



Mississippi State's Golf and Sports Turf Management Program



One Mississippi State golf and sports turf management student, Bart Prather, oversaw the conversion of War Memorial Stadium in Little Rock, AR, from Astroturf to a natural surface. Photos courtesy: Steve and Suz Trusty.

By Steve and Suz Trusty

Imagine the impact on the sports turf industry if "the real world" and the academic world interacted so positively that students entered the work force equipped with the educational background and the practical skills necessary to do the job. Employers, students and universities would all benefit.

That process has been put into action at several universities that have established an informal network with sports turf professionals at various facilities to provide input on the academic curriculum and to offer the opportunity for on-the-job training. One of the top educational programs in sports turf management is at Mississippi State University.

"Mississippi State University is presently the only school that offers a four-year agronomy-based degree in golf and sports turf management with an additional 12 months of experience required for graduation," says J.M. (Mike) Mathews, associate director for the Co-operative Education Program at Mississippi State. "For many years, MSU offered a Turfgrass Management Program in the department of plant and soil sciences. In 1993, we changed the program name to Golf and Sports Turf Management, added the mandatory co-op program, adjusted the curriculum and designated electives to address the special needs of students in the golf and sports turf areas. Students select their focus — either golf or sports turf."

Dr. Mike Goatley, associate professor in the department of plant and soil sciences,

who also serves as an academic advisor for the program, worked together with Dr. Jeff Krans to develop the curriculum. It consists of basic and applied courses in plant and soil sciences plus a core of courses in the humanities, social sciences and arts.

Scott Maynard, assistant director of the co-op education program, says, "Faculty members in the department had observed that students with experience prior to graduation were securing more competitive positions after graduation than those students without experience. Therefore, a minimum of three semesters of co-operative education work experience are now required of all GSTM majors."

Mathews adds, "These scheduled work periods allow students an opportunity to gain practical experience through productive employment under realistic, competitive circumstances. It also provides the students with a means to apply and test the theory and training they have received in the classroom and laboratory."

Only one semester of co-op work is required at some other time than the summer term, but to maximize experience, students may vary the timing of their co-op semesters, working over the entire calendar year. Semester time periods are spring (January to mid-May), summer (mid-May to mid-August), and fall (mid-August to December). Students may choose to work two back-to-back semesters, spring and summer (start of season to mid-August) or summer and fall (mid-May to end of season). Flexibility in the beginning and ending dates of the co-op semesters

allows the program to adjust to employers' needs.

Mississippi State University is always seeking employers who will provide students with a quality learning experience. Golf course superintendents have shown tremendous support. Sports turf managers have been slower to come along.

"Currently, the golf portion of the program is able to place students at co-op work sites in 37 states," says Mathews. "These students have the opportunity to work with different types of courses and with both warm-season and cool-season grasses. At present, the choices aren't as extensive for the sports turf students, but we'd sure like them to be."

In the MSU program, each employer evaluates each student and also has the opportunity to talk with the staff about the program — the curriculum, the practical labs, and past and future hands-on, practical, co-op work experience. The program offers employers the opportunity to fine-tune the academic and practical experience of potential future employees.

The current curriculum at MSU provides 20 hours of restricted electives. The courses that fill these slots are determined by the student and his or her advisor to fit specific needs or provide additional expertise in areas most closely related to the student's projected employment preferences.

Once employers agree to join in the MSU program, they have the opportunity to interview potential student employees. They can make contact with students

through on-campus interviews held in February and October, set up separate on-campus interviews, interview students at the work location, set up telephone interviews with students, or any combination of these. Employers may send photo brochures or videos of their operations to give students an overview of what to expect.

At MSU, placements are not made by assignment but rather by mutual agreement between the employer and student employee. All offers must be submitted in writing, and MSU must be informed of all arrangements. Maynard focuses on placement of co-op students, both during the work semesters and following graduation.

