



Professional Baseball Diamond of the Year:

Binghamton Municipal Stadium

By Bob Tracinski

Mike Williams, head groundskeeper at Binghamton Municipal Stadium in Binghamton, NY, home of the AA Binghamton Mets, was pleased that his field was selected as the 1994-1995 Beam Clay Professional Baseball Diamond of the Year. Williams' success comes as no surprise considering his background in sports turf management. After all, what else would you expect from a 28-year-old who started his groundskeeping career at age six?

As a youngster Williams lived next to the high school baseball field in Athens, OH, and kept bugging the coach until he was allowed to help. When the family moved a few blocks away, Williams simply jumped on his bike each day to commute to his "job."

His backyard served as a training ground as well. While lots of kids lay out a rough field to play baseball in their backyards, Williams *constructed* a field. He built a mound and batter's box, put in bases and even did the painting. His dad thinks it's funny ... now.

Though starting only his second year in the Binghamton position, Williams has already been voted 1994 Groundskeeper



The Beam Clay Professional Baseball Diamond of the Year 1994-1995: Binghamton Municipal Stadium, Binghamton, NY.

of the Year by the Eastern League. At that time, team General Manager R.C. Reuteman said, "No one is more deserving of the award than Mike. He is an extremely dedicated individual, and the outstanding condition of our field is a testament to his hard work and commitment to the team."

Williams says, "Keeping the field in top shape takes total team commitment. This program receives undying support from R.C. Reuteman, the rest of the Mets management team and our local ownership. These people understand the impact a great field has on the game and are committed to making sure we have what we need to get the job done."

Williams has high praise for his crew. "I can't say enough about the dedication and commitment of my staff — daytime assistant Mike Molnar and the three game-time crew members: Pat Murray, Jimmy Loftus and George Gamble. My crew and I have a total dedication to providing the best playing surface possible every single day."

Williams considers this total dedication part of his commitment to the fans and the organization. "I have never believed in shortcuts or doing things just to get by," he explains. "I believe in

a total 120-percent effort every hour of every day, and so does my crew. After all, what's the first thing fans see when they walk through the tunnel and up to their seats? The field! It's a direct reflection not only of the groundskeeper and grounds crew, but also of the organization in general. A great-looking field portrays a positive image, especially when that field also plays well."

Williams spent the 1993 season as head groundskeeper with the Canton-Akron Indians, followed by a five-month stint on the grounds crew of the Cleveland Browns. He says of Browns Head Groundskeeper Vince Patterozzi, "Vince is fantastic. I think he could grow grass on asphalt if he needed to. I learned so much from him and his crew in the short time I was there."

Williams also has high praise for the educational assistance and support he has received from others through the informal mentor system that seems so much a part of the groundskeeping profession. "At every field I've worked on there's been someone who loved the game and really understood the important role the field plays. These guys were so helpful, so willing to share information, and they always were learn-

ing more, looking for better, more efficient ways to get the job done. I couldn't have had better role models."

Williams held his first head groundskeeper position during the summer of 1992 when he worked under coach Jerry DiCuccio on the Columbus, OH, All American's field during the Great Lakes Collegiate Summer League program. Williams helped with grounds care during his undergraduate playing years at Ohio University while earning his degree in recreation management. Field care was part of his official duties during his stint as a graduate assistant coach there while earning a master's degree in athletic administration. His mentors during this period were head coach Joe Carbone and groundskeeper Dave Hamill.

Even before that, as a high school catcher, Williams was excused from study hall for pre-game field preparations. He got his grounding in basic field care from his coaches, Bill Woodell and Les Champlin.

Binghamton Municipal Stadium is entering its fourth year of operation. Williams has established an ambitious maintenance schedule to keep the young field in winning condition. "Being a former player, I have an advantage. I know how the field is supposed to play. I spend a lot of time on the field during batting practice and watch the games closely. I also talk with the players. I believe in communicating with them and working with them to provide the surface they desire. I don't ever want the field to have a negative effect on the outcome of a game. The ball will do enough funny things by itself; it doesn't need any extra help.

