

Sun Devils Close to Heaven on Field of Year

By Bob Tracinski

Arizona State University's Sun Devils baseball team spends a good part of each year close to heaven — playing on the precisely manicured field of Packard Stadium — the 1995-1996 Beam Clay® College Baseball Diamond of the Year.

Maintaining that piece of heaven in the hot-house environment of Tempe, AZ, is the daunting responsibility of Brian Johnson, athletic facilities coordinator and head groundskeeper, and what he deems "a tremendous crew."

Consider that Packard Stadium is "just" one field within the multiple facility framework so typical of the university sports scene. Besides Packard Stadium, the Arizona State University sports system includes a second baseball field, the Sun Devils' football stadium, two football practice fields, a softball field, the track facility, tennis courts and the basketball stadium. Add the pro football Arizona Cardinals to the picture and things become even more complicated.

Then consider that ASU has a total of three full-time employees for the majority of these athletic facilities. Johnson "runs" the baseball, track and tennis facility programs. Pete Wozniak covers the football practice facilities, softball, and Sun Devil Stadium. Mike Tomah covers the Sun Devil skyboxes and the University Activity Center. These three full-time facility coordinators have a "pool" of five to six students that work for them. The only help they receive is from long-time STMA member Don Follett, who is in



Maintaining ASU's piece of heaven is a tremendous crew: sitting, Brian Johnson; kneeling, Mike Tomah; standing, left to right, Brian Grot, Doug Pierski, Jeff O'Connor, Matt Hedrick, Scott Paulson, Pete Wozniak. Not pictured are Chris Wahl and Niyi Ibitayo. Photos courtesy: Brian Johnson.

Judges for 1995-1996

The Beam Clay Baseball Diamond of the Year Awards are sponsored jointly by Beam Clay, the Sports Turf Managers Association and *sportsTURF* magazine in recognition of excellence and professionalism in maintaining safe, professional quality diamonds. Winning diamonds are named in the professional, college, and high school/municipal/parks categories.

The following are the judges for the Beam Clay Baseball Diamond of the Year Awards for 1995-1996:

Trevor Vance, head groundskeeper, Kansas City Royals, Kaufman Stadium;

Clay Wood, head groundskeeper, Oakland A's, Oakland Alameda County Coliseum;

Gary Wahoff, field superintendent, Cincinnati Reds, Riverfront Stadium;

Mark Razum, head groundskeeper, Colorado Rockies, Coors Field.

charge of the football playing field at Sun Devil Stadium.

As Johnson points out, with the multiple and often overlapping sports programs, "Everyone does whatever it takes, anywhere, to get the job done. We cover

all the sports, from baseball and football to basketball, gymnastics and tennis. For example, during the first baseball conference series the first weekend in March, we had four other events going on at the same time, the season's first track meet, a tennis competition, women's softball, and women's basketball."

Johnson stresses the crew's team effort. He says, "Flexibility is the key to making it work. We three 'full-timers' work well together, and we've had the same students on the work team for a couple of years. In the past, we'd have a student for one semester, and then start over with a new student. With this core group of students, we're seeing real professional results. They care about field conditions and take pride in their work, and we really appreciate it. I'd put them up with the professional spring training site staffs anytime. For them to juggle this with all the classes and study is super."

With so much going on, the full-time staff meets at the beginning of every week to develop a master plan. Field and facility use schedules fluctuate "all the time," and the student crew members have classes, papers and projects to "fit in." Johnson says, "We generally have a base crew scheduled for a few hours each day, but we have to be flexible. It's a matter of seeing who is available and what's happening, and planning the day accordingly."

"We're pleased to have been selected the Field of the Year, especially because it's a confirmation of our sports turf management program. This is what the field looks like. We didn't change our

basic procedures or do anything special to prepare before submitting our entry."

Trouble in Paradise

Packard Stadium isn't without problems.

The stadium and original field were constructed in 1974 on generally poor soil, with lots of clay and pretty poor drainage. In 1992, a sand based infield was installed.

