



Because of the field's busy schedule, maintenance must be worked in between morning league games, day-time practices and games. Photo courtesy: Mike Varner.

Drikakis Field Wins STMA's Softball Field of the Year

By Bob Tracinski

A consistent, safe and highly playable surface is the rule, not the exception, at Jim Drikakis Field in John Bailey Park, Battle Creek, Michigan. The STMA's 1996-1997 Softball Field of the Year is a shining example of a successful balancing act between heavy use and a good maintenance program.

"Bailey Park is the center of outdoor activity in Battle Creek," says Head Groundskeeper Mike Varner.

The park has 11 playing fields, including C.O. Brown Stadium (home of the Michigan Battle Cats, the Class A Midwest League affiliate of the Boston Red Sox). Drikakis Field in Flannery Complex opened in 1993 and is where all the important games are played: adult slow-pitch, adult fast-pitch, high school and college fast-pitch, and the Michigan High School Athletic Association girls fast-pitch state finals.

All that differentiates Drikakis Field from the other seven softball fields in the complex is that "it faces the main entrance and that's where they put the bleachers," Varner observes.

Working in Maintenance

Weekday evening games begin at 6 p.m. On weekends, fields are in use from 9 a.m. to dark — and longer on the lighted fields. Maintenance procedures are worked in between the morning league games, day-time practices and games.

"Checklists are provided," Varner says, "for each of the three maintenance categories: daily, weekly and periodically — so no one can forget what needs to be done."

"Our infield playing surfaces," Varner says, "are made of crushed limestone screenings [also called 'stone dust']. Good native clay/sand mixtures are hard to find in Michigan, and then we face the additional challenge of getting them screened properly because most of the native clay is very rocky. Stone dust is relatively inexpensive at \$13 per ton. It's easy to maintain and works well when wet. The only drawbacks are that it does not compact very well in batter's boxes and gets pretty dusty when it dries out."

Added to the middle of each of the infields this year is an additional sprinkler head.

"We can manually turn a ball valve to activate this head to keep the dust

down," Varner says. "We plan to run each of these heads two or three times a day for 10-minute intervals during the driest periods."

During daily infield maintenance, the front blade on the field rake is used to push material back into holes and depressions. With the stone-dust surface, the broom is used by itself unless wet conditions require use of the spikes to promote better drying. Spiking is needed only occasionally once the freeze-thaw cycles of March and April have passed. Stone dust is added to the infields as needed, and lips are washed twice a year.

For some supplies, Varner has an innovative arrangement.

"We have an advertising/ticket trade-out," Varner says, "with TruGreen/Chemlawn for the granular fertilization of all the park fields. This includes signage in the C.O. Brown Stadium, an ad in the Battle Cats program, and advertising during the radio broadcasts of the Battle Cats games."

He keeps a master record of all games scheduled on each of the 10 fields and the stadium field each day, and makes adjustments for rain-outs and other cancellations. The actual game figures are totaled for each field

at the end of each month. He uses paper checklists to track all maintenance procedures for each field daily and enters the data into his computer maintenance program to develop both an easily accessible record and a case history for future planning.

A Unique Agreement

"I work for the Michigan Battle Cats," Varner says. "We have a unique lease agreement with the City of Battle Creek. The city pays us a set amount each year for maintenance of the 10 fields outside the stadium. We maintain only the playing fields, that area inside the fences. This frees us from all the red-tape jobs, allowing us to maintain all 11 fields at a higher level. The city maintains all other areas of Bailey Park in addition to the other parks around the city and the athletic fields in those parks."

The city's Parks and Recreation Department arranges the game and practice schedules for the fields outside the stadium. Park supervisors are on hand for every game.

While Varner's crew members aren't required to be at the field during games, they are constantly on call in case problems develop. Varner and City Recreation Supervisor Pete Baum meet every Friday to go over the next week's schedule so Varner can plan field preparation and maintenance.

Nation's Largest Tournament

"Field activity begins as soon as the fields are playable," Varner says, "generally in mid-March — with practices for the local junior college and one of the high schools."

Adult softball practices kick in during mid-April. Leagues start three weeks later and run through mid-August. Adult leagues play four games each weeknight. Industrial leagues play Monday and Wednesday mornings. These third-shift workers hit the fields at 8:30 a.m. for two doubleheaders each day.

Fall practice begins in mid-August. Fall leagues run from the last week of August to the third week of October.

Fourteen tournaments were held in 1996, including the American Softball Association Men's 35+ National Slow-pitch Tournament over Labor Day weekend.

For two four-day weekends during the summer, all eight softball fields are fitted for baseball (four with portable



The infield surface is made of crushed limestone screenings, called "stone dust," which is relatively inexpensive. Photo courtesy: Mike Varner.

mounds) for the annual Mayor's Invitational, the nation's largest amateur round-robin baseball tournament. Teams are invited from across the nation to participate. Every field in the area is used, including all high school fields and all the fields in other city parks. Four baseball games are played on each of the complex's fields during the day. The fields then are refitted for the evening softball leagues.

"In 1996, 493 games were played on Jim Drikakis Field in the 190-day

Stadium

Location: Battle Creek, Mich., in Flannery Complex (2 softball complexes, 4 fields each in cloverleaf pattern), in John Bailey Park, which also includes C.O. Brown Stadium, 2 full-size baseball fields, 12 shuffleboard courts, 2 sand volleyball courts, 40 picnic tables and a boat ramp.

