

“Just Do It!” Triumphs at Fike High School

By Bob Tracinski

Just Do It! was the slogan of Coach Will Flowers long before Nike “borrowed” it.

Flowers’ contagious attitude and the results of that hard work are why Fike High School’s 36-year-old native-soil field, turfed with common Bermudagrass, is the 1995-1996 Beam Clay High School Baseball Diamond of the Year.

Fike High School, in Wilson, NC, is typical of many of today’s secondary schools. There’s more to be done than the budget can stretch to cover. Enter Coach Flowers.

“I went to Fike High School and played on this field,” says Flowers. “At that point, turf wasn’t considered important at the high school level. If you had a place to play and the skinned area was adequate, that was all it took. Turfgrass management has come so far since then.”

Following high school, Flowers attended Atlantic Christian College (now Barton College) in Wilson, majoring in health and PE with an eye to coaching.

Following graduation in 1976, he spent a few years searching for “what I really wanted to do.” After a stint as assistant manager of a roller skating facility, he moved to the third shift (11 p.m. to 7 a.m.) at the local feed mill. With some daylight hours on his hands, he found time to help out at the baseball field, working with the coach and close friend, Alton Britt. When Coach Britt stepped down in 1982, Flowers was “in the right place at the right time.”

That mentoring tradition continues. Flowers has a “right-hand man,” John Galeazzi, who “went to high school and played for me.”

The Field

There is no doubt that Fike High School has a great field. The diamond was built in 1960 on Wilson’s native, clay-loam soil.

Common Bermudagrass is the turf for both the infield and outfield. Fertilization begins about mid-April with an application of 10-10-10 that coincides with spring green-up. This is followed in late May by an application of 16-4-8 slow release fertilizer. An application of 38-0-0 in late July completes the summer fertilization program.

Flowers says, “We keep the infield turf between 1/2 and 3/4 inch, depending on play schedules and weather conditions. We mow the infield with a 22-inch, walk-behind reel mower. The area is mowed every other day and always on game days. We catch the clippings most of the time, but occasionally allow them to work back into the soil. We mow a different direction each time – which creates a nice striped effect. The outfield is mowed at 3/4 inches to one inch with a triplex reel mower. Again, we mow every other day, in a different direction each time. We pay close attention to the quality of cut on the turfgrass, keeping our blades sharp.”

Flowers calls on Tommy Davis, who is in charge of the local public course, Wedgewood Golf Course, for assistance with mower blade sharpening and backlapping. Davis also helps out with advice and loans of equipment.

Flowers says, “We keep the turf edged around the infield, pitcher’s mound and home plate. It’s a big thing with us. We edge everywhere grass meets dirt every two weeks. We pull a string to ensure a



Largely responsible for the Fike High School field are Will Flowers (left) and his assistant, John Galeazzi. Photos courtesy: Will Flowers.

straight line, cut through the turf with a power edger and use a garden hoe to peel off the excess. Before we had the use of the power edger, we’d do the cutting with a straight-blade garden spade. It’s harder work, but the look is the same.”

The school’s administration arranged special funding for the installation of an automatic underground sprinkler system in May of 1988. There is a total of 51 heads divided into four zones: one for the infield, two for the outfield and one for the foul area.

Skinned surfaces receive daily care. Each season, Flowers goes through a truckload of a sand-clay mixture purchased from a company in Louisburg, NC, for the infield, pitcher’s mound and home plate areas. He also has a free source of native clay, a patch of the right consistency located in a nearby woods, which he uses for patching holes in the mound and home plate area.

Flowers says, “The mound and home plate are covered with tarps to keep the moisture at a workable level, and to keep rain from washing away the mix. We work these areas first each morning, filling in any holes, hand raking the dirt, watering it down and packing it with a tamp. We then reposition the tarps.”

“Generally we’ll work the rest of the skinned area in the morning when the moisture allows us to get down far enough to keep the top layer soft, but playable. If the mix is too dry, we turn on the sprinklers to get the desired moisture level. If the mix is too wet, we’ll wait until later in the day to work the area.”

