



*The 1994-1995  
STMA Football  
Field of the Year:*



The base turf is Medalist Premium Bluegrass Mix, which is overseeded with Medalist Gold Perennial Ryegrass during the playing season if the turf canopy runs thin. Photos courtesy: Don Wirick.

## Demaree Stadium, Merrillville, IN

By Bob Tracinski

**T**he nearly 70-acre high school sports complex at Merrillville, IN, is one of the largest in the region. It features three baseball diamonds, two softball diamonds, two physical education multiuse diamonds, four soccer fields, four football fields, a golf driving range and target green, and two band practice fields. A running track surrounds the main soccer field. The jewel of the facility is the football game field, Demaree Stadium.

Planning for the complex began nearly 10 years ago. It would be part of a massive, \$56-million renovation project at the high school, incorporating the main campus, the district's transportation facilities and the sports complex on a 100-acre plot, an extensive undertaking for the town.

Community support was marshaled from the beginning. Meetings and hearings involved school and city officials, faculty, staff, students and parents, engineering and construction profes-

sionals, and always, the community at large. Consideration was given not only to the initial physical facility, but also to long-term maintenance, playability and fan comfort. The concrete stadium, with locker rooms, weight training facilities, a press box and a hospitality room, would focus on a newly reconstructed, sand-based field. By the time the project came up for a vote, it received strong taxpayer support.

In addition to the high school, the city has seven other schools, with a property total of nearly 800 acres. Two of the middle schools have athletic fields — a football/soccer field and a baseball/softball field — bringing the total sports turf close to 100 acres.

Officials decided the sports complex, combined with the existing properties, would require a full-time grounds superintendent. They sought an applicant who would have the mechanical experience to take care of the equipment and could learn groundskeeping. At the same time, Don Wirick, an auto mechanic with 14 years of experience, was con-

sidering a change. When word of the position filtered through the grapevine, Wirick applied — and landed the job.

Initially, Wirick wasn't concerned about tackling the groundskeeping part of the task. He'd always had a lawn and, as he says, "Growing grass isn't extremely difficult — until you put a lot of people out there playing on it."

Merrillville's native soil, a sandy clay, is the base for all the rest of the sports fields. An extensive subsurface drainage system runs beneath all the athletic fields. The system leads to a retention area and moves through a filtration series of water baffles until it ends up in a small lake at an adjoining park.

At the site of the stadium field, soil was excavated to a depth of 16 inches. A tile drainage system was installed in 4 inches of coarse sand. This was covered with a 12-inch layer of the modified soil mix of 85- to 88-percent sand and 13- to 15-percent native soil.

Wirick says, "We were able to use a local source for the soil mix. The contractor

worked between two separate piles of the modified mix which had been pre-tested for sand content, gradation and pH."

The final grade was completed, and then the irrigation system was installed. "It was necessary to refinish the grade," explains Wirick. "The field is crowned with a gradation of 1.7 to 2.5 for improved surface drainage."

Though multiple trucks brought in the precast concrete and other heavy equipment was needed to complete the construction, the integrity of the field surface was preserved. Artificial turf was installed at both sidelines, stretching from one 30 yard line to the other for the team area and benches. A strip of turf approximately 3 feet wide separates this strip from the field.

"The contractor slice-seeded the new field with a bluegrass blend and stayed around through the second or third mowing," says Wirick. "Then, in the spring of 1991, it all became my responsibility, and panic set in. Actually, I'd been exposed to enough of the specialized needs of sports turf to realize I'd need some technical help — and that I'd have to be a fast learner."

"John Anderson, with Arthur Clesen, Inc. of Wheeling, IL, (and formerly with the Scotts Company) has been our unofficial consultant since the field's conception. And I have a terrific staff. My full-time crew, Don Baron and Tom Rosenbaum, and part-time crew member Steven Kerr are dedicated to getting the job done right. The school system's custodial department assists by handling some of the mowing at the satellite properties, and we have additional part-time summer help. My supervisor, Gordon Lorentz, director of grounds and building maintenance, has provided input and been very supportive."

With the initial game set for September 1992, Wirick and crew had the whole summer to establish playable conditions. However, the well water

used in the irrigation system produced a fine sand that contaminated the sprinkler heads. While repairing the heads and installing a better filtration system, they used a 1-inch hose and self-propelled water cannons along with aboveground sprinklers to keep the grass growing through the summer heat.

By the opening kickoff, the field was in great shape. Wirick says, "Since that first game, the community, coaches, players and fans expect to have a fine playing surface."

Demaree Stadium gets a workout, hosting about 20 events a season, including 17 football games. The varsity, junior varsity and freshman teams all play their home games on the field. The district's two middle school teams play special games there. In addition, a Powder Puff game is held the night before homecoming. In 1994 Demaree Stadium hosted the local Punt, Pass and Kick Contest, a National Drum and Bugle Corps Contest and the fund drive kickoff for the local United Way. In both 1994 and 1993 the field was used for the Pop Warner National Finals.

It's not just on-site spectators who view all this activity. Games and special events get good coverage from the local cable and PBS television stations.

**Field Maintenance**

"Turf is a living, dynamic thing," says Wirick. "I lay out a master maintenance plan for the year, then adjust the scheduling as necessary to comply with weather conditions and field-use schedules. What I planned in procedures and timing may not turn out to be what we actually do. With nearly 100 acres of sports turf fields, we have to be flexible."