Seating: 1,000 permanent, 500 temporary.

Dimensions: 8 ft. permanent outfield and sideline fences. Right and left fields, 300 ft.; center, 320. Portable fencing converts field to 200 ft. for fast-pitch games on 5 fields at one time or to 250 ft. for 3 fields. Warning track, 15-ft. wide, around field.

Amenities: Lights for night games. Building with concessions, rest rooms, officials' area, and a covered press box open on four sides for optimum viewing for PA announcer and scoreboard operator.

Turf: Kentucky bluegrass on native-soil base of silty-loam, with 1-percent grade for drainage.

Irrigation: 4-in. mainline feeds each field, allowing simultaneous irrigation of 2 fields. Toro 640 series heads with Toro 2-in. electric valves. Toro Vision II series 9-station controller per field. Two 1-in. quick couplers in front of dugouts per field.

Maintenance

Mowing: 3-4 times/week, at 1.5 in. with 5-gang reel mower, cutting each field in 30 min.

Daily: Infield — shoveling, raking to fill holes in batters box, pitcher's rubber, around bases; dragging with Kromer conditioner drags behind utility vehicle. Other — sweeping off grass edges, dragging warning track, picking up trash in dugouts and on field, chalking batters boxes and lines, and setting out the bases park supervisors have removed and stored at end of each day.

Weekly: Raking out crushed limestone surfaces of dugouts. Painting outfield lines, filling a 12-gal. line striper and doing all 10 fields in succession. Edging (alternated so each field gets attention every 2 weeks) with walk-behind edger, followed by hula hoe or diamond-blade hoe to eliminate stray grass.

Herbicides: Glyphosate as-needed. Sprayed along fence lines, and other areas where unwanted grasses pop up, from 25-gal. tank with electric pump attached to battery of utility vehicle. Also from hand-held 3-gal. sprayer for spot treatment of occasional outbreaks of dandelions and white clover.

Insecticides & Fungicides: None needed last two years.

Aeration: 4 times/year with 6-ft.-wide coring aerator behind tractor, followed by a pass with rotary mower to break up cores.

Fertilizers: 5 times per growing season. Formulations based on soil tests performed each April. Formulations for 1996 (all applied at ≤ 0.75 lb. of N or K per 1,000 sq. ft.) included: 18-6-12; 30-0-15; 19-19-19; and 15-0-30. Granular fertilizers supplemented with foliar applications of iron, magnesium, manganese and potassium before big events or in instances of extremely high field usage.

Personnel

Crew: 6 full-time seasonal. Scheduled from end of March to May through mid-Sept. to mid-Nov. This year's staff — Craig Grestini, Mike Ireland, Dan Cretsinger, Willis Vaughn, and two interns, Bill Wilson (Hawkeye Comm. Coll., Waterloo, Iowa) and Scott Dobbins (Washington St. Univ., Pullman, Wash.)

Varner: 8th season as a head groundskeeper; 2nd with Michigan Battle Cats and Drikakis field. B.S. in recreation and parks administration, Texas A & M Univ. Prior experience — construction, renovation and consulting on sports fields. Family — wife, Christine, and 19-mo.-old son, Trey. Associations — STMA, Certification Committee.

period from April 15th to October 23rd," says Varner.

And that's not all. Besides the regular game and practice schedule, any team can "walk on" an open field for practice.

Contagious Attitude

Varner is the only full-time, year-

round member of the maintenance staff. Everyone else is seasonal.

"I had a super crew in 1996," Varner says, "and this year's staff is coming together extremely well. Three of the regular 1996 crew members — Greg Lough, Craig Veeder, and Steve Whitehead — have moved on to



Head Groundskeeper Mike Varner holds the STMA 1996-1997 Softball Field of the Year award he and his crew won for Jim Drikakis Field. Photo courtesy: STMA.

other positions. Jim Haun, the Michigan State student who interned with us in 1996, has graduated and is now head groundskeeper for the Beloit (Wisconsin) Snappers.

"Two crew members are assigned to the softball complexes for regular duty, and we all chip in during tournaments and heavy-use times. Crew members are rotated so everyone gets experience on the softball complexes, baseball fields and in the stadium."

Varner's enthusiasm for sports turf management and commitment to pro-level quality are contagious. Staff members quickly adopt his "do it right" attitude and attention to detail.

According to Varner, earning a B.S. degree in park & rec administration seemed like what he was supposed to do after working with sports fields starting in his Little League days. When an arm injury took him out of the player ranks after high school, he shifted his focus more strongly to the maintenance aspects of the game.

He's quick to credit the commitment and cooperation of city personnel, Battle Cats management and his grounds crew. Special praise goes to his wife, Christine, who encourages his efforts during the long and unpredictable hours of the season.

"Every athlete," he says, "deserves the best possible playing surface. We strive to keep all our fields in such great shape that every amateur athlete has as good a shot at a great play as any pro." □

Bob Tracinski is the manager of public relations for the John Deere Company in Raleigh, North Carolina, and public relations co-chair for the national Sports Turf Managers Association.

Q: What do all of these teams have in common?

- Oakland A's
- Phoenix Cardinals
- San Diego Chargers
- Los Angeles Dodgers
- University of Texas Longhorns
- California Angels
- San Francisco 49'ers
- San Diego State University Aztecs
- Arizona State University Sun Devils
- San Francisco Giants
- San Diego Padres
- University of Southern California Trojans
- Oakland Raiders

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