

# Ridgewood High Grows Grade-A Gridiron

By Bob Tracinski

**H**igh school football fields often become the focus of their schools' outdoor events. In Ridgewood, NJ, the football field hosts fall football games for the freshman, junior varsity and varsity teams for approximately 18 home games in eight weeks. All three teams have one practice session on the field each week. There also are weekly band practices and performances.

The first week of April marks the start of the lacrosse season. Mid June marks the Junior Olympics. Graduation, naturally on the field, hits in the third week of June.

Keeping this field in safe, playable condition with this packed schedule is tough when conditions are ideal. But lack of rainfall during the summer of 1995 forced an outdoor water-use ban that began on June 15 and lasted into early September.

Not only did Bob Buono, grounds manager for Marriott School Services, and his crew keep the football field playable, they brought it to award-winning status, earning STMA's 1995-1996 Football Field of the Year Award.

## Nurturing a Native

Marriott School Services, a division of Marriott Management Services, provides dining, nutrition education and facilities management to more than 330 US school districts. Marriott spokesperson, Kathy Boyle, says, "School districts have the mission of educating children. Marriott wants to handle all the other services."

And Buono and crew have lots to handle. The Ridgewood School District has 12 other fields, making a total of 28 acres of athletic turf under their care. They also

maintain the 20 acres of outside grounds for the district's ten schools and one professional building, as well as the 35 acres of paved surfaces consisting of tennis courts, outdoor basketball courts and parking areas. In their "spare time," they also are responsible for moving all gymnastic and sports equipment from school to school throughout the year. This includes seasonal movement, such as the football field goal posts, and day-to-day movement, such as the "dummies" used for football practices.

Buono oversees the entire maintenance program, consulting with Paul Carstens, director of buildings and grounds for Marriott at Ridgewood, his immediate supervisor, and with the school's director of athletics and physical education to coordinate the scheduling of events. Maintenance procedures must be slotted around these field-use schedules.

Carstens says, "The Football Field of the Year Award is the culmination of the outstanding efforts of Bob Buono and his crew to improve the athletic facilities and grounds of the Ridgewood schools."

It's obviously a team effort, and Buono is quick to credit his crew. He says, "My crew does an excellent job. Foreman Michael Lannin is focused on providing top quality maintenance for the district. He handles all the field lining, oversees daily operations and interacts with the director of athletics. Crew member William Hunt assists with field lining, handles much of the mowing and assists with set up of all events.

"Peter Catania, head custodian at the high school, and his staff also do an outstanding job. Their cooperation and assistance with the set up of functions help it all flow smoothly."



From left to right, William Hunt, Michael Lannin and Bob Buono display a recent cost-effective investment. Photo courtesy: Bob Buono.

The mutual respect between the Marriott staff and school district personnel is obvious. Tom Burgin, secretary of the Ridgewood School Board, says, "We're very proud of Bob Buono and his crew."

Buono joined the Marriott operation two years ago. Prior to that, he'd worked for a fertilizer and equipment distributor, for a major lawn and landscape maintenance firm, and owned and operated his own business in the landscape industry. He's completed several college horticulture courses and the Rutgers Athletic Field Maintenance and Construction Course.

Buono "thrives on challenge" and "appreciates the before and after aspect" of sports turf management. He credits his parents for instilling in him a "hard work philosophy" and "good business sense." Armed with all this, and the support of his wife, Renee, the Marriott position offered him a challenge to savor.

All of the Ridgewood athletic fields are native soil. Buono says, "The football field was reconstructed 12 years ago and has excellent underground drainage. I began integrating more turf-type tall fescue into the turf mix when I came on board here. The present ratio is 80 percent fescue and ten percent each bluegrass and perennial ryegrass. We need a tough turf that can stand up to the heavy field use and our weather extremes. Last summer's extended stretch of high temperatures and sparse precipitation would wipe out most other cool-season grasses."

## Aggressive Maintenance

Heavy use on native soil fields means compaction is a constant challenge. Wear, especially along the sidelines, presents another challenge. Buono counteracts all this with an aggressive maintenance program.



**Creative management and a lucky window helped Ridgewood's native soil field survive the '95 drought.**  
Photo courtesy: Bob Buono.

In late fall of 1994, the field was core aerated in two directions, overseeded with a 50-50 mixture of turf-type tall fescue and perennial ryegrass, topdressed with 3/8-screen topsoil, and overlaid with a light layer of sphagnum peat moss, spreading 40 four-cubic-foot bales.

Buono says, "We leave the cores on the field after aeration so the native soil, topsoil and peat combine to gradually improve the soil profile.

"Crabgrass is a perpetual invader. We make an early March application of pendimethalin combined with a 0-0-7 fertilizer. That's followed with a second treatment the first week of April in combination with a 19-3-7 fertilizer with a 50 percent sulfur coated urea (SCU) nitrogen source. In conjunction with the second treatment in 1995, we sodded the worn out areas along the sidelines with grade-A bluegrass sod and spot treated for fungus and broadleaf weeds."

Buono used a granular insecticide and fertilizer combination with a 23-3-10, 40 percent SCU Poly formula in May of 1995. A second spot treatment for fungus and broadleaf weeds was made during May.

The field is "on display" for graduation in June. Buono says, "Ten days prior to commencement, we applied a fertilizer product with 100 percent SCU and five percent iron. The field was in top shape for the graduation ceremony. We aerated and overseeded with our 50-50 seed mix again at the end of June.

"Everything was looking great when the '95 drought hit. Luckily it coincided with our only window of limited field use. We applied a slow release fertilizer during July and August and spot treated broadleaf weeds with an amine herbicide. We also applied granular Merit as a preventative measure against grubs. We aerated the entire field and sidelines."

Buono is a licensed pesticide applicator and handles all of the pesticide applications.

He follows IPM practices, acting immediately when field-damaging activity becomes apparent.

The results of the tough summer kept him hopping in August. Buono says, "I applied Dylux to control grub activity in a few confined spots, boom sprayed the entire field with a fungicide to combat leaf spot, and spot treated with Acclaim to wipe out the crabgrass that appeared in some of the hottest, driest areas. We aerated, overseeded and topdressed the grub-damaged areas."

As the drought broke and temperatures eased up a bit in the fall, Buono was able to resume watering. He says, "We applied our standard fall fertilizer, aerated the entire field and sidelines, and sodded the worn areas along both sidelines with grade-A bluegrass sod. We overseeded the worn areas with turf-type tall fescue, topdressed with topsoil and added a light layer of peat moss on top."

Crews groom the football field every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, alternating direction with each mowing. The three-inch mowing height drops down to 2 1/2 inches in the pre-game mowing for football and lacrosse.

Buono says, "In the spring of '95 we purchased a new Jacobsen HR 5111 12-foot hydrostatic-deck diesel mower from Wilfred McDonald Equipment in Lyndhurst, NJ. It's been a labor-saving, cost-effective investment, and we've received excellent support from our supplier.

"Varsity games are played on Saturday. During the playing season, the field is lined using our Titan paint liner following the Friday mowing. Other equipment in our small but effective arsenal includes a Model 1920 Ford tractor with a tow-behind aerator, tow-behind 100-gallon sprayer, and a three-point spreader. Two 25-gallon electric tanks are mounted on our utility cart for spot spraying. We've designated one tank for selective control products, the other for non-selective controls."

Like everyone else in this industry, Buono must be creative in stretching the budget to bring heavy-use and high-visibility areas into top condition without slighting other segments of the property.

He says, "It's a continual juggling act, but the results are gratifying. What better 'after' could I have than STMA's Football Field of the Year Award?" □

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