

Olympic Softball's Invisible Gold Medalists

By Floyd Perry

On July 30, 1996, a first time gold medal was awarded to the United States women's softball team in a dramatic 3-1 victory over China in the 100th Olympiad. This victory celebration was shown nationwide on live television from Golden Park in Columbus, GA. It was a great day for the ladies who worked so hard and long to create a positive image for the softball players in future games and from various countries.

The other gold medal, which wasn't seen by the 8,900-plus fans in the stadium and the TV audience, was the one awarded to Columbus Park's maintenance staff, who under a multitude of conditions (rain, heat, foot traffic, sleep deprivation, and the stringent Atlanta Games Com-

mittee) accomplished a task that many groups wouldn't have even attempted. They created a positive, outstanding playing surface daily that allowed Olympic performances without any player knowing the behind-the-scene problems. The group of men had the desire and leadership generated for this task by their supervisors, Richard Bishop and Benji Brumboloe, and never once lost focus of their goal.

As with other Olympic venues, the pressure of game performance was so



Sod was hauled in to transform the "mud puddle" into a lush pasture of green. Photo courtesy: Floyd Perry.

great that even the smallest detail was magnified three-fold. Checks, double-checks and final walk-throughs were so common that they were accepted as ordinary before the first pitch. The respective department leaders all marched

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to different beats, so everyone evaluated the venue differently. The venue's owner, Richard Bishop, refused anything short of perfection when it came time to evaluate the playing surface, and his staff responded to his direction.

To prove that point, the one day off before the medal rounds when the top four finalists played for individual glory, his staff of 30 men put in a 16-hour day resodding and painting the stadium turf, which was ruined from a previous day's thundershower. This was the turning point of the softball event, and the comments that followed helped compensate the crew for all the sweat and physical anxiety.

One spectator from Australia who witnessed the whole tournament told the staff, "I thought I was at a different site! The picture perfect condition of the surface is night and day from Saturday's last out. How did you do it?"

Another visitor who was in attendance during the Friday thundershower was likewise outspoken at the metamorphosis of the field: "When I left it was a mud puddle! I returned, and it was a lush pasture of dark green color! Simply amazing."

The split teams of employees arrived at 6:30 a.m. for a 9 a.m. session start, and the second team left at 12:30 a.m. after the second session's final out. On one occasion, day cots were used by some of the night staff because a rain delay set the ending time at 2:30 a.m. and sleeping at the park was easier than going home.

A list of items that were done by the group are as follows: six placements of base, mound and home-plate tarps; four roll-outs of the 120/120 tarp; placement and scarifying of three tons of Turface in the playing surface; painting of "fair" lines with aerosol five times; chalking of batters boxes 32 times; mowing turf eight times; cleaning bases 32 times; and packing mound and home plate 32 times. And so on.

These tasks only featured the Olympic game site, not the two practice fields that were used daily for warm-up and batting practice. That six-man staff also created a quality surface for the participating teams and visiting national delegations.

The park staff was truly a well-coordinated and well-greased unit that had the 1995 SuperBall tournament and 1996 NCAA Division I World Series under their belts, but saved their best

effort for the July Gold Medal Series.

Few people appreciated the second gold medal performance unless they were in the stands and noticed the error-free performance of the players. The second medal was unceremoniously awarded to the park maintenance department located in "the pit" down the third-base line of Golden Park. My groundskeeping hat goes off to these men, and I will always be indebted to Columbus for allowing me the opportunity to volunteer my efforts. □

Floyd Perry travels the country coordinating workshops and seminars on grounds maintenance and facility improvement. He has authored two textbooks: A Pictorial Guide to Quality Grounds-keeping, Book I, Covering All the Bases and Book II, There Ain't No Rules. His third book, Keep It Simple — Make It Safe, featuring softball maintenance, will be on the market in December 1996. For information call (800) 227-9381.

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