



A member of STMA, Greg Freix attends "every sports turf seminar I can work into the schedule." Photos courtesy: Greg Freix.

Wausau's Athletic Park Wins Municipal Diamond of the Year

By Bob Tracinski

A limited budget, a packed schedule and north-central Wisconsin's short growing season make baseball field maintenance a constant challenge for Park Manager Greg Freix and his staff. So, the moment seemed even sweeter when the 1996-1997 Beam Clay Baseball Diamond of the Year Award in the Schools, Municipalities and Parks category went to their field, Wausau's Athletic Park, the premier facility of the City of Wausau and Marathon County Park Department.

Freix says, "We strive to have the field prepped consistently for every event. That's what it's all about." And that attitude and commitment pay off in quality.

The baseball field of Athletic Park is one of 13 diamonds located throughout the city. The closest is a Little League field located behind Athletic Park.

The Wausau Park area has been used since the early 1900s, which is reflected by the older residential

neighborhood that surrounds it. During the Work Projects era of the 1930s, a stone wall was constructed three-quarters of the way around the park when the original infrastructure was built. The only open section of the diamond ran from right center field to left center field, a space now filled with bill boards added in the late 1970s as a fund-raiser for the field's primary user.

Freix says, "The park is essentially land-locked, but that's not all bad. The community, and the city, consider it 'theirs.' For all events, people park along the neighborhood streets and walk to the facility. We have bleacher seating for 1,800 and, with a packed house, have reached attendance levels of 2,500 to 2,700.

"Everyone enters through the main gate behind the grandstand area and walks up to the bleachers, so their first glimpse of the field is similar to the experience of entering a major league facility."

Freix and crew are very conscious of the "wow" factor, the reaction of players and spectators alike when they get that first look at the field. The mainte-

nance program is focused on delivering the playing level anticipated by those first perceptions.

Freix says, "Because of our northern location, we have an average of 115 to 125 playing days available for an average 150 game schedule. An April 1st season opener used to be planned, but we've moved that to April 15th, and we're lucky to get up to three games in before early May. The season ends in mid-August. In 1995, a record of 162 games were played here. In 1996, we worked in 161 games with 111 days available for play. Obviously, there are lots of doubles."

Until recently, the last major field work had been completed in the 1940s, so with the combination of heavy use and the native clay soil, the infield became "a lake" following rain. At times, crews resorted to digging holes and installing sump pumps to get water off the field.

Renovation began in August of 1993 to improve both surface and subsurface drainage. The infield was excavated to a three-foot depth and the original material hauled off site for fill on

other projects. A subsurface drainage system with perforated tile lines spaced at 15-foot intervals was installed. The tiles are embedded in gravel and surrounded by geotextile material. Excess water flows through the tiles into the storm sewer system.

A 10-inch layer of material covers the drainage system. In the turf-covered portion of the infield, the material consists of a sandy-loam native soil that was screened off-site and trucked in. A local landscaper laser graded the field, establishing a one percent crown.

Freix says, "The skinned area, including the base paths, was filled with a mixture of 60 percent sharp sand and 40 percent clay loam. This was mixed off-site and trucked in. It's similar to the infield material of the turfed area, just a little bit sandier. The renovation has allowed us to get in most of our games as scheduled. We generally can play except when it's actually raining or there's lightning. Following the renovation, the skinned area was playable within 15 minutes of our heaviest rain."

The city's budget for the field improvement wouldn't stretch enough for an in-ground, automatic sprinkler system. A quick coupler was installed behind the mound for irrigation. By mid-September, the reconstruction was completed and the infield seeded with a ball-field mixture from Reinderers Brothers consisting of 75 percent Kentucky bluegrass (Touchdown, America and Banff) and 25 percent perennial ryegrass (Cutter II).

Freix says, "We overseeded with annual ryegrass in the spring of 1994 to create a nurse crop cover for the young field. At the end of the 1995 season, we killed the existing outfield turf with glyphosate and seeded with a mixture from LaCrosse Seed Company consisting of 60 percent Kentucky bluegrass using Bartitia, Alene and Ken-Blue and 40 percent perennial ryegrass using Pinnacle and Premier."

A Great Group

Freix is in his sixth year as park manager for the Wausau/Marathon County Park Department. He earned a BS degree in forest management from the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point, planning a career in forestry. Instead, he spent six years working for Chemlawn in various capacities before taking a position as horticulturist for Marathon County. After a year, he

advanced to his current position in 1989.

A member of the national Sports Turf Managers Association and the Wisconsin Turfgrass Association, he's attended "every sports turf seminar I can work into the schedule." He especially enjoys the tremendous variety, and challenge, of maintaining a top quality facility. He gives credit to his wife, Yvonne, who is supportive through all the demands of his position and keeps things running smoothly at home with three-year-old Clare and nine-month-old Jackson.

Less than half of Freix's work time is committed to the Athletic Park baseball facility. For assistance, he calls on the Parks Operations Department for such time- and equipment-intensive projects as aeration. He calls their support "excellent."

Freix says, "Though the rest of my crew members are seasonal, many of them were 'repeaters,' with some even working at the park before I came on board. We've had a great group with total dedication to do the job right."

