

Steve Wightman: Man of the Year



Mud races may be fun for the crowds at Jack Murphy Stadium, but for Steve and his crew, they mean a lot of work. Photo courtesy: Steve Wightman.

By Jim Williams

If four words can, “helpful, knowledgeable, modest” and “organized” sum up Steve Wightman, winner of *sportsTURF*’s eighth annual Man of the Year award.

“He’s the consummate professional,” says Greg Petry, past president of the STMA. “Technically he knows his stuff and couples it with great people skills. He talks to people, not at them, and he’s a friend to everyone. Although he works at the professional level, he doesn’t have a chip on his shoulder — he doesn’t think he knows it all, and he’s willing to listen to everyone. He puts the profession ahead of himself. I can’t say enough about him. Out of everyone I know, I can’t think of anyone who deserves the award more. As far as I’m concerned, he should be Man of the Decade.”

Whether for Man of the Year or Decade, Steve does have the credentials. The following are a few of the past or present accomplishments he can list on his resume for either honor: (1) teacher of sports turf management at Cuyamaca College in El Cajon, CA; (2) member of *sportsTURF* Advisory Board; (3) board member, treasurer and two terms as president of STMA; (4) winner of Hunter Industries’ Lifetime Achievement Award for his “contributions to the sports turf management profession and his efforts to promote education and training in the industry”; and (5) winner of the 1984 Harry C. Gill Memorial Award (STMA Groundskeeper of the Year), for his dedication to “developing and maintaining quality sports turf areas; outstanding ability and commitment to sports turf

industry service....” And the list goes on, providing a dry description that really doesn’t capture the essence of Steve Wightman.

Perhaps Chris Bunnell, grounds supervisor for California’s Escondido Union School District and president of Southern California STMA, does when he says about Steve: “He’s very helpful. He’s always been a source others can go to. He’s got a firm grasp of the whole spectrum of sports field management. He understands all the technical requirements, and understands each person’s point of view. He can talk to a guy on a mower, then turn around and talk easily to a club owner or a league president. His trick is he can talk to anybody.”

Mile High Times

But that’s only one of Steve Wightman’s “tricks.” Another is his prodigious organizational ability, which must have been apparent to the owners of Denver’s Mile High Stadium when they hired him in 1976, at the rather fledgling age of 27, to manage their professional sports arena.

At the time, it must have been a dream job come true for Steve, who grew up in a small eastern Colorado ranching community before moving at the age of eight to Denver, where he lived until he went to the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley. He entered college on a track scholarship not really knowing what he wanted to study. He started in math, worked part-time for the Denver parks department, and graduated with a bachelors degree in marketing, economics and finance in 1971. He then moved to Tucson, AZ, for 13 months to work in the banking industry

— which he didn’t like. Since he had enjoyed his part-time green industry work in college, he moved back to Denver and worked for a landscape company. Three months later, he joined Denver’s parks and recreation department to organize and supervise 250 ball fields, which had to be maintained weekly, some even daily. Although he had only six people helping him, he enjoyed the job more than banking, and his aspiration at the time was not to manage a pro stadium, but simply to succeed at the park and rec job.

In 1976, though, came the offer he couldn’t refuse. He was invited to become head groundskeeper for Mile High Stadium in Denver. He was hired at a difficult time. Mile High was undergoing major renovation, installing a PAT (prescription athletic turf) system. At the time, Mile High and RFK Stadium in Washington, DC, were the only places experimenting with a PAT system, and no one really knew how to care for it. Steve was told not to let the sand dry out, so he kept it wet — too wet, especially for football. One thing he learned during the process is that the ideal turf for baseball is not the same as for football.

From such experiences, he gained some insight into managing a multi-purpose facility and a great deal of experience in trying to handle the weather. Sitting on the eastern rim of the Rockies, Denver is climatically one of the most diverse places in the country. The weather can change dramatically from month to month and year to year. Recorded temperatures during September range from 95 to 15 degrees Fahrenheit. The weather can



When California State University at Fullerton needed help rebuilding its baseball field, Steve Wightman devoted a weekend of his time to the project.

also change dramatically in one day. Steve encountered days when it would be clear at 2 p.m.; at 3:30, the place would be deluged with rain; then it would be perfectly clear again by 5 p.m. His last several years at Mile High, in an attempt to deal with the weather, Steve added to his staff a meteorologist, who would call Steve at home with the latest weather news. It often helped him prepare the stadium for games, and at least helped him keep umpires posted so they could call off games early.

