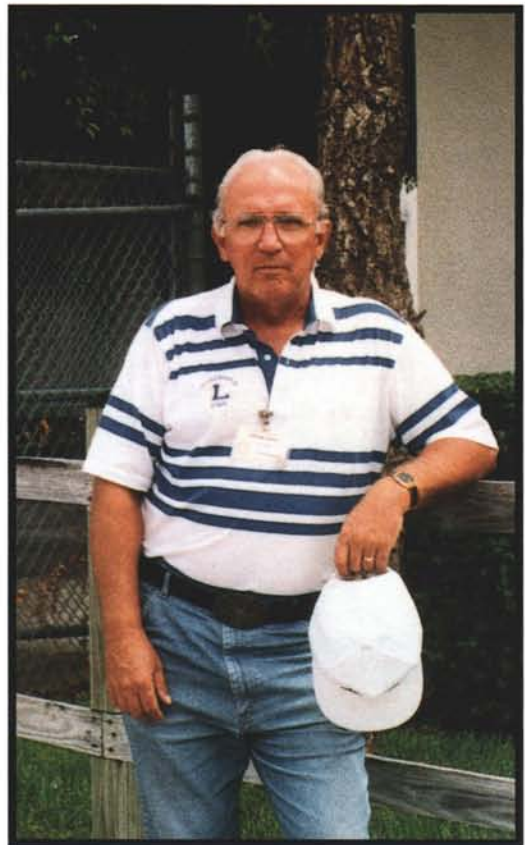




1994 sportsTURF Man of the Year

The Sultan of Safety, Ed Birch



By Bruce F. Shank

Preventive maintenance: That's what they call sports turf management in Fort Lauderdale, FL. There hasn't been a single field-related injury on Broward County School District's fields in more than a decade. We're talking about 190,000 students playing on more than 80 fields. Lockhart Stadium alone has more than 190 events every year, including professional soccer from April through September. But, as we all know, most injuries take place on the practice fields, so that's where Ed Birch, the 1994 *sportsTURF* Man of the Year, started in 1983.

Birch packed up his desk this month to join the ranks of the retired in Florida. He and wife, Hazel, are on a three-month trek across the country in their motorhome. As Birch steers his 35-footer along the nation's highways, he can look back at his second career with a deep sense of accomplishment. Not just because he and his crew did a great job, but because he helped chart the path for future sports turf managers in South Florida. He was among the founders of the first chapter of the Sports Turf Managers Association, Florida Chapter #1, which now boasts more than 60 members.

Starting from scratch (not even a single mower) Birch built the school district's program into a model for all large public school systems. Today, 37 people take care of 500 acres of athletic turf, including an average of two new schools each year. He teaches new coaches and league officials about sports turf care and brings in local experts to speak to his crew members. "They learn just like I did," says Birch, "by asking questions."

"I had absolutely no experience with sports turf management before moving to Florida," he admits. "As a kid in Pittsburgh, I played football on a sandlot. They used to dump ashes from coal furnaces on one end of the field. We'd come home with scraped-up knees and elbows from the rocks in the field. Dan Marino grew up in my old neighborhood. But, that was the sum of my sports turf experience before this job."

No Task Too Large

The part of Birch's personality that stands out is his willingness to take on responsibility with great confidence. That includes things he is not completely knowledgeable about. His first career was in property management for a Columbus, OH, builder with projects across the eastern half of the

Ed Birch built a new department to take care of Broward County School District's 500 acres of athletic fields.

country. "I was the on-site manager responsible for completion of apartment and condominium projects," recalls Birch. "When one job was completed, we'd pack up and move to the next. My youngest daughter attended seven different schools. I had to be a jack-of-all-trades, including lawn maintenance."

In 1969, Birch was hired as director of marketing for Columbia Maintenance, a building maintenance contractor in Columbia, MD. "One of our condo customers asked me if we could handle his lawn maintenance along with everything else," he reflects. "We started with his two complexes. The second year we were maintaining 86 different condo projects in the Maryland/Virginia area." The company created a lawn maintenance division and named Birch vice president of operations. "By 1979, my division was doing \$1.5 million in business. We had 15 trucks and 110 people. It was a hectic pace."

After 20 years in the property management business, Birch wanted to slow down. He explained his desire to Skip



Left: Florida Chapter demonstration taught by the Orange Bowl's Dale Sandin (R).

Below: Staff in front of preventive maintenance headquarters.



and Ken Schatz, owners of Columbia Maintenance. "One day I came home exhausted and told my wife, 'Why don't we sell the house and move to Florida?' To my surprise, she gave me an enthusiastic yes. That night we walked to a nearby real estate office and listed our home. In 10 days, the house was sold and in 30 days, we were in Boynton Beach, Florida, without jobs."

