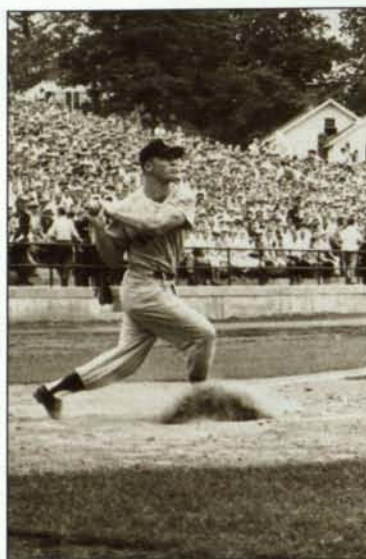
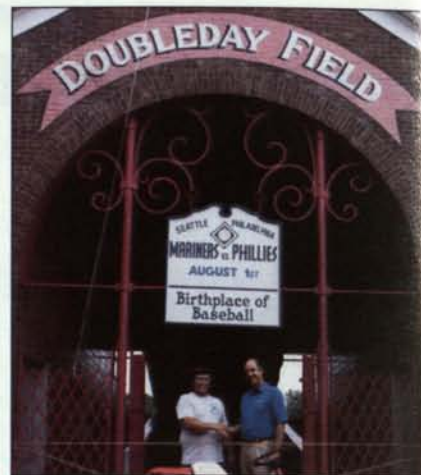




In addition to the Hall Of Fame Game, Doubleday Field hosts hundreds of other games each year. The home-plate area is groomed at least once a day during the seven-month season, using a toothed, free-floating, surface-finishing rake attachment. Photo Credit: Alan Lincourt/Pro Image.



Mickey Mantle hits a home run at Doubleday Field, 1954. Photo courtesy: National Baseball Library and Archive, Cooperstown, N.Y.



The Doubleday Field facility is a classic of baseball architecture. Under the arched main gate is Joseph Harris, grounds superintendent (left), and Don Smith, president of Smithco (right). Photo Credit: Alan Lincourt/Pro Image.

COOPERSTOWN: The Hometown of Baseball

Daniel K. Ingham

Lazy August days. The smell of leather and glove-oil. A wad of bubble-gum jammed into one cheek. A faithful mutt shagging balls in the outfield. A resounding crack from the bat as you imagine yourself knocking one out of the park, bottom of the ninth with three runners on, in the World Series, and hoping it misses any nearby windows. These are the memories and images of baseball many of us have and remember fondly in the twilight hours of a summer day.

Well, these memories are alive and well in a place called Cooperstown, NY — the birthplace of baseball. The Baseball Hall of Fame is located there and is the national repository of our nation's baseball memories. Doubleday Field is there as well, and every year it adds a new set of baseball memories to a new generation learning the nuances of America's favorite sport.

Well, supposing you never made the bid for the major league (we are all certain we could have with a little more practice), what would be the next best job to have? How about being grounds superintendent at Doubleday Field? Just to be there when the annual Hall of Fame

Game takes place would be enough to persuade many to take the job, regardless of pay (well, almost).

The man who currently has this distinction is Joseph Harris. But when you hear what his day is like during the season, you'll find that the job is not all fun and games. It's more like a labor of love.

"I arrive at the field about a quarter to 7 every morning during the season," said Harris. "I have a cup of coffee and get right to work because the first game usually starts at 9 a.m. When that's finished it's time to clean up the field and stands and get ready for the afternoon game at 1 p.m. After that there is a 6 p.m. game that is played by the local pony-league (ages 13-15) or the American Legion (ages 16-19). The field has to be prepared for this game as well and then the final cleanup afterwards. Usually, I don't get home till around 9 p.m."

As grounds superintendent at Doubleday Field, you might think he has his hands full managing the crew that does all this work. And he does — *he is the crew*. Except for one or two part-time summer hires to give him a hand, Joe Harris is a one-man show. "When I have the part-timers around, I sometimes get home early." But not all that

often, reiterates Harris. "We open the field on April 15 and it is mostly high school and other local teams that play at this time. I work six days a week during the spring and fall."

Before Harris became superintendent, he spent time in the farming business and the Cooperstown Highway Department. He started full-time at Doubleday Field in 1990.

A Baseline Lineage

Doubleday Field had its birth in 1919 (the year of the Chicago White Sox scandal), when the officials of the village of Cooperstown obtained a two-year lease on some pastureland from Alexander Phinney, the gentleman who owned it. The village officials filled it with soil and ashes with the aim of turning it into a public playground.

This playground was soon developed into a baseball field the following year. The first baseball game was played there in September 1920. Baseball was soaring in popularity across the country and in Cooperstown in the 1920s. Cooperstown is where Abner Doubleday is believed to have invented the game back in 1839. The 1920s have been hailed as the second "Golden Age" of baseball. The field, of course, is now named for Abner Doubleday.

In 1923, the taxpayers of the village of Cooperstown decided to purchase the field (rather than continue to lease), and an appropriation of \$1,238 was approved for this purpose. During the following spring of '24, a wooden grandstand was erected for the convenience of the fans.

Two years later, in March 1926, an additional village appropriation was voted in order to purchase ground between the field and Main Street. The intention was for the proposed construction of a main entrance gate to the field, a purchase that took place the following year.

Further improvements and construction were undertaken in 1933. This was done through President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal work program, the Works Progress Administration (WPA). At that time additional land was purchased to expand left field, which was short of regulation. The entire field was then graded, a new diamond constructed, fencing installed and the entrance gate landscaped. The field was reopened in August 1934.

Then, in December 1938, the WPA approved and provided many additional improvements. These included the construction of steel-covered grandstands, more wooden bleachers, seeding of the field, a drainage system, new outfield fencing and stone masonry, all of which were completed in June 1939.

