Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh. The crew used a sod cutter to slice out an 18-x-18-inch square at angles to the pitcher's mound first, from the pitcher's mound to second, and from the pitcher's mound to third to make up the diamond look. They rebuilt the mound and home plate area, again measuring precisely and shaping with native soil. Then they topped off these skinned areas and bullpens with a fine red crushed brick dust and sand mixtures, which has the look of Georgia clay. They set the Hollywood bases next for first, second, and third. There are no ridges, only smooth and even grass lines.

The skinned areas are now practical, as well as aesthetically pleasing. "We can walk across the skinned areas after a downpour of rain with no mix sticking to the bottoms of our shoes," Thompson enthuses. "A quick raking gets the areas back in playable condition. We only had one cancellation in the 1992-1993 season, and that was because of an all-day rain that continued through game time.

"Prior to renovation, the field had a dirt perimeter with a grassed infield," he continues. "It took a tractor, rakes, and topdressing sand to get the skinned area ready for play prior to each game. Because our home-team players had to pitch in on the pre-game maintenance, the visiting team players, who started the game fresh, had a definite advantage. Now, it's 'rake and play,' or even easier when the skinned sections are tarped."

The white limestone that always tracked into the dugouts and onto the field was removed. Cement was poured in its placed and artificial turf was placed on top. Artificial turf also replaced the rock in the on-deck circles.

Thompson extends special thanks to Vo-Ag teacher Jim Henline and his class, who have pitched in to help with various projects, and to team mothers and fathers, boosters, alumni, players, and other volunteers who showed up in force to tackle the "grunt work," such as removing the sod cut away from the mound, homeplate, and base areas. The entire community wants its kids to play on a Class A program field. With such an outflow of volunteers at all stages of the renovation, labors costs were low. And, because the whole community considers it "their" field, there's been no more graffiti.

Maintenance Routine

The 1992-1993 season was the first year for play on the renovated field. The spring season opens as soon in early March as the weather permits, and play continues throughout August. There are approximately 50 baseball games played during this period. Once school gets back in full swing in the fall, Thompson and staff begin preparing the field for winter.

After the first year of play on the young field and a record bad winter, snow mold appeared at the start of the season. Spot fungicide treatments cleared it up quickly.

Thompson has adopted a fertilization program based on the results of an annual soil test. The first season

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program included a spring starter, a summer general purpose application, and a late-fall winterizer. Urea was applied as needed for a quick boost of nitrogen. Surrounding areas that aren't maintained make spring preemergence herbicide application necessary.

Genoa is located 15 miles east of Toledo. Because the weather is unpredictable, changing quickly and drastically through "lake effects," maintenance timing must be flexible.

Since aeration equipment must be rented, core aeration is done once a year for all fields. The cores are mat-dragged back into the soil profile.

Currently, a rotary rider mower is used one to three times a week to keep the infield turf cut "a shade" under two inches. The outfield field turf is cut at two to 2-1/2 inches. Clippings are usually left on the field, but the mower can vacuum and catch if necessary. Still another goal for the athletic department is to switch to a reel mower, but that probably in the vet-to-be-defined Stage III.

To keep weed control at a minimum, a soil sterilant is used in the stone sections around the fence lines and behind the backdrop and dugouts, keeping the material two to three feet away from the grass. After the scoreboard and press box are in place, Thompson plans to cement the areas behind the backstop and dugouts to eliminate even this need for weed control. A string trimmer is used as necessary on weeds in the "chemical-free" zone.

The bullpens and five skinned areas on the field are edged and manicured as needed. Each day, the home plate batter's box and pitcher's mound are tamped and the artificial turf of the on-deck circles and areas in front of the dugouts is swept.

Thompson also maintains a plot of replacement sod on a section of farmland provided by a student's parent. This plot was started at the same time as the field renovation, using the same seed and maintenance practices. The plot continues to receive the same care as the field.

Money remains tight, and more is needed for completing Phase II. The field belongs to the high school and the community itself, Thompson asserts, and can be viewed as an asset for both the community and its children. He adds that while they're asking everyone to participate financially, this is a "one-time deal," and that they don't want people to feel they'll be asked to contribute every year.

"All contributors receive a thank-you letter and their names in the programs for the ball games during the first year," he says. "We've established different levels of donations, designated as RBI, single, double, triple, and grand slam. We'll acknowledge those who have given support by listing them under the appropriate category on a permanent, plexiglasscovered billboard attached to the press box.