"Our field is sand-based with a network of underground drainage. Both infield and outfield turf are Medalist premium sod-blend bluegrass. Because of the sand profile, we've developed an aggressive fertilization program following soil-testing guidelines. Basically, we're applying one-half pound of nitrogen every two weeks. In 1994 we put on approximately five pounds of potassium. I plan to bring that up to eight pounds

this year. The city water has a high pH, and that's showing up in the soil profile, so we're making adjustments there. We're also bringing some of the trace elements more in line with optimum levels.

"The field is mowed every game day and no more than every other day when the team is away. The infield is mowed in a four-way pattern with a 22-inch walk-behind greensmower set at a one-inch cutting height. The outfield is mowed in a two-way pattern with a



The Binghamton Mets grounds crew: (back, left to right) George Gamble, Jim Loftus, Mike Williams, (front, left to right) Mike Molnar and Pat Murray.

ride-on triplex mower set at a 1.25-inch mowing height. The mowing direction is alternated between the second base to center field pattern and a pattern parallel with the left field line to create a consistent checkerboard appearance. Foul territory is mowed parallel with the foul lines and crossed behind home plate. To alleviate an existing thatch problem, clippings are caught for disposal.

"Following every homestand, we aerate worn areas with a pitchfork, then overseed with pre-germinated Medalist Gold, a dark-green perennial ryegrass blend. Areas overseeded include the front and back of the pitcher's mound, between the plate and mound between the lines, the first and third base rounding areas, on-deck circles, coaches boxes, umpire hot spots, the grass line on the first and third base sides where the defensive

players work and the outfield hot spots. During cool weather we increase seedling survival with growth blankets.

"Following this procedure has really paid off. We needed no resodding during or after the 1994 season.

"The area in front of the mound is aerated every third day during the season with a pitchfork to eliminate compaction and stimulate subsurface root growth.

"The irrigation system consists of a Buckner controller with Hunter I-Series heads. The spray pattern is designed to reach head-to-head. There are 58 heads on the playing field: 52 I-40s in the outfield, four I-40s in the infield and two I-20s behind home plate. Foul territory currently is watered with the infield hose. Following the 1995 season we hope to eliminate the I-20s and extend the system to cover the foul area.

"I monitor evapotranspiration rates and check moisture levels at grass-root depth with a soil probe.

During the season, watering times usually run between 8 p.m. and 1:30 a.m. During hot periods the system is set on a loop function to cool the grass plants, usually running from three to five minutes per zone. The infield and foul territory are cooled with the infield hose.

"My game-day preparations begin at 6 a.m. for afternoon games, 7 a.m. for night games, with basic field inspection and equipment preparation. The mound gets attention first. Our mounds are among the finest in all of baseball. Being a former catcher, I take care of the pitchers. They appreciate it, and so do the opposing teams. Dwight Gooden said ours was one of the best mounds he had ever pitched from.

"I believe in total consistency between the bullpen and the game mound. If the bullpen has a different slope and surface or is neglected, the transition to the game mound will throw the pitcher out of rhythm and force him to adjust his delivery. With total consistency between the bullpen and the game mound, the pitcher maintains his concentration and positive mental attitude.

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"Mike Molnar is in charge of maintaining the bullpens, stadium landscaping and jobs related to the stadium surroundings and appearance. Monitoring the bullpen mounds and working them as necessary is the first thing on his daily schedule. He'll join me on field preparation once he's wrapped up his pre-planned maintenance.

"The game-time crew assists with pre-game preparations and post-game wrap-up. Generally, two work each game on a rotating basis, unless three are needed because of weather conditions or special events.

"Field care always takes top priority. Outside tasks may need to be altered due to unfavorable weather conditions, but maintaining a consistent playing surface is mandatory. Our mission statement is: 'Success comes before work only in the dictionary.'