The Wilson area gets quite a bit of rainfall during the spring months, and

naturally Flowers wants to get in as many practices and games as possible. It can take up to 24 hours for one inch of rainfall to percolate through the native-soil field enough to allow play.

Flowers says, "We'll use cups to dip water from any puddles that form, and a submersible pump if necessary. Keeping an eye on where water collects helps us identify any low spots. We also rake the skinned base lines by hand occasionally to identify low spots and check for foreign objects. We'll mark low spots and bring them back to level as soon as the area is workable. Mix is moved in by wheel-barrow loads as needed, tilled in, raked and tamped level.

"We drag the infield after each game and practice, always dragging in a different direction and avoiding the turf edges. We first pull a nail drag behind the tractor, then follow with a mat drag. We stop dragging at a different spot on the field each time. We then hand-rake around the bases in a parallel direction along the grass edges, being careful not to allow lips to build up around the grass lines."

During pre-game preparation, Flowers uses water sprayed from a garden hose

to achieve the right consistency for skinned areas.

The entire field is core-aerified once a month during the growing season. The cores are always dragged back into the soil. MSMA and Sencor are sprayed during the summer months to control weeds.

Flowers overseeds with Topflite perennial ryegrass following the last home game in mid-October. He uses 150 pounds of seed on the infield and 700 pounds on the outfield and sideline areas. Prior to overseeding, they mark all sprinkler



A state-of-the-art sprinkler system helps maintain Fike's field, which is enhanced aesthetically by cross-hatching of the infield.

heads; then aerate the outfield and sideline areas in two different directions with a pull-behind core aerator.

"We use a verticutter in the infield and hand-rake to removes the thatch – which provides good seed-to-soil contact," says Flowers. "We'll then aerate the infield and spread the seed. Following seeding, we apply a 10-10-10 fertilizer. Approximately one month later we make an application of 30-16-10 slow release fertilizer."

Flowers doesn't tolerate worn areas on the field. Any divots resulting from batting practice and fungos are set back into place, along with a mixture of sand and Topflite perennial ryegrass seed.

He says, "We're currently using two old ten-foot by ten-foot tarps placed side by side to protect the grass in front of the plate area. (A new protective tarp is on order.) All batting practice is thrown from a four-foot by six-foot platform covered with Astroturf carpet, which is placed in front of the mound. We feel you can work hard in practice on our field and still keep it in great shape."

Flowers was one of the first to sod the home-to-first and third-to-home base

continued on page 32

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continued from page 31

lines of a high school field. Under his extensive maintenance program, these areas hold up just fine. Eliminating that section of skinned area is a big time saver.

Frustrated with the wear within the turfed-and-lined coaches' boxes and on-deck circles, and unwilling to "mar the field" with cut outs, Flowers stopped outlining those areas. Players and coaches still stay within bounds, but without a line to "stick to," turf wear is minimal.

During the playing season, Flowers assigns the players small cleanup duties after the game. As a result of 15 to 20 minutes of group effort, their teamwork increases, and they gain a closer connection to their field. Players also take part in frequent team work-days to help tackle the major tasks.

Always a Way

Flowers thanks his personal "booster club" – his wife, Cindy, and sons, 11-year-old Tripp and 8-year-old Clark – for understanding his love of the field and



Fike's award-winning field features a remodelled press box, dugouts and other amenities.

knowing that he "just can't leave until everything is right."

Flowers says, "Help is out there. All you have to do is let people know what you need and what getting it will accomplish."

"The people here are just amazing. The players' parents and the Booster Club can accomplish wonders. In November of 1989, we talked about getting a press box.

A group got together, and we went around checking out other fields to decide just what we wanted. By the spring of 1990, they'd funded and built what we decided on, a two-story press box with a concession stand and rest rooms. In 1992, they funded and helped install a six-foot-high chain link fence around the outfield and a backstop. Also in 1992, the dugouts received new roofs, shelves and bench seats. In 1993, they worked with the school and Coca Cola to erect a ten-foot by 20-foot Scorebrain scoreboard."

"This field is really a result of a total team effort by the players – past and present – their parents, the school, the Booster Club and all the Fike High School baseball fans. No matter what you have to start with and the limited size of your budget, a great field is possible, if you 'Just Do It!' □

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.

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