"Our immediate goal is to host the Ohio state districts and regionals at our complex by 1995," he concludes. "But the greatest achievement for the whole community well be the sense of pride and life-long memories that playing on a top-notch field will give our athletes."

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 national Sports Turf Managers Association.

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 safe, professional-quality diamonds. Winning diamonds are named in the professional, college, and high school/municipal/park categories.

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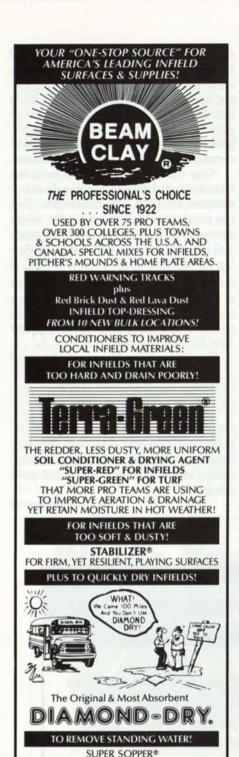
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ABOUT THE JUDGES

By very year, four judges from the ranks of Major League Baseball groundskeeping carefully review Diamond of the Year entries from around the country to select winners in the professional, college, and high school/municipal categories. To reach their decisions, the judges review photographs and written descriptions, including the history and maintenance practices of each field.

Selecting Diamond of the Year winners is a labor of love. It's time-consuming pursuit conducted by four different, top-notch professionals, representing Major League Baseball's four divisions each year. Here's a look at this year's judges.

Tom Lujan, Mile High Stadium, Denver, CO - National League West

Home to Major League Baseball's Colorado Rockies, the National Football League Denver Broncos and the Colorado Foxes professional soccer team, Mile High Stadium sees more than its share of unpredictable weather each year. Braving it all is Field Manager Tom Lujan, who celebrates his 18th season at the facility this year. Lujan, who tutored under former Mile High Field Manager Steve Wightman, now with San Diego Jack Murphy Stadium, grew up in the Denver area and developed an early interest in field maintenance. After high school, he applied with the Denver Parks and Recreation Department and was "lucky enough" to be assigned to Mile High Stadium. Gradually, he worked his way up the ranks to his current position, where he puts in 70 to 80 hours a week.

Lujan considers himself truly fortunate to have worked under Wightman. That early influence led him to seek advice from some of sports turf management's best minds and talents, including Dr. Kent Kurtz, Barney Baron, formerly with Candlestick Park, NFL turf consultant George Toma, the late Harry Gil, STMA founder and long-time Milwaukee Stadium field manager, and more recently Dr. Jim Watson with the Toro Company.

The challenge is what attracts Lujan to the job. "You have to look at the overall schedule for the entire year, and make sure that the field is the best it can be for each event, and that it's ready on time," he explains. "Working around the weather and events schedule is a real challenge, and I thrive on that."

For those looking to "make the jump" to the big leagues, Lujan suggests first getting an education in horticulture. However, he notes, there is no substitute for experience.

"Get internships in as many places as you can, and learn about the hands-on part of the job," he advises. "Without the hands-on experience, it's going to be hard to get that top position."

Brian Nofziger, Angel Stadium, Anaheim, CA - American League West

When the California Angels are playing a home stand, Anaheim Stadium Lead Groundskeeper Brian Nofziger and his crew don't balk at putting in 12- and 13-hour days. During football season, when the Rams call the stadium home, the schedule is less hectic and fewer hours are required.

Nofziger started at the stadium full-time in 1973, after getting out of the military. During high school, he had worked for the Angels as a bat boy and in the clubhouse, and a friend helped him land a part-time position with the grounds crew in 1972. He worked under head groundskeeper Joe Verdi until Verdi retired and he was promoted.

Nofziger cites Verdi as an early mentor, as well as Ray Reyes, who's been with the stadium since it opened, and retired stadium superintendent Don Marshall. He continues to read widely on sports turf management techniques and attends seminars when possible.

Changeover from one sport to another poses the greatest challenge for Nofziger. "We had one real doozy in 1983, when we had David Bowie one week night, a college game on Saturday, the Rams on Sunday, and the Angels on Tuesday night," he recalls.

Sports have always been a part of Nofziger's life, which he sees as a tremendous advantage in is profession. "You have to really like sports because there are a lot of hours involved with this job," he says.