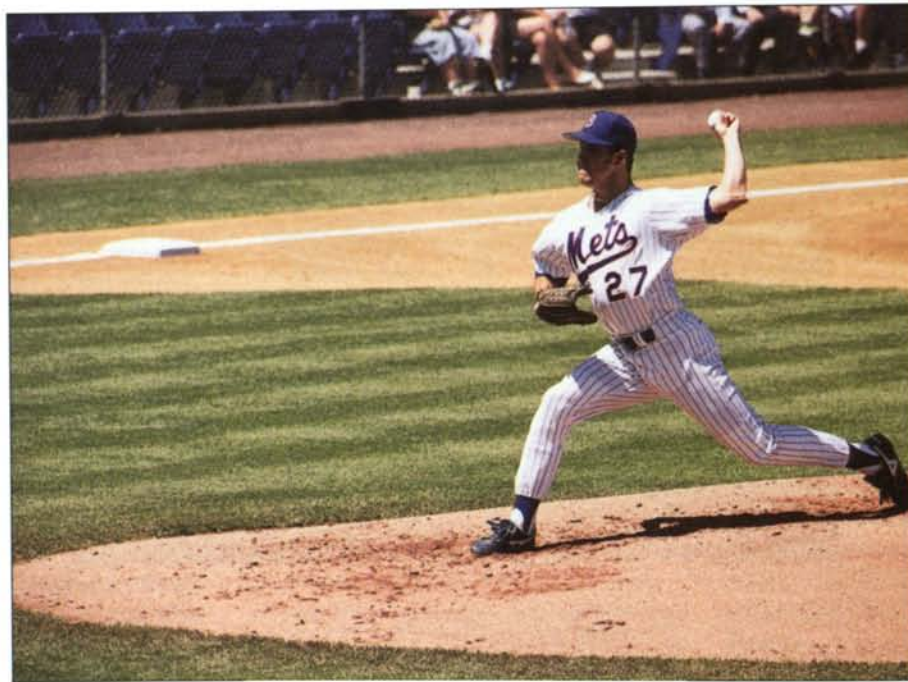
I feel this field is one of the best because it's the best it can be all of the time, not some of the time, and it shows. Our motto is: 'Always leave the field in better shape than it was when you arrived that morning.'

"All of the skinned area surfaces are worked each game day. We remove excess clay from all inside and outside edges with a soft-bristled brush, hand-rake the basepaths and walkways and spike and mat-drag the infield. After the infield turf has been mowed, the infield clay is watered. The infield clay will be mat-dragged and watered again after the rest of the mowing is completed. Moisture will be monitored and water applied as needed until batting practice begins at 4 p.m. Next, the warning track is spiked and mat-dragged. Foul lines and coaches boxes usually are painted every other day.

"Home plate is uncovered for early sessions. The mound is uncovered and the infield clay watered again just prior to

batting practice. Pre-game preparation begins 40 minutes before game time. All the skinned areas get a final going over, baselines and batter's boxes are chalked, clean bases are placed on the field. Then it's show time!

"Post-game maintenance includes repair of the home plate area, mat-dragging the infield, raking walkways and coaches boxes, floating the cutouts and edges, and soaking the entire infield clay area to a 'glazed' look. Again, the mounds,



The pitcher's mound at Binghamton Municipal Stadium gets special attention. "Our mounds are among the finest in all of baseball," says Head Groundskeeper Mike Williams.

both on the field and in the bullpens, receive extra care. We repair them after each game, removing excess clay each time. The bullpen mounds are covered after this. We soak the field mound and home plate area, leave them open for 20 minutes and then cover them.

"We handle heavier maintenance when the team is out of town — reworking the mounds, batter's boxes and catcher's box; washing clay from the edges with a hose; repairing low spots in the infield; and edging the entire field. We spike-aerate to a four-inch depth approximately every six weeks. We core-aerate only in the early spring and late fall, following this aeration with a top-dressing of 80-percent fine and medium

sand and 20-percent Dakota peat."