MSU sets no parameters for student compensation, but common sense dictates that salaries and related benefits be competitive with those of other employees at similar skill levels. If the student will be moving out of the region during the co-op semester, housing assistance programs — in the form of no-cost, on-site housing or low-cost/subsidized off-site housing — may be a deciding factor.

The Employer's Role

Does the co-op program require extra work from the employer? Sure it does. Teaching takes more time than telling. Answering questions about the why and how is very demanding as is developing a program for teaching what the student needs to learn and conveying that information in a concise, understandable form.

MSU recommends diversification of job assignments to afford the student with a wide range of training and experience. The technical level and degree of complexity increases as the student demonstrates competency and progresses through the program.

Often a student may be paired with a crew supervisor on a tough technical project. Students may also participate in facility inspection tours to learn exactly what to look for and why it matters. Some paperwork is involved in analyzing and reporting a student's performance. Students are rated in the following areas: relations with others, judgment, ability to learn, attitude and application to work, dependability, quality of work, attendance and punctuality. Generally, a staff member will visit the student on the job.

Employers are encouraged to develop their own training program, providing the student with learning opportunities in as many areas as possible. Students are expected to do their fair share of downright hard, often dirty grunt work. But students

are more than just laborers. The experience employers provide will be evaluated. Students are required to rate their employers and give a verbal report of the co-op session once they're back in the classroom.

Employers are asked to think of the student as a potential long-term employee and encouraged to question the training they provide. What new skills can the student tap into to do a better job right now? What skills will give that person the ability to do a better job in the near — and

the long-term — future? In what areas can this person move a step or two up the ladder of necessary skills? In what areas can he or she climb all the way to the top? Where did the student fall short? Where did the student excel — and why? Would changes in the work-training or other parts of the program be beneficial?

The Student's Role

Students in the co-op work program put their own knowledge, expertise and work

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ethic on the line and become instrumental in the development of the employer's and co-workers' perceptions of the sports turf management program at the school. Ideally, students learn much about the science and art of sports turf management — and about their own aptitude for and attitude toward it.

Most employers have developed a broad-based program that offers the "feel" of the job and the opportunity to fine-tune existing skills and learn new ones. But none of this is served on a silver platter. It's up to the student to get the most from this hands-on experience.

As in all employment situations, students must adapt to the working situation. Some working conditions may be less than ideal; after all, sports turf needs attention when conditions are too hot, too cold, too wet and too dry. Some tasks are repetitive, others challenging. Students will succeed at some and fail at others. During all this, students are evaluated — formally by the employer and other supervisory personnel, informally by co-workers. Meanwhile, the student evaluates the

When MSU student Bart Prather had finished overseeing the reconstruction of the stadium in Little Rock, AR, the surface of the new natural field was three feet lower than that of the old artificial turf.



quality of the program, the intent of the employer, and his or her own expertise, abilities and shortcomings.

Students have the opportunity to see different segments of the profession, to try them on and find out how they feel, to shift focus or change directions altogether. The program offers students the opportunity to network and meet people who may become mentors, job search consultants or life-long friends.

Welcome to the Real World

Participation in the program takes extra effort — from both the employer and the student — but both reap the rewards. Maynard says, "Employers receive immediate benefits in the form of productive work by the students. These students

are hard working and eager to learn all aspects of golf and sports turf management. Long-term benefits include more effective recruiting and training programs at a substantial cost savings. Also, statistics show a lower turnover rate in permanent employees who have had co-op experience." Students enter the work force armed with an education tailored to their specific field, with skills gained from on-the-job experience, with a supportive network of contacts and references. The industry moves one step higher in professionalism. □

Steve and Suz Trusty are partners in Trusty & Associates, a consulting firm located in Council Bluffs, IA. Steve is executive director of Sports Turf Managers Association.

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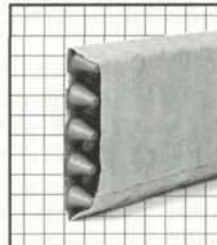
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