For those hopeful professional sports turf managers on the rise, Nofziger recommend heavy doses of both "book learning" and on-the-job training. And enthusiasm is a must.

"You're not going to get rich doing this," he asserts, "so you better love what you're doing."

Alan Sigwardt, Joe Robbie Stadium, Miami, FL - National League East

Though he's been head groundskeeper at Joe Robbie Stadium for a little more than a year, Alan Sigwardt brings approximately 12 years of experience to his position. Sigwardt, who managed the field at Sun Devil Stadium in Tempe, AZ, for two years, worked his way up through minor league baseball training facilities including those of the Milwaukee Brewers, Angels, and Chicago Cubs. He credits NFL Turf Consultant George Toma and the late Harry Gil with helping him grow into the job.

"I called George once a few years back for advice, and he called me back and helped me out," Sigwardt recalls. "We've kept in touch ever since, and he's been like a father to me. I worked with him at last year's Superbowl in Atlanta, and I'll work with him again on this year's Superbowl at Joe Robbie.

"I also worked under Harry Gil, and he was like a father to me, too," he adds. "Harry really took me under his wing."

Joe Robbie is home of the NFL Miami Dolphins and Major League Baseball Florida Marlins. In addition, the venue hosts events from rock concerts to motocross. The pressure, says Sigwardt, is constant.

"I think we had four Monday Night Football games here last year," he explains. "You look at Don Shula and the Dolphins, a class organization, and the Marlins and their owner and coaches, and they're another class organization. There's quite a legacy here at Joe Robbie, and every event is big. Both teams demand the best. The pressure is on us, as a grounds crew, to keep everyone happy. But the best thing about this work is that if you work hard, you can walk out and actually see your accomplishments. Not all jobs are like that."

Dedication to the profession, says Sigwardt is the key to success. "The best thing you can do is always ask questions, and *look around*. It's the same everywhere — the budget, equipment, and supplies aren't there. When you're fighting your way up, you have to overcome those odds. If you want to sit around and make excuses why the field isn't in shape, you'll never make it. In terms of supplies, budget, staff and equipment, it gets a little easier at this level. But then, there's a lot more pressure."

Gary Vandenberg, Milwaukee County Stadium

Milwaukee, WI - American League East

Gary Vandenberg, director of grounds for Milwaukee County Stadium, didn't start out as a sports turf manager. Before joining the crew in 1981, he worked as a golf course superintendent. Vandenberg holds a bachelor's degree in soil science from the University of Wisconsin at Fond Du Lac.

At Milwaukee County Stadium, Vandenberg worked under head groundskeeper Harry Gil for nearly 10 years, and credits Gil for showing him "the ropes" of baseball field maintenance. As an assistant golf course superintendent, he recalls, he learned under the tutelage of superintendent John Zahn before becoming a superintendent himself.

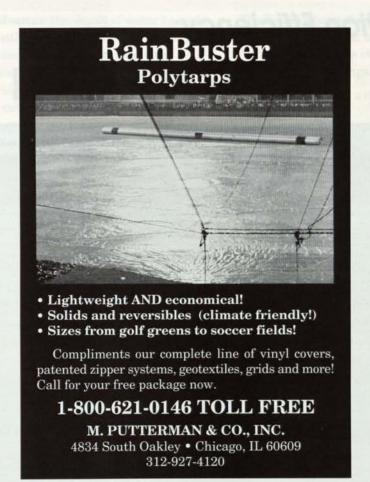
Vandenberg became director of grounds in 1991. When the Milwaukee Brewers baseball team is in town, he and his crew put in 80 to 100 hours a week on the field. The venue also hosts four NFL Green Bay Packer games, in addition to concerts and other events.

"The biggest challenge, day-in and day-out, is the weather," says Vandenberg. "You might have rain coming in, and the umpires will be wondering what to do, the managers will be wondering whether or not to warm up their pitchers, and everybody will be looking to you for answers."

Vandenberg professes a passion for baseball, which makes his job ideal. "Since I was never good enough to play it, the next best thing is watching it," he admits. "I never get tired of watching baseball, which is a good thing in this business."

Desire is one of the main roads to becoming a successful sports turf manager at the professional level, Vandenberg observes. "You've got to be patient, persistent, and you have to put in your time," he emphasizes. "And you've also got to be a little lucky." \square

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