Following the close of the football season, Wirick core-aerifies the game field in four directions, drags to break up the cores and then removes thatch with a hand rake if necessary. This is followed with an application of 22-0-22 fertilizer.

The basic turf is Medalist Premium Bluegrass Mix. Wirick overseeds at the rate of three pounds per 1,000 square feet in early November. He says, "I prefer the strong rooting and recuperative power of the bluegrass, so we stick with it as much



**Field manager Don Wirick (left) and part-time crew member Steven Kerr paint yard lines on the field.**

as possible. We'll overseed with Medalist Gold Perennial Ryegrass at the rate of two pounds per 1,000 square feet during the playing season only if the turf canopy thins enough to warrant it."

Wirick runs a soil test every two years to adjust the fertility program. The pH levels have been running at 7.2, so he applies sulfur in late November and again in the early spring.

In late March, the field is mowed to a 1-inch height to stimulate early growth. That height will gradually be adjusted up to the in-season height of 1 1/2 to 1 9/16 inches. Wirick added a reel mower to the equipment arsenal last year. He's pleased with the clean, manicured cut — and the ability to add a distinctive five-yard striping pattern. The field is mowed three to four times a week during the off season, daily in season.

In late March or early April, Wirick again aerifies, then overseeds with the bluegrass mix and drags to break up the cores and work in the seed. This is followed by an application of 11-23-10 fertilizer. The first season, he included Tupersan preemergence control in this application. It hasn't been needed since.

Three weeks after the high phosphorus application, he'll fertilize with 22-0-22 and follow this with 30-4-6 in mid-May. Any broadleaf weeds are spot-treated in May.

If the field shows signs of compaction, Wirick will aerify in mid-June using a two-direction, criss-cross pattern. This is followed by an application of high potash fertilizer to bulk up the turf and help it withstand the stress of July heat. If temperatures are cool, he'll do another light aeration in July. If the heat is on, he'll skip it.



**Demaree Stadium hosts about 20 events a season, including 17 football games.**

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## Demaree Stadium

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"As the football season approaches, we move into high gear," says Wirick. "We'll make an application of 25-5-15 fairway fertilizer to improve turf color. A day or two before important games and special events, we'll apply a micronutrient mix, including iron, at the rate of 2 1/2 pounds per thousand square feet."

During football season, games are played most Thursday and Friday nights, and some Wednesday nights. On either Friday night or Saturday morning, the crew walks the field to replace divots, then irrigates heavily. Wirick says, "The players seem to get bigger and the games more competitive each season, and they can really kick up divots. Why waste that turf if you don't have to? We do have access to comparable sod from a local grower. So far, we've only needed it for a few spots along the sidelines."

The field isn't painted for every game but is for every varsity game. It takes three days to do the complete painting. A group of parents from the football team has volunteered to paint the team's Pirate head in the center of the field the night before varsity games. They use an

indoor/outdoor stencil. The next day's mowing makes the lines crisp.

### Sideline Drainage

Wirick says, "One of the problems we encountered following completion of the stadium was sideline drainage. Though provisions had been made for surface drainage, large amounts of storm water would shed off the stadium across the artificial turf team area. Surface drainage from the field would then collect on the sideline. The subsurface drains could move this amount of water, but the water failed to percolate adequately.

"We solved the problem in 1994 by adding three surface drains on each side of the field, one at the 50 and at each 35-yard line. Then we contoured the ground with topdressing to channel the runoff to these drains."

With nearly 100 acres of athletic turf and 700 acres of other grounds, Wirick and his crew always have plenty to do. Wirick is gradually upgrading the other varsity fields. He'd like to bring them all up to the level of the football game field, but, as with programs everywhere, staff and budget constraints make it a gradual process.

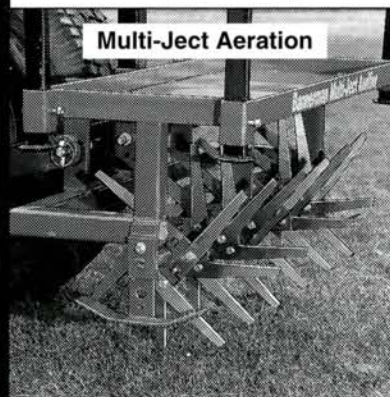
Wirick says, "The level of interest in the athletic program has increased tremendously. I'm sure the TV coverage has helped. The school district and the community do understand that our ultimate goal is to alleviate injury. The aesthetic quality is important, but it's secondary to player safety.

"After four years in this industry, I've become addicted to sports turf. This position demands lots of hours. My wife, Carla, understands my addiction and is really supportive. She also rallies the support of the kids, Jessica, age nine, Brian, age seven, and even two-year-old Joshua.

"The forethought of the administration and the commitment of the community to back the project and to maintain it at top level has enhanced the beauty of not only the complex but of the town of Merrillville. Without all the help this team has provided to me and my staff, Field of the Year status would have been a distant dream." □

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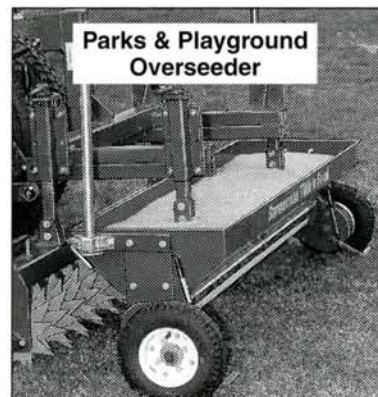


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