

Hoover Metropolitan Stadium: Home of the Birmingham Barons

Beam Clay awards a history maker

by Bob Tracinski

The Birmingham Barons' Hoover Metropolitan Stadium made awards history when it was named the STMA/sportsTURF / Beam Clay 1997 Professional Baseball Diamond of the Year. For the first time, the same head groundskeeper has been honored twice for his work at two different facilities and at two different levels of baseball.

Steve Horne, the Barons' director of field operations during the award-winning 1997 season, was head groundskeeper/stadium manager at the University of Mississippi when Swayze Field was selected College Baseball Diamond of the Year in 1992. Horne had already accepted his current position as director of field operations for the AAA Memphis Redbirds when he submitted the entry for Hoover Stadium "on behalf of the Barons Ball Club and the wonderful people of Birmingham." Mike Zullo, Horne's assistant in 1997, has since been named the new head groundskeeper for the Barons.

That's not all. At the end of the 1997 season, Horne and Zullo were recognized by the Southern League, Major League Baseball and the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues with the Groundskeeper of the Year Award.

These are the newest honors for a long-standing team. The Barons' tradition dates back to 1885. The team won

the first of its 12 Southern League titles in 1906.

Birmingham millionaire industrialist A. H. (Rick) Woodward bought the team in 1910. He moved it to the first concrete and steel ballpark in the minor leagues: the 12.7-acre Rickwood Field. It served as the Barons' home field until 1987.

The City of Hoover built Hoover Metropolitan Stadium in 1987.

petitions, and church festivals. The Southeastern Conference Baseball Tournament came to the Met in 1990 and 1996, and will return for a four-year stint in 1998.

"Millions viewed the Met on TV when basketball's Michael Jordan joined the Barons for the 1994 season," says Horne. "Home field attendance ballooned to 467,867, and Dave Elmore's Elmore Sports Group bought the Barons the following year. In 1996 the team started its second decade of affiliation with the Chicago White Sox."

These events led to a major field renovation in 1996. Management chose Southern Turf Nurseries to be the prime contractor. They stripped the sod, completely removed the infield and foul territory materials, and re-graded the subsurface.

The Champion Sub Surface system designed by Southern Turf Nurseries includes an underground network of perforated piping covered by geotextile fabric. They covered a 12-inch layer of sand with a light layer of

peat, and tilled to create a profile that delivers maximum percolation rates. The new Rain Bird underground irrigation system can be programmed manually or with an automatic timer.

Horne joined the Barons right after the old grass had been removed. He says, "We replaced the entire infield skinned surface with a mixture of clay



The Birmingham Barons make good use of their award winning field at Hoover Metropolitan Stadium. Courtesy: Steve Horne

Gresham, Smith and Partners of Birmingham developed the design in conjunction with HOK of Kansas City.

According to Horne, "The Barons serve as the Met's facility managers and primary tenants. The Met also hosts Hoover High School football and youth baseball games, auto and boat shows, concerts, high school band com-

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soil, white sand and Pro's Choice Soilmaster to provide the right combination of drainage and texture.

"We also completely reworked and rebuilt all of the pitcher's mounds. They are maintained with a combination of Beam Clay Mound Mix, Pro's Choice Pro Mound, and a top layer of Soilmaster.

"We replaced the original white slag rock in the warning track that circles the field with a material from Crimson Stone. The new sod was Tifway bermudagrass overseeded with the Medalist Gold blend of perennial ryegrass cultivars at a rate of 10 lbs. per 1000 sq.ft."

An already-narrow window of opportunity set aside to accommodate these renovations was shortened by an early winter. Also, the high school football team's playoff