The next improvements to Doubleday Field were made in 1960, when aluminum grandstands were installed along the first and third baselines. These were donated by Tom Yawkey, owner of the Boston Red Sox. More recently, a state-of-the-art, remote-control sprinkler system was installed.

As for previous groundskeepers, there have been many. "The groundskeeper here before me was Dave Wilshere," explained Harris. "He was here for about 10 years. He left the job due to a disability, and I believe his father, Whitey Wilshere, used to pitch for Philadelphia. Before that the groundskeeper was Herbie Wilford. He, too, was here for about 10 years."

Doubleday Today

Doubleday Field is owned, operated and maintained by the village of Cooperstown and is the site for the annual Hall of Fame ceremonies and baseball game.

The current field meets all major-league specifications. Distances to the fences are 296 feet to left field, 390 feet to center field and 312 feet to right field. The fences are 30 feet high. The total field area is approximately 100,000 square feet, of which 84,000 square feet are turf. The field has a seating capacity of 10,000.

The field is used heavily during the normal season, with 284 baseball games

being played in 1993. As for this year, we asked Harris whether the strike had affected him in any way. "The strike has not affected my schedule this year. We played 278 games this season and canceled 43 due to rain," he said.

In addition to the major-league teams playing the Hall of Fame Game, other teams using the field include high schools, colleges, the American Legion, pony leagues, semipro, baseball camps and the National Adults Baseball Association. In addition, feature films and TV commercials have been shot at Doubleday and it is often visited by famous personalities.

All in all, it's a major-league field with a lot of hometown personality that hasn't let success go to its head. It epitomizes the essence of baseball.

Maintenance on a Shoestring

"My budget this year, for upkeep and maintenance of the field, was \$9,600," continued Harris. "The first year I came on board it was \$5,000. That was in 1990. The reason the budget is so low is that the field is taxpayer supported." That's not much money when one considers how much goes into the upkeep of most professional ballfields.

In order to balance this budget, the needs of the field and his limited "crew,"


Harris has had to be resourceful. This has led him to visit the major trade shows, such as the New York State Turfgrass Conference, to contact manufacturers for donations to the field. So far, he has been successful.

Doubleday Field is a mixture of clay and sand, said Harris. "The field is mostly clay, so there are drainage problems if things get wet. One problem is that the soil works its way into the grass areas, which can force a cancellation of games when it rains heavily. Usually, when it rains we cover home plate and the pitcher's mound only. It would take about 10 people to put a cover on the whole field, and we just don't have the manpower — it's kind of hard to do it by yourself."

To solve this problem, Doubleday Field is slated to have a new subsurface drainage system in place next year. "Hopefully, we'll have our new drainage system finished by next year. We've solicited bids for the installation, and I think it's going to be an ADS subsurface system."

Grass at Doubleday is of major importance, and taking care of it is a large part of the job. "The grass is a mixture of Kentucky bluegrass and rye. We get the seed from AgWay or Scotts, either one.

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Fertilizer, though, is donated by Scotts, and as long as I stick to their program they provide it for the year." Mowing is accomplished with a 25-foot self-propelled walk-behind from National Mower.

Before last year, all the watering was done by hand. "The turf and field are watered 35 to 40 times during the season, depending the rainfall." That has changed, thanks to a donation by Rain Bird and Rochester Plumbing. According

to Harris, they donated the entire system that now waters Doubleday Field. "We had a couple of minor adjustments when we put it in, but once we got the bugs out of the system, it's worked pretty good and we've had few problems. All the heads are pop-ups and behind home plate are Falcons." Watering now take only two hours to complete. A pump supplements the system from the village water supply, and the entire system was installed by Sun Shower Services.

Much of the equipment for maintaining the field is also donated. The

soil areas of the field are conditioned daily from April 1 through Oct. 15. If the field requires it because of conditions after a game, it's groomed twice a day.

To help with field conditioning, Smithco recently donated an Easy Rider and the related equipment. Harris said, "Before Smithco's donation, I had to rake the field by hand if it was too wet for a dragmat. Now I can use the machine for both the infield and the outfield track.

"The AFC's implements include a center-mounted scarifier that we use to break up compacted surfaces and smooths out the clay surfaces. There's also a finishing rake and dragmat for final smoothing and conditioning." The fields permanent foul lines are from Beam Clay and Diamond Dry Corp.

Another piece of useful equipment that Harris has been able to secure is a Power-Vac from Cub Cadet and Oneota Power Equipment. "Litter cleanup between and after games was a real problem and until this year (1994) it was all done by hand. The Power-Vac has simplified the job and reduced the time it takes to get it done."

Harris is always on the lookout for ways and means to obtain additional equipment so he can further mechanize and increase the efficiency of his maintenance operations. "I just wish I had more time and a bigger budget so we could do more to improve Doubleday Field's playability."

A Labor of Love

"The thing I like best about this job," said Harris, "is that it's outdoors, I get to meet a lot of nice people, and what makes you really feel good is when a complete stranger walks up and tells you how good the field looks. It really makes you feel as though you've accomplished something."

When asked what he likes least about the job, he replied in true baseball fashion, "Rain. I hate rain. It makes life miserable." He added, too, "I don't like the number of hours it take to do a good job on the field, but only because it takes time away from my family during the baseball season."

So, next time you're in Cooperstown and get a chance to see Doubleday Field and maybe a Hall of Fame Game, remember that the expanse of green grass in the outfield and the immaculately groomed infield are the work of one man and a few part-time summer helpers. And, if you like what you see there, perhaps you could leave a note taped to the bleachers, or find Joe Harris and tell him how great the field looks. We're sure he'd appreciate it. □

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