"Two people are assigned to the 11 ball diamonds at other sites and six people are assigned to Athletic Park. Two of these people come on staff the first of April and work until mid to late August. Most of the other six crew members are college students who join

us at the end of May or in early June and work until their class sessions begin in the fall, usually around the end of August. This will be a transitional year for us, because most of this crew have completed their formal schooling and are moving on to full-time positions in other areas."

Seven Days a Week

Besides developing and overseeing park maintenance, Freix handles all field scheduling, no easy task with a lighted facility open for play seven days — and nights — a week. He says, "The park is home to the Wausau Woodchucks baseball team, a summer college team which is a member of the Northwoods Baseball League. The field also is home for three local high schools, a Legion team, three adult league teams, Babe Ruth baseball and Senior League baseball (Little League). Many other non-local teams use the field if and when it's available."

"Athletic Park also is host to several tournaments each season and several locally organized events, most of which are held on weekends. This will be the 25th year for the Wisconsin State Baseball Tournament, which brings us 13 games in 3 days. For the last 15 years, the Breakfast Optimists have held a tournament for the Senior League that packs 10 to 15 games into



"Wow" is generally the reaction of those who visit Wausau's Athletic Park for the first time.

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A typical day during the season begins at 8 a.m. and ends well after midnight.

2 1/2 days, including a 6-game session on the opening night."

The Park Department does allow practice on the field, if the schedule permits. A batting tunnel in the left field bullpen can also be used prior to a game if that activity doesn't disrupt a scheduled event.

All field users pay a game fee. The Wausau Woodchucks have a primary use arrangement with the facility and maintain a small office at the front of the grandstand. They also operate the three concession stands and pay a percentage of their profits to the city.

Different Every Day

During the season, a "typical" day begins around 8 a.m. and wraps up well after midnight. Freix says, "We start the day with infield grooming and any maintenance needed along the grass/skin edge. We also try to allow a short break between games so the crew can whip the field back into shape. Plate and mound repairs and a quick drag of the baseline take between a half hour and 45 minutes. But circumstances are always changing, so it's a different situation every day and for every game. Sometimes, when games run long and fit together

back to back, we have to rely on the integrity of our overall maintenance program to carry us through."

That program includes core aeration at least twice a year to at least a three-inch depth. This is done once in the spring and once in the fall, and more frequently if conditions warrant. The level of compaction, degree of heat and time available are critical factors. The cores are dragged in. Crews overseed weekly with a pregerminated seed mix. They also fill in divots with a mixture of pregerminated seed and sand or calcined clay. They do this weekly for the infield and on an "as needed" basis in the outfield.

The field is fertilized four or five times a year with the timing and amount of nitrogen and supplemental nutrients based on

soil-test results, weather patterns, and growing conditions. Soil tests are conducted every two years. Modifying potash and pH levels are usually the two basic adjustments needed. The last fertilization of the year is scheduled for the end of October or the beginning of November to prepare the turf for the following spring.

The field is mowed every two days. A tow-behind, 3-gang reel mower clips the outfield turf to 1 3/4 inches. A walk-behind rotary mower trims the infield turf to 1 1/2 inches in past years, but a riding reel mower will be added this year.

Insects and grassy weeds are not a problem, and broadleaf weeds are minimal. Those that do appear are spot treated with a Trimec solution administered from a backpack sprayer during spring and fall field checks.

But the same total enclosure that helps keep weeds at bay creates conditions that increase the incidence of diseases, especially pythium. Freix follows IPM principles of close observation and cultural adjustments, applying a combination of preventive and curative fungicides as needed.

Infield watering is basically by

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Dating back to horse-and-buggy days, Athletic Park thrives on space-age technology.

Diamond of the Year

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hand, using a one-inch hose attached to the quick coupler located behind the pitchers mound. More extensive irrigation is managed with a traveling Rain Train sprinkler, but even running overnight, it can only water from 1/5 to 1/6 of the outfield. The sprinklers are used when turf conditions warrant

during the critical, heavy-play period in June and again in the fall if there is a lull in play.

"Because of the shaded area right behind home plate created by the shadow of the grandstand, we frequently have a problem in the early spring with snow," reports Freix. "One year, the snow was piled up to the dugout fence as our April 15th season opener approached. Crews ended up

hand shoveling that snow into wagons, hauling the wagons to the outfield, and hand shoveling the snow back out, spreading it in shallow layers across the outfield so the sun could melt it. But that's all part of our 'do what it takes' approach to field care. It's all worth the effort when coaches and players tell us that this is their

favorite place to play because they don't have to worry about field problems and can really concentrate on their game."

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.

The Beam Clay Baseball Diamond of the Year Awards are sponsored by the Sports Turf Managers Association, *sportsTURF* magazine, and Beam Clay in recognition of excellence and professionalism in maintaining safe, professional quality diamonds. Winning diamonds are selected in three categories: (1) professional; (2) college; and (3) schools, municipalities and parks.

Entrants are judged by four major league groundskeepers each year. Judges for the 1996-1997 Beam Clay Baseball Diamond of the Year Awards were Joe Mooney, Boston Red Sox (AL-East); Tom Burns, Texas Rangers (AL-West); Barry Foley, Pittsburgh Pirates (NL-Central); and Steve Peeler, St. Louis Cardinals (NL-Central).

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