



Floyd Perry's Hands-On Seminars

By Chris Turner

Floyd Perry has a wagon full of toys. Actually the wagon is full of tools, but there is really no distinction between the two with Perry. He lifts one little gadget after another from the wagon and shows them to the assembled group with the enthusiasm of a third-grader at a Friday show-and-tell.

"Over here is a little something we developed to aerate your infield that allows a person to do the job by himself," he says, pointing to a white, pitchfork-looking instrument with three long tines and a platform for pushing it into the ground with your foot. The tool is demonstrated; then Perry continues.

"If you want to see how compacted your turf is, you can use this tester," he says as he pulls a long, thin meter that resembles an oversized cooking thermometer out of the ground.

Perry is no Inspector Gadget — he is a grounds maintenance expert. He is founder and owner of Grounds Maintenance Services, a company that travels around the country offering instruction for the low-of-budget and the short-of-manpower staffs. The groups often include small city parks and recreation departments and high school coaches who maintain their own playing fields. The participants pay their money and, in exchange, take with them all kinds of neat little tricks and tidbits of information, while also being introduced to tools that can aid them in their jobs.



Perry conducts four multi-day academies and 80 one-day workshops around the country each year. Photos courtesy: Floyd Perry.

"I pride myself in being a blue-collar kind of guy," Perry says. "I've never claimed to be a professional groundskeeper. What I try to do is provide these guys with the tools and the techniques to help them do their jobs better. Groundskeeping is a great profession. There are a lot of little things you can do to get better."

Although Perry is an advocate of continuing education by reading trade publications and attending seminars, he earned his experience by doing. Perry was a high school baseball coach for many years and also coached at Valencia Community College in Orlando, FL, for 15 years. He left coaching to accept the director of baseball operations position at Baseball City, near Orlando, where he was responsible for maintaining several fields. When Baseball City closed after five years, he and his wife, Libby, struck out on their own with the Grounds Maintenance Services.

"I saw a real need for groundskeepers to be able to learn ways to make their jobs easier and for playing surfaces to be prepared in a safer manner," Perry says. "There is a real liability factor, and everyone is looking at the groundskeepers now as to why a field wasn't safe to play on."

Perry started the business in 1992 and conducts four multi-day academies and 80 one-day workshops around the country each year. In addition, he owns a company that builds ball fields and does consulting work.

One of the most notable academies is conducted at USA Stadium in Millington, TN, the national training site for Team USA, America's top amateur team, which represents the U.S. in the Olympics.

"We host all levels of amateur baseball here and are trying to bring things in to make this a baseball learning center as well," says John Daigle, promotions

director for USA Stadium. "The groundskeeping academy fits right in. It has been a big help, not only to our groundskeeper here, but several of the local municipalities have taken advantage of what Floyd has to offer. We're just fortunate that USA Stadium has been the place where the seminar is hosted."

In 1994, the USA Stadium academy was conducted during the International Challenge Cup Series, a tournament that featured Team USA, Cuba, Australia and Canada. Participants in the seminar did hands-on training in the morning, had a classroom portion in the afternoon, and went to the stadium to help prepare the field for two games each evening.

"I think the academy works better when we can bring in a group of people and can prepare the field for multiple games like we did in 1994," he says. "There is a little more downtime with just one game a day."

Perry speaks in terms his disciples can understand: time. When it rains and there are several games scheduled, time becomes a valued commodity.

"Floyd shows you ways to get the job done in a short period of time," says a participant from Bartlett, TN. "That's the biggest thing I've learned from his academies."

"You get so many ideas on how to do things better or make the most of what you have," says a Buffalo, NY, school district groundskeeper. "So much of what we learn helps us to streamline our efforts."

Perry says, "The majority of the parks and recreation departments in the country do not have 15 or 20 people they can run out onto a field when it rains. We teach ways one person can get a field ready for play in a short period of time."

That's where the wagon full of gadgets comes in. The USA Stadium complex has two fields, one of which is used for pre-game batting practice. Perry took his group to the practice field and began to hose down the third base corner of the field to the point where the bag appeared ready to float away. A concerned member of the stadium's staff nervously reminded Perry that a team from Nicaragua was scheduled for practice on the field in just a few hours. Perry assured the gentleman it would be ready for play in 15 minutes. When he did turn the water off, chuckles from the audience left the impression that some people were betting whether the field would be playable or not. Ye of little faith.