Years of being constantly busy rubbed off on Birch and left him restless in his new state. He found a job in the newspaper as an irrigation foreman for a landscape contractor. After three years

of installing irrigation systems, he noticed an ad in the paper for a maintenance supervisor with the Broward County School District.

"When I arrived for the interview, they told me they were creating a department just to take care of athletic fields," Birch says. "They were having a lot of problems with fields that were maintained by a mixture of coaches, parents and janitors. They said my new job was to hire people, buy equipment and put a program together for 24 high school fields, all middle school fields and all elementary physical education fields."

"I'll never forget the way I felt in the beginning," he remarks. "I started calling equipment distributors. Phil Gardner [head of Lesco in Florida] spent hours with me and let me try out mowers and other equipment for up to a week. Ken Stirez with Asgro and Ed Kajahiro with Mantek helped me with the fertilizer and chemicals. They all mentioned Ed Miller, head groundskeeper for the Yankees' spring training center. So, I called Ed up and we've remained friends for years. I also got in touch with Dale Sandin at the Orange Bowl, who connected me with Tom and John Mascaro with Turf-Tec International, who were consulting Joe Robbie Stadium."

Florida Chapter Number One

A network of resources started to build. "In Maryland, I had been active in the Professional Grounds Management Society and knew how much help a local chapter could be," remarks Birch. "Dale happened to be one of the original members of the Sports Turf Managers Association. Tom suggested, that with all the sports turf in South Florida, a local chapter of STMA made a lot of sense. The problem was STMA didn't have chapters at the time and didn't have bylaws regarding chapters.

On Nov. 21, 1988, the small group held its first exploratory meeting with Birch serving as chairman. Drs. John Cisar and Monica Juhnke at the University of Florida, Fort Lauderdale Research Center offered their complete support and use of the university's facility for chapter meetings. Tom Mascaro was elected president and contacted STMA national headquarters for its approval of chapters. The STMA executive board voted to approve the chapter during its first annual conference at Dodgertown in Vero Beach.

"Being the first chapter meant a great deal to us," says Birch. "We started meeting every two months. It wasn't long before we had 50 or more people at our meetings. People from local schools, parks and maintenance firms had access to sports turf information for the first time. We all shared what we knew and John and Monica gave us

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the agronomic facts. Lesco and Jacobsen gave regular demonstrations. We got to see the Orange Bowl and Joe Robbie Stadium like the pros get to see them. We have all been inspired by chapter events."

STMA now has nine chapters with interest expressed from at least four more regions. "Chapters have become an important part of STMA," states Greg Petry, national president. "They are the front line of our efforts to help sports turf managers to become professionals and to gain the respect they deserve for their contributions to the safety of athletes and the business of sports. Now, major league baseball and NFL groundskeepers are sharing their knowledge with those of us who manage the sports turf at our local schools and parks. I think coaches and athletes have noticed that their fields are getting better as they show their support to sports turf programs."

Leaving a Legacy

The crew at Broward County Schools is undoubtedly sorry to lose Birch, as were the Schatz brothers in Maryland. His preventive maintenance program stands as solid proof that the district made the right decision when it created a separate division for care of athletic facilities.

During his tenure, Birch supervised renovation of all football and soccer fields and baseball infields, including irrigation, planting appropriate turfgrasses, regular pest and weed control, aeration, fertilization and weekly mowing. "My crew deserves the credit for our safety record," Birch affirms. "They've worked extremely hard and take great pride in what they do."

All work is centralized. No school has its own on-site groundskeeper. All operations are supervised and scheduled from one central location, and the crews and equipment move from site to site.

Birch worked closely with athletic directors and coaches at each school on field safety, conditions and small daily tasks that students and volunteers can do to help out. He gave regu-


lar "in-service" clinics to lawn maintenance and custodial personnel who maintain the part of the school grounds that isn't used for sports. "It should be a team effort all around," says Birch. "The whole team suffers if one member gets injured."

Birch is on the road again. He and Hazel sold their home in December and loaded their motorhome to visit their three children and five grandchildren.

Rumor has it that Ed plans to put down roots in northern Florida and see if he can't get a chapter started there. He recently bought new software for his PC, the same computer that has the Florida chapter's roster on its hard drive.

"You can count on seeing Ed around sports turf for some time yet," says John Mascaró. "He has a lot to offer our industry."

One thing is for certain: He'll be at the STMA Annual Conference at Pirate City in Bradenton next month. If you have any big assignments requiring a fearless organizer, let him know. He has a great track record. □



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