Johnson says, "The original infield soil was excavated to a depth of 2 1/2 feet and a hard-pan base prepared. The area was then filled with washed, medium-grade, mortar sand from a local source. There's no underground drainage system, just the hard pan below the sand, but there's enough sand that the natural drainage works. The infield was sodded with Tifway 419 Bermudagrass following the construction. The outfield turf is common Bermudagrass.

"Prior to 1992, there was no sprinkler system. We just hooked the hose to a quick coupler located behind the mound. During the construction, four sprinkler heads were installed in the infield, positioned halfway between the bases."

With Tempe's traditionally high temperatures and low humidity levels, Johnson and crews face a constant struggle to keep things green. The poor soil in the outfield creates "hot spots" that require continual attention. In addition, poor overlap of the sprinkler system puts too little water in some areas, too much in others, causing further problems. But redoing the sprinkler system and reconstructing the whole outfield are not in the plans.

Johnson says, "Irrigation starts in earnest in April and May. Because of the high heat and low humidity combination, we have to 'flood' the field to get water to the turf roots. Lighter irrigation simply evaporates before it can be absorbed. Temperatures generally start to cool off in September."

The university falls under state funding, with only so much water allotted for use by the whole campus. Though athletic fields had traditionally taken more water than allotted, overall campus water use had fallen within or a bit below the total allotment. During the summer of 1995 there were 20 consecutive days of temperature highs at 110 degrees or higher with very low humidity. Overall summer temperatures hovered in the 100-plus degree range. For the first time, total campus water use exceeded the allotment.

Johnson says, "The overage triggered a look at athletic facilities and water

Opening day for Packard Stadium was January 21, 1995, when an alumni game was played and Coach Jim Brock's number was retired. The field was not overseeded until November 26, 1994, due to all the fall activity.



use. Actual water use figures had never been made available to us before. We're now getting figures that show what the allotment is for the year — and what is actually being used. Obviously, we'll be tracking irrigation closely. The university also is considering building a lake for use by the on-campus golf course — which will cut the total campus water use."

Sea of Bodies

In addition, Packard Stadium faces an all-time high in field use.

There are 45 to 55 Sun Devils' home games on the schedule. The team uses the field for practice also. Practice begins right after Christmas and runs at least through May 31. Team preparations for Omaha's College World Series in June can push practice even later. Fall practices take place in August and September.

This year, for the first time, a "developmental" game schedule has been added. These games provide experience for the younger players, and the coaches are enthusiastic about its beneficial effect on the program. However, it adds 32 games to the schedule — and they're all home games. These games will take place on what would have been off days on last year's schedule.

For the past four years, ASU has hosted a college summer league following the Sun Devils' season. This league plays a 49 to 55 game schedule, averaging seven or eight games a week.

Also add in 20 days of baseball camps for kids of all ages. Some of these days come in March, during spring break; some fit in just before and just after the summer college league games; some come in the fall, and the most extensive camp is held during the week between Christmas and New Years. Packard Stadium also hosts the 41 Senior World Series games each November.

Once or twice each season Fan Photo Days fill the field with avid fans seeking an up-close opportunity for getting photos

of and with, and autographs from, the players.

Then there are the "occasional" events. Johnson says, "This January, the baseball team went to the Oakland A's facility to practice during all the activity surrounding the Super Bowl. There were only a few activities on the Packard Stadium field. The main one was the Nat Moore Youth Football Clinic, a Super Bowl two-day event. There were 26 football fields marked out and 3,000 kids and the NFL players instructing them. I was helping paint the football field for the Super Bowl, but did slip in one morning for a peek. I could hardly see the grass for all the bodies out there. It was an 'interesting' experience, especially coming ten days before the baseball season opener.

"George Toma's crew supplied us with some pre-germinated seed. We put down the seed immediately after the clinic and applied ammonium nitrate, and it came out looking great.