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Perry pushed his wagon to the edge of the quagmire. He dumped the wagon's contents on the outfield grass, picked up a pump, and moved the wagon into position. As he spoke, he slid one end of the pump into the watery mess and leisurely pumped most of the water into the wagon. He rolled the wagon to the edge of the field and poured out the water. With most of the water gone, he picked up a sponge-covered board by its rope handles and dropped it into the remaining standing water. A volunteer stood on the board mashing the sponges down in the water — then picked it up and dropped it into the grass where the water was squeezed out.

With the water gone and only moisture remaining, Perry tossed some cabined clay on the ground and scratched it around until the surface looked as though it had been sprinkled during pre-game field preparation to settle the dust.



In a typical day at Perry's 1994 USA Stadium academy, participants did hands-on training in the morning, a classroom portion in the afternoon, and were at the stadium to help prepare the field for two games each evening.

Actually, less than 15 minutes had expired, including lecture time.

"Maintaining a field is as important to me as CPR, driving a school bus, or teaching a player how to catch ground balls," Perry says. "I try to teach groundskeeping from that perspective.

"It's funny. Coaches have been going to clinics for years learning ways to teach a curve ball, but they have some of the

worst-looking fields in the world. What I try to do is show them things that will give them a nice, safe field."

Raking and dragging a field is not all the participants do. During his 1995 academy at USA Stadium, Perry brought in Tom Samples, a horticulturist and turf specialist from the University of Tennessee-Knoxville; Chip Houmes, from CIBA Industries; Mike Provost from the University of Memphis; and James Griffin from Toro Industries. All made presentations dealing with their areas of expertise.

"You've got to keep ahead of things in this industry because your labor will sometimes walk out on you," Perry says. One way to keep the hired help around, he says, is to give them tools and knowledge they can work with. "Groundskeeping is not landscaping. The tools that groundskeepers have always come from landscaping. A group of us got together and came up with the idea of manufacturing tools specifically for groundskeepers. In this profession,

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a lot of times, you have to use your imagination and improvise."

Perry has done both. He saw a farmer using a tool that inspired the idea of making a triangular blade attached to a handle that could be used for sliding across the top of the ground to trim around the edges of the infield and the home plate area. The result is a perfectly manicured grass line. One industrious Little League volunteer, who works for a styrofoam company, came up with the idea to make "Puddle Pillows," which can be tossed into a wet spot and used much like the sponge board. The Puddle Pillows are chunks of styrofoam sewn into an absorbable fabric.

"I probably learn as much from the people who attend the academies as they do from me," Perry says with a laugh.

Probably the most useful items the seminar participants take with them are the little tricks of the trade that are subtle, but can save time and wear and tear on a groundskeeper's back.



Thanks to Perry's seminars, low-of-budget and short-of-manpower staffs can learn many professional techniques, such as the art of field painting.

Tricks like:

- Dragging a hose across the infield and around the foul territory in the morning to sweep away the dew so the grass can be cut;
- Hanging a piece of PVC by a pipe to the other side of the fence near the bullpen so a mound tarp can be wrapped around it, flipped over the fence and quickly drawn over the mound before it gets too wet;

- Burying clay blocks in the batter's box and the landing area of the pitcher's mound so the wear areas are not as difficult to repair and take less time between games;

- Brooming the infield clay surface rather than steel-mat dragging;

- Using artificial turf pads from which to pitch and hit off so as not to tear up the prepared clay;

- Using a fine, finish rake to smooth the mound and home plate areas to leave a touch of neatness.

With more municipalities adding soccer to their recreational programs, Perry says the need has risen to provide educational support for maintaining all types of fields and has seriously considered expanding the scope of Grounds Maintenance Services to meet that need. Until then, he'll continue to push his wagon full of goodies around the country, pulling out his toys, and doing a show-and-tell for people who are as excited about their profession as he is. □

Chris Turner is the sports editor for The Millington Star in Millington, TN.

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