The weather wasn't responsible, though, for what Steve describes as the most embarrassing moment of his career, which occurred in the early 1980s during a Denver Bears AAA baseball game. The Bears had been on the road, and Steve used the opportunity to reschedule the cycling of a newly installed irrigation system, programming it to go on and off at various times of the day. When the Bears returned to Denver, he forgot to cancel a 9 p.m. setting.

During the sixth inning of the first game of the home series, while the visiting pitcher was on the mound trying to protect a two-run lead, the sprinklers went off as scheduled, showering the visiting team. While Steve raced to reach the controller to turn off the irrigation, the visiting pitcher scurried around the infield trying to escape the aquatic ambush. It wasn't easy — no matter which direction the pitcher turned, he faced a sprinkler

head blasting him with water. Although the Bears went on to win the game, and the irrigation system had certainly proved its efficiency, Steve would like to forget the game. Unfortunately, it was one of the Bears' few televised games that season. Cameras caught the spectacle, and it has since become immortalized in various baseball blooper compilations.

Another difficult Mile High headache for Steve, not of his own doing, was the "blizzard game" of 1984. The snow came down so heavy that people in the upper decks couldn't see the field, so they were allowed to move down to the stadium's lower levels to occupy any open seats. On the field, Steve and his crew plowed snow before the game, during the half and, at times, between plays. Also, during the national anthem and at half time, they did more than plow the snow — they painted it. The snow had obliterated the shape of the field, so the groundskeepers outlined the field with orange paint, enabling officials to make out-of-bound and end-zone calls.

Multi-Use Mania

After 12 years at Mile High Stadium, Steve got a call to move on. Following an interview at Jack Murphy Stadium, he was offered the head groundskeeper's job, which he initially refused because it offered less pay than what he earned at Mile High. After some negotiation, Steve consented. He wanted the opportunity to work with warm season grasses and the experience of Major League Baseball. In

1988, Steve gave up the challenge of Denver with its Kentucky bluegrass and fickle weather for the bermudagrass and challenges of Jack Murphy.

Chief among those challenges is its hectic schedule. It is probably the most heavily used major natural-turf stadium in the country. Besides games for its three regular tenants (the Padres, the Chargers and San Diego State University), the stadium houses dirt races, concerts and other special activities. Altogether, Jack Murphy hosts about 125 events a year — an average of one every three days.

The schedule grows more hectic, as Jack Murphy continues to schedule more events. For instance, the stadium didn't host rock concerts for awhile because of a disastrous Who concert in 1984 when the field was torn up. But in 1989, soon after Steve arrived, a rock concert was held and proceeded peacefully. Now more and more are being scheduled.

Also, last September, for the first time since Steve's been there, a Padres' baseball game and a college football game were played in Jack Murphy on the same day. The schedule allowed Steve and his crew only three hours to make the conversion from daytime baseball to nighttime football. To pull it off, Steve spent two months choreographing how his crew would move stands and change the playing surface in so short a time. Three weeks prior to game day, he and his crew conducted a walk-through of the procedures

continued on page 12

Introducing... the one sports turf mixture with your field in mind.

**CHAMPION[®]
S.T.**



SPORTS TURF MIXTURE

- Customized to meet your specific needs
- Specially designed for geographical, climatic, & traffic stresses
- Contains Seed Research's SR 4000 series perennial ryegrasses* in addition to the customized percentages of our Kentucky bluegrasses, tall* & fine* fescues

SEED RESEARCH
OF OREGON, INC.

1-800-253-5766 • 541-757-2663

*endophyted-enhanced

Man of the Year

continued from page 11

he'd planned. One week prior to game day, they had another rehearsal and, just before the games, a third rehearsal. It paid off, with the first game transcending smoothly to the second. But there was no rest for the weary. After the football game, Steve and his crew had to reconvert the stadium for another Padre game the next afternoon. By the end of the ordeal, he and his crew had spent 48 straight hours on the field.

Murphy's Laws

Such is life in the big leagues. To cope with it, Steve has experimented with various hybrid bermudagrasses. The Santa Ana hybrid he started with eventually gave way to Tifgreen, which was then replaced with Tifway. Later, the stadium converted back to Tifgreen because it better fits Jack Murphy's program. It supports both baseball and football well, and, requiring less dethatching and cutting than Tifway, it needs less renovation, for which Steve and his crew have little time. Also with Tifway, it was harder to keep a baseball from "snaking" (following the mowing patterns in the turf), which made playing the ball difficult for outfielders. When one of the outfielders is Padres' hitting machine Tony Gwynn, you do what you can to make him happy.