"We also hosted a special sales conference for Wilson Sporting Goods during 1995. They wanted a baseball atmosphere to introduce some new products to their vendors. We painted their logo on the field. They set up tents and arranged displays for a hands-on introduction. It went well."

Looking for a Break

With all this field use, there are few windows for procedures. Johnson says, "There may be a month between the end of the summer college league and the start of the Sun Devils' regular practice schedule. The second break is approximately 1 1/2 months, from the end of the Senior World Series games around November 15 to the Youth Camp right after Christmas. The team starts back on January 2 or 3.

"We get ready for winter overseeding immediately following the Senior World Series. Normally that would be done

continued on page 10

College Diamond

continued from page 9

here in mid-October, rather than mid-November. By then it can get chilly here for perennial ryegrass germination. A couple of years ago we got to frost level shortly after the seed went down, but it came out okay."

Johnson manages to work one core aeration procedure into the late summer schedule. Then, in mid-November, they core aerify in a couple of different directions and verti-slice, lowering the blades to scalp the bermudagrass down to the dirt. They also pin-spike the field to create small openings so the seed can get down into the growing media.

Johnson says, "We overseed both the infield and outfield turf. We usually get the first overseeding down around the 20th to the 22nd of November, using Scotts Divine Perennial Ryegrass applied with a Scotts hand spreader. We don't use pre-germinated seed for the first application.

"We'll see a lot of growth within two to three weeks, depending on the weather. Because of the configuration of the

stadium and the angle of the sun at that time of year, there are some spots that don't get as much sunlight. About two weeks after the initial application, we follow up with pre-germinated seed in the sparse areas. I'll pre-germinate seed about once a week for the next month, continuing to supplement the seeding as the perennial ryegrass fills in and gradually takes over. We have until the Christmas break for the grow in."

The perennial ryegrass keeps going until mid-May. Then the Arizona heat wipes it out, and the bermudagrass takes over. Johnson says, "The turf looks uniform for most of the year. There's just a small transition at the beginning of each changeover."

Johnson works with Scotts on the nutrient program. They take soil samples every fall and draw up the annual program based on test results. Currently, they're using an 18-9-18 fertilizer with selected minors. Johnson says, "I'll look at the total fertilization scheduled for the month and make half-rate applications as evenly spaced as possible. We want a steady feeding, with no flush of rapid growth. In 1995, the team took Mondays off. So we

applied fertilizer on Sunday night and soaked it in, giving the field a day of no activity following fertilization. This year we don't have that luxury. We'll analyze the field use schedule and work in fertilization where it fits best."

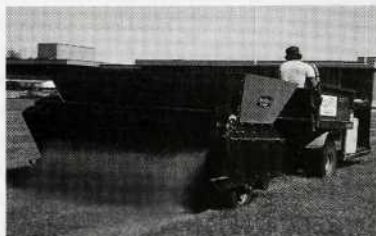
Daily maintenance is done with two staff members. There may be six or seven people involved on game days.

Johnson says, "On game days, we set up the batting cages and prep the mound and plates in the early morning. We line the field with crushed marble rather than chalk. There are no side areas with fungo circles and no walk-ups to home plate, so we lay down Enkamat and cover it with geotextile material, and the players hit from that. We put a fungo net in front of home plate. Then, after batting practice we pull it all off. We drag the skinned area again, water lightly, and touch up the lines."

The logo is painted on the field for three or four series a year. Generally, the crew brushes in the logo two days before the event and then fills it in with paint on the first game day.

continued on page 12

Our New Pattern Will Change The Way You Top Dress.



Top dress a field in less than 2 hours



*Low PSI ground driven
6 wheel design*



*Eliminates shovel
loading*



*Precise on/off
application*

Turfco's patented chevron belt handles all types of top dressing mixtures from sand to compost, wet or dry. The belt's chevron ridges, combined with ground drive, make sure that material flows consistently and spreads evenly. The top dresser assists in leveling out depressions and providing good drainage. Because there are no hydraulics the top dresser can be hooked up to any tractor or turf truck. There's less maintenance, lower costs, and no oil leaks on your field. Top dressers since 1961. Call 612-785-1000.



**Turfco Manufacturing Inc., 1655 101st Avenue Northeast
Minneapolis, MN 55449-4420, (612) 785-1000 Fax (612) 785-0556**

College Diamond

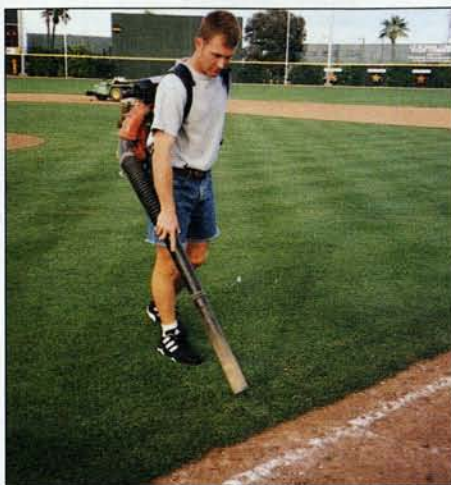
continued from page 10

The university's physical-plant staff is paid by the athletic department to mow the practice fields and the outfield of Packard Stadium with a ride-on reel mower. Johnson's staff mows the infield with a walk-behind greensmower.

Johnson says, "We use John Deere's field rake on skinned areas. We do have a hand drag and hand nail boards, and I do like the fine finish you can get with them, but the field-rake results are quite good and lots faster.

"We do a lot of prep work on the infield dirt. We rework the skinned areas when we rework the infield for overseeding. We add new dirt, rework the areas with a big leveling float board, water, and roll. I'm a big believer in keeping it nice and level. We may also have to rework the skinned areas half-way through the regular spring season, depending on the use schedule and field condition.

"I believe in a nice hard base layer top-dressed with a mixture of sand and Soil Master for a little fluff on top. That layer should be about a quarter inch so the



Jay Rapson blows dirt and clay chunks off the grass — which is done every post-game and every post-practice. No sprinkler water is ever run with dirt on the grass.

players' spikes get a good hold, but aren't taking out big chunks of the dirt. We build the mound with a straight mound mix. Daily and after every game we sweep out the mound and batters box,

mend any holes with mound mix and pack it all firmly. It bothers me when sports turf managers don't take the time to do that and the catcher and batter sit in holes. I want our players to play on top of the dirt, not down in it."

Johnson and crews do all the prep work after every practice and after every game, not the following morning. He says, "When it's hot out, we have to run the irrigation system. So we use a blower to blow off any skinned area material along basepaths and at all edges of the grass, then smooth the skinned area dirt, and then run the sprinklers. I don't want to water the skinned areas if the surface isn't in proper shape."

There are 11 sprinkler stations that cover the whole field. The few stations on the middle of the outfield that make full circles in the turf run approximately 45 to 50 minutes during an average May or June night. Those that are half circles, like those along the warning track, run a little less.

Johnson says, "The sprinklers are set to come on at pre-set intervals during the night. By spacing those intervals properly, we can have the turf slightly damp in the



Out front cutting with baskets for clippings.



Attractive striping shows-off playing field.

Great Sports Striping At Superb Prices

- Light on your wallet — low initial cost and long life
- Great striping from the shearing reel cut of a National
- Smooth, clean cutting builds hardier, healthier turf
- Easier to sharpen and lower operating cost
- Easier to maintain than rotary riding mower
- Easy rear turning wheel for high maneuverability

For details call: (612) 646-4079



NATIONAL MOWER COMPANY

700 Raymond Avenue
St. Paul, Minnesota 55114
TEL (612) 646-4079
FAX (612) 646-2887



Groom 2-4 acres an hour with National Mower 70" Sports Turf Triplex

NATIONAL® is a Registered Trademark of National Mower Company

Nothing makes sports turf look better than a National. The Best Price. The Best Cutting.

morning. By two in the afternoon, top evaporation will have created dry spots."