With all the hours spent on the field, Williams has little leisure time, but he planned ahead in this area, too. His wife Shelly was on the Ohio University softball team when they met. Williams says, "As a former player, she understands the commitment it takes to maintain a winning field, and she's very supportive of what I do."

The start of the 1994 season didn't look too promising for Williams — or the field. "Winter dropped a total of 127 inches throughout the season," he explains. "Under this perpetual white blanket, the ground and underlying soil structure never froze completely. There was no way heavy snow-moving equipment could be used on the playing field.

"We started spring preparations on March 14 with temperatures still below freezing and 17 inches of snow lingering at home plate. We unrolled the frozen tarp and placed it black side up over the infield to help melt the snow. Five days later, when we could see the infield, we moved the tarp to the outfield, where it was shifted from site to site until the snow was gone.

"We used a walk-behind snowblower and shovels to remove snow from the shaded areas in foul territory and other snow pockets around the field. Where possible, we channeled this snow onto the warning track and removed it with a skid-steer with bucket attachment.

"With the snow out of the way, we tackled the other pre-opening-day projects. We constructed a new bullpen on the visitor's side of the field to create more picnic area for group outings. The mounds were pivoted 90 degrees; they now face behind the left field fence, rather than running parallel with the field. Sod from the old bullpen was cut and moved to the new one. The bench was moved and a new chain-link fence installed to enclose it. This took two days.

"New warning-track material was applied and the track leveled. We removed the Evergreen growth blanket from the infield grass. As soon as the infield dried sufficiently, we spiked the clay to aid in the drying process and leveled the area as soon as possible by spiking a second time and mat-dragging. Home plate was hand-raked, as were the basepaths and walkways from the dugout to the home plate area. We edged the infield and warning track, applied starter fertilizer and watered it in, and mowed the field.

"The first full-squad workout was April 5. On opening day, April 7, at 1:30 p.m., the temperature was 38 degrees with a wind chill of eight. The players were reluctant, but the field was ready.

"Despite this chilling start and record rainfall throughout the season, we only had two rainouts — back to back on April 10 and 12 with an off day in between. Both were made up in double-headers."

The Binghamton Mets placed first in the division in 1994 and had the highest fielding percentage in the Eastern League (.972). Though Williams and

his crew are not claiming any credit, since 75 of their games were played at home, the field surely had something to do with that.

"The season ended on September 14. Overall, 78 games were played at Binghamton Municipal Stadium: 20 day games and 58 night games. Included in this total were the 1994 Double A All-Star Game, Eastern League Playoffs and Championship and a local high school championship game. We hosted a softball game featuring the 1969 Champion New York Mets and roped off the warning track for a pre-game autograph session.

"A symphony and fireworks night preceded the Monday All-Star Game. Once the symphony stage was in place, the rains poured. Prior to the next day's game, I had to rebuild the left side of the infield clay, hose off clay and syringe the turf to remove the tracks. It was exhausting, but we made it, and the players loved the field."

Williams says, "I am pleased with the outcome many times but never satisfied. The most important thing is to pro-

vide the best playing surface every single day so the players can be at the top of their individual game." And in Binghamton that goal is achieved.

Bob Tracinski is the manager of public relations for the John Deere Co. in Raleigh, NC, and public relations co-chair 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, high-quality diamonds. Winning diamonds are named in the professional, college and high school / municipal / park categories.

Judges for the 1994-1995 Beam Clay Baseball Diamond of the Year Awards are Bob Wilkinson, stadium superintendent, New York Yankees, Yankee Stadium; Brandon Koehnke, manager of field maintenance, Cleveland Indians; Pete Flynn, head groundskeeper, New York Mets, Shea Stadium; and Steve Wightman, stadium field manager, San Diego Padres, Jack Murphy Stadium. □

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