In keeping Jack Murphy a happy, smooth-running arena, Steve says his biggest asset is his assistant, Bill Gibbs, and the rest of his crew, which he considers the best in professional sports. What makes them so special, says Steve, is that they feel Jack Murphy is their field, and they will put in extra time or do whatever else is necessary to prepare it. George Toma's key phrase, "and then some," is riveted into each one of the crew members. Currently Steve has a total of ten full-time crew members, which includes six groundskeepers, a landscaper, a mechanic and an equipment technician. For overnight stadium conversions, which requires 22 people working through the night, Steve has additional full-time and part-time personnel at his disposal.

When Steve began working at the professional sports level, his major goal was simply to become comfortable preparing a pro field and get through a season without a major "screw up." As he gained experience, he wanted not just to survive a season but to provide the most aesthetically appealing field with the optimum playing surface — to give whoever is "out there" the best field possible. Today, his biggest challenge is figuring out ways to achieve that goal for everyone on Jack Murphy's very heavy multi-use schedule. Stadium owners cooperate by consulting with him before scheduling many events, especially smaller ones. Regular tenants also listen to him. The San Diego Chargers, for instance, would like their logo painted at midfield, but Steve says it's not done because the combination of the paint and the high traffic the area receives would damage the grass. "Aesthetics can be enhanced by painting," Steve says, "but the real beauty of any field comes from the aesthetic value of green grass."

Building the Best

Maintaining an attractive, healthy playing surface is mainly how sports turf management has changed over the last 20 years, according to Steve. There is always an art to groundskeeping, but today there are more technical aspects, more scientific information available, and more pressure on groundskeepers. There's more focus on the playing surface as an integral part of the game. Playing surfaces have dramatically improved over the years because, with their high-priced players, club owners and managers have emphasized the importance of the turf to

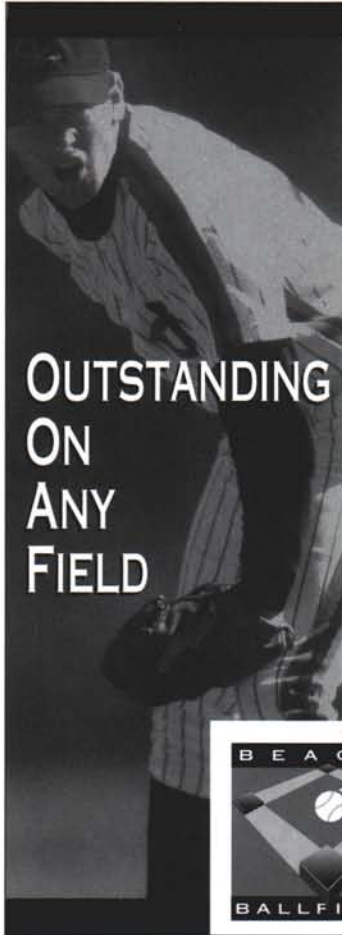
the safety and performance of their players. Groundskeepers today are more educated partly out of necessity.

To Steve, that's the value of the STMA — education. Growing up in the industry, he says, has been comfortable because he's had opportunities to call up Jim Watson, Kent Kurtz, the late Bill Daniel, the late Jackie Butler and other authorities. "It really helps sharing mistakes and talking to others. There's a natural attitude among turf managers to share and be open." That's one of the ways Steve himself would like to be remembered: as "someone who was willing to share mistakes and successes with anyone in the industry," as well as "for providing fields that offered both aesthetics and playability. As someone who provided the best possible surface for every possible event — whether it was a high school game or the Super Bowl. For taking his job seriously while also having fun at it."

"Steve lives the ideals of the STMA," says Bunnell. "One of his main concerns is to help other sport field managers. He helped incorporate the STMA and has been very instrumental in the Southern California Chapter, helping to get it started and supporting it along the way."


"Steve is very steady both in his manners and his thinking," Petry notes. "He's been with the STMA during both the good times and the bad times. He'll always be there for the STMA."

The bottom line for any turf manager, though, isn't the opinion of peers but that of players on the field. Their opinion was recently summed up by a pitcher for California State University at Fullerton. Taking a practice throw off a pitcher's mound Steve had just built for the college, the young man said, "This is bitchin' — the best." □



BEACON BALLFIELDS HAS IT ALL!

- BASES & PLATES — LARGE SELECTION
- BACKSTOPS
- BAT/BALL HOLDERS
- DRAG MATS
- BATTER'S BOX MATS
- DIAMOND-DRY
- FLEXIBLE FENCING
- FLEXIBLE HARROWS
- LINE PAINT & MARKERS
- CUSTOM NETTING
- PITCHER/INFIELD SCREENS
- TURFACE & STABILIZER
- SOIL ADDITIVES
- STENCILS
- WATER REMOVERS
- MORE!



CALL FOR OUR COMPLETE CATALOG!
800-747-5985

P.O. Box 45557
MADISON, WI 53744