Johnson says, "We cover the field with a tarp as necessary in the spring when the game schedule is heaviest. But the tarp is old and has some leaks in it. So, if the tarp is going to be down for an extended period, with wet grass under it in our heat, we'll use a granular fungicide as a preventive. Otherwise, the air here is so dry we have no problem with diseases. Insects aren't a problem, either. We do have a fairly bad nutgrass infestation. The perennial ryegrass hangs on so long that the nutgrass only looks bad during part of the summer, so we haven't done much to control it. Don will be using Manage for control at Sun Devil Stadium this year, and we'll try it in Packard Stadium in May."

Constant Battle

Johnson always pictured himself "doing this." He attended college at Mankato State University, MN, and earned his bachelor of science degree in recreation. It was a flexible major, with many opportunities both in special projects (most of Johnson's focused on base-

ball and turf care) and in post-graduation positions. During his last semester, Johnson served his internship at ASU, working at the recreation facilities. He volunteered a lot of hours on the athletic fields. When a full-time position opened up at ASU a year later, Johnson says, "They tracked me down and offered it to me. I've been at ASU since 1985, 11 years."

He was assigned to the baseball area right away, working under Coach Jim Brock, who died last year. Brock had the reputation of being "kind of hard" to work for, so it was a sink or swim position with "lots of trial and error," but also a great opportunity for learning.

Coach Pat Murphy was hired to replace Coach Brock. This is his second season at ASU.

Johnson says, "Each coach has his own philosophy and way of using the field for practice, so with a new coach there will be different procedures and a lot of different things to learn. It's another reason sports turf managers need flexibility."

"I've been lucky to have worked with people who willingly share their expertise and tricks of the trade. Don's been a

great working partner. Alan Sigwardt, who is at Joe Robbie Stadium and was working with the Cardinals at the time of our field renovation, supervised the infield construction and was great to work with."

Another must for any sports turf manager is a personal support team. Johnson says, "I'm usually the first one here and the last to leave. My wife, Allison, has been extremely understanding and supportive, and so are my sons, Austin, who's six, and Travis, who's five."

Johnson understands that field care is a constant battle, a balancing act between use and maintenance. He says, "You work really hard to get the field looking great so the players have the best possible surface for play. Then they do play, which tears up the field, and you go right back to working hard to put it in great shape again. I guess either you love doing it or you don't last in this profession." □

Bob Tracinski is manager of public relations for the John Deere Company in Raleigh, NC, and public relations co-chair for the national Sports Turf Managers Association.

Deep Drill Aeration



U.S. Pat. No. 4,476,938

FILL AERATOR HOLES COMPLETELY, THE FIRST TIME

- 0-8 inches deep using 24 Carbide Tip Bits – Spaced 7.5 centers.
- 1 inch Drill Size.
- 2500 to 3000 sq. ft. hour.
- Hoppers will hold total of 1.87 sq. yd. per fill.
- Medium – Dry Sand – Isolite – Profile – Axis, etc.

Floyd McKay Aerofier Co.

P.O. Box 191 • Dunn, NC 28335
(910) 892-7806 • (910) 892-4443 fax

Athletic Surfaces



"We Make the Game Look Better"

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| • FIELD MARKING PAINTS | • TURF COLORANTS |
| • COMPUTERIZED GRAPHIC LOGOS | • ATHLETIC STRIPERS |
| • ANTI-GRAFFITI PAINT | • MIXING ACCESSORIES |
| • PRIVACY CURTAINS & WINDSCREENS | • TRAFFIC PAINT |
| • STENCILS & ACCESSORIES | • FIELD STENCILS & ACCESSORIES |
| • NON-SLIP STADIUM COATINGS | • GYM FLOOR PRODUCTS |
| • SPORTS FIELD ACCESSORIES | • SELECT ATHLETIC FLOORING
(TENNIS, TRACK & WEIGHT ROOM) |

Sport Coatings are our only business.

World Class
athletic surfaces, INC.

Toll free 1-800-748-9649