

# Mowing “Pattern Masters”



Dave Mellor, assistant director of grounds for the Milwaukee Brewers, “etches” a pattern into the infield. Photo courtesy: David Mellor.

## Share Their Secrets

By Steve and Suz Trusty

**F**lick on the TV set to catch a baseball game and the first thing that grabs your attention is the intricate pattern etched in the turf. For couch potatoes and fans in the stands, this marvel of mowing and tender loving care puts baseball's turf in the top echelon — far, far better than the maybe not-so-green grass of home.

Here, three “pattern masters” — Gary Vanden Berg, director of grounds, and David Mellor, assistant director of grounds, for the Milwaukee Brewers Baseball Club and Mark Razum, head groundskeeper for the Colorado Rockies Baseball Club — share their secrets.

Vanden Berg says, “I remember entering this same County Stadium as a kid taking in a game with my dad and being overwhelmed by the awesome expanse of grass. It had an indescribable aura that captured the spirit of baseball for me. That's what we're trying to create for today's fans.

“The patterns also help improve the image of groundskeeping a bit. We don't just mow grass and move dirt. Sports turf management is a complex combination of art and science.”

Mellor adds, “Safety and playability will always be the top priority. The infield skin in baseball is really the most important. That's where much of the game is played and where a

groundskeeper makes his name. Ours has come full circle from tough shape in 1988 to prime condition today. Once that skinned area is in top shape, you have the time to concentrate extra effort on the turf.

“A pretty field that plays poorly won't cut it, while an ugly field that plays well can be acceptable. That ugly field may be the only way to achieve safe, playable status for that game with the resources available and time frame and weather conditions involved. In this area of turf management, sometimes it's necessary to take short-term actions to get in a game that aren't in the best long-term interests of the field agronomically. Knowing when, why and how to accomplish the best possible solution for both short- and long-term field use is one of the major challenges of this profession.”

Vanden Berg and Mellor were both young players hooked on baseball who, through injuries, ended up traveling a different route but retain the player's eye for how the field will play. Vanden Berg says, “The pattern should have no effect on the players' game, and that's part of doing it well. Ideally, the field itself is in such great shape it ceases to be a factor, allowing the players to concentrate totally on the game. They really notice the pattern when they review game film or watch highlights on TV.”

All three of these pros borrowed from golf course equipment technology and use techniques to integrate patterns into their fields. They praise the technological advances, especially over the last ten years or so, in turf varieties, fertilizers, mowing and other field care equipment that acknowledge the importance of the sports turf category and allow managers to do more precise maintenance, including the patterns.

### First: Thriving Turf

They point out the need to start with healthy grass.

Mellor says, “The Brewers' fertilization program is fine-tuned to turf needs. Extra potassium provides more wear tolerance and a residual effect that keeps that pattern holding longer. We rotate the Scotts micro-nutrient rich granular STEP product and PBI-Gordon's liquid Bov-A-Mura mixed with iron and manganese to keep levels high, but not into the ‘overcharge’ range.”

Turf varieties make an impact. Vanden Berg and Mellor have selected the darker green cultivars of Kentucky bluegrass as a base and added limited quantities of high-quality, dark-green perennial ryegrass as needed. Primed and pre-germinated bluegrass cultivars are used for fill-in overseeding as much as possible.

Mellor says, “The field was resodded in 1995 with 100 percent Kentucky bluegrass. As of mid-June in 1996, perennial



ryegrass had been used only in areas of heavy wear — where the outfielders stand, the foul areas and in the area where the batting practice outfield screen is placed.”

At Coors Field, Razum is dealing with the young, 90 percent sand, 10 percent peat soil profile and a turf mix of 60 percent perennial ryegrass and 40 percent Kentucky bluegrass. He's working toward the 70 percent bluegrass, 30 percent ryegrass ratio he'd prefer for greater durability and the tillering advantages. He says, “There are more divots with the perennial rye, so we have to go in with more seed and sand.

“It will take another year or two for the field to settle in. We're spoonfeeding nutrients to correspond to turf needs and using an organic fertilizer to ‘build up’ the field. The potash to nitrogen ratio is critical. With heavier potash



**The Brewers' fertilization program includes extra potassium, which has a residual effect that keeps a pattern holding longer. Photo courtesy: David Mellor.**

levels the turf is more upright on its own, almost like a bristle brush, so the mowing pattern tends to disappear or looks weaker than it would with a more normal potash level. We're spraying on more iron now, which creates a more equal color as well as improving turf quality.”

“We're topdressing with straight sand of the same type and size used in the original soil profile, rather than a sand/peat mix. This eliminated the slick organic mat right at the top surface of the soil that developed following field construction.”

## The Crowning Touch

Razum says, “Fertilization, aerification, irrigation and mowing are all coordinated to meet turf needs. The patterns ‘polish’ the field. They're the crowning touch to all the babying we do for it.”

Razum started establishing patterns in Arizona during spring training. It was the first time he'd had access to reel-type mowers. He says, “We were getting help from a golf course, and seeing the results they achieved with the reel mowers, I wanted more detail for our field.”

When Razum took the position at the Oakland A's Coliseum in 1989, the pattern concept went with him. He says, “There were a few fields being striped at that point, but we wanted more. We developed a cross pattern, which meant



**A successful pattern should have no effect on the players, allowing them to concentrate totally on their game. Photo courtesy: Mark Razum.**

we didn't need to go up to the mound and make those sharp turns. The pattern kept the turf properly mowed by not crossing those areas of the mound. It also slowed the ball a bit around the mound, helping the pitchers make infield plays.”

Imitation is the most sincere form of flattery. Mellor says, “When we initially moved into patterns, we were really impressed with Mark's and ‘copied’ it. We even dubbed it ‘The A's Pattern.’

“Our first really original pattern at County Stadium came in 1993 and originated as a form of distraction,” says Mellor. “Forklifts had created a worn path in the outfield during the in-and-out movement of materials for a Paul McCartney concert. We immediately deep-tine aerated, topdressed and overseeded the damaged turf, but weather wouldn't allow us to do anything more. That section of the field sure didn't meet our standards, and the team was headed back for a home stand.

“This coincided with my opportunity to put in my creative designs. So, with Gary's full support, we decided now was the time to try out an innovative checkerboard pattern in the infield to divert attention from the outfield. It took from 11 at night until 9 in the morning to get



**Patterns are the result of a crew's extra effort, and their ideas can be freelance, sketched on a pad, or created on the computer screen. Photo courtesy: David Mellor.**

just the right effect. Fans and sportscasters, including Tom Seavers and Phil Rizzuto, all raved about the new look — and no one mentioned that outfield turf.”

## How They Do It

All three declare you need supportive management and a super staff. It's vital for team and facility owners and field users to respect the abilities and judgment of the sports turf managers. All within the grounds department must work together to make the field the best it can be.

Razum calls his crew “tops” and credits them with dreaming up and sketching out many of the pattern ideas. He notes the special efforts of Jose Gonzales on the infield and Javier Rivera on the outfield. Rivera is “the master” of mowing that perfectly straight line. His impromptu “command” performance demonstration at the Colorado STMA Chapter's June meeting drew spontaneous applause from the attendees. (Gonzales drew similar applause on his skinned area drag mat techniques at that meeting. See coverage of that meeting in the July issue.)

Razum's crew mows in the pattern, using a walk-behind reel mower for the infield and a triplex reel mower on the outfield. The front and back rollers “etch” in the pattern with no additional rolling.

Razum says, “Time is a very important factor with the young field. We want a striking pattern that is still basic and simple to execute. Sometimes a pattern is born of ‘freelance art’ on the mower. Something just clicks, and we give

*continued on page 12*



## Pattern Masters

continued from page 11

it a try. More often we'll draw out a pattern on a sketch pad. Rivera's skills really help. He can do a diamond cut pattern by visually lining up with two spots on the field."

Vanden Berg says, "It's one thing to come up with a pattern idea, another to execute it well. I credit David and the crew members for making it work. Etching in the patterns does add a little wear and tear to the field, so the turf must be in top condition to withstand the stress."

Mellor says, "The crew's extra effort and pride across the board make it possible to do the patterns. It's definitely a group effort. Pattern ideas may be freelance, sketched on a pad or created on the computer screen, blocking out the various segments in two different shades of green."

"Crew member Doug Schoch assists with both patterns and computer design. Crew member Kirt Bakos helps a lot in the infield. And crew member Jeff Adcock even challenged me to come up with an idea to honor future Hall of Famer Robin

Yount when his number was retired. We decided to create a huge number 19 pattern."

Mellor explains that the grass blades bend in the direction the mower travels. The light and dark sections are created by light reflecting off the blades. As you face the field, the turf appears light where the mower traveled away from you; dark where the mower traveled toward you.

With the design in hand, Mellor and crew divide the field into quadrants, then measure out and run a string line down a specific section. The string can then be stretched over to the other side to make sure matching segments are uniform.

Mellor says, "Initially, to accommodate slower infielders, we cut the turf at 2 1/2 inches with a rotary mower. We then followed up with a reel mower, without the reels engaged to roll in the pattern. Now we mow the field in one direction with a triplex reel mower, alternating that direction at each mowing so we don't get any 'grain' in the grass that might cause snaking or unusual bouncing of the ball. We then form the pattern with the

walk-behind reel mower, without the reels engaged."

Mellor usually mows in the initial pattern, with crew members handling subsequent mowings. He sets up the first stripe of each segment with the string line and lines up the remaining stripes in each segment to the first stripe. A slow, wide turn at the end of each stripe avoids scuffing and turf wear. "Skinny lines" are formed with one pass of the mower; "fat lines" with two passes. The mowing of each section is planned in order, so as the mower moves on to the next section, the turning portion is "wiped out" with a "clean up pass." Generally, one pass with the mower is sufficient, but for major games, Mellor and crew etch in each stripe with three passes for definition of contrast. The reels of the mower aren't engaged for the additional passes.

Crews mow every day during home stands; every other day when teams are on the road. During team travel, different mowing angles are used and new patterns are tried out. These changes help the turf maintain an upright growing pattern and improve overall turf vigor.



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All three "pattern masters" caution that an idea that looks great on the sketch pad or computer screen may not work on the field. Patterns are viewed from every angle by on-site spectators. TV camera crews and print photographers add another dimension to that viewing. The aesthetics of each pattern are gauged from all angles before a go-ahead is given for game use.

### Who Notices

All have fielded questions on their patterns. Fans try to guess how it's done, coming up with ideas like different types of grasses planted in stripes or segments, turf mowed to different heights or painted in different shades of green.

Vanden Berg says, "The patterns become a signature for your ballpark, and with the multiple coverage of the networks and two ESPN channels, exposure has greatly increased. We've received calls from all across North America, sometimes from friends or couples wanting us to settle an argument about how it's done."

Mellor reports, "We've walked other sports turf managers through the steps of developing a specific pattern, sometimes over the phone and sometimes in person. The patterns have received excellent media coverage, including spreads in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and the September 1995 issue of *Popular Mechanics*. The *Milwaukee Journal* sports writer, Tom Haudricourt, joked about what we might do when Robin Yount's number was retired and, when he found out we were working on a field pattern for it, covered that as part of the news story."

Razum says, "When the A's played the Giants in the 1989 World Series (the one cut short by the earthquake), a *San Francisco Chronicle* sports writer derided our pattern, wondering how anyone with bad eyesight could even watch a game on our field. That sparked the first feedback from our players, who rallied around us and told everyone how much they liked the patterned field."

Razum says, "We'll change a pattern just before a home stand, so the players have a new look when they come back, or we'll change the pattern halfway through a home stand, as a bonus for the fans."

"Last year we tried a circular pattern for the first games of a seven-game home stand in mid-August. The team lost the first three games. Our owner said he

was feeling a bit superstitious about it and asked us to go back to the old pattern. We did — and the team rallied to win the final games. The morning after that first win, I had five media calls. A field shot made the front page of the newspaper. One of the radio stations did a remote broadcast, with one of their microphones attached to our mower."

Mellor says, "There's a fraternity of sports turf managers out there, striving for perfection in the traditions of the late Harry Gill and of George Toma's 'and then some'

philosophy. Field patterns are one more way of demonstrating our professionalism and earning both the notice and respect this industry deserves." □

*Steve and Suz Trusty are partners in Trusty & Associates, a consulting firm located in Council Bluffs, IA. Steve is Executive Director of the national Sports Turf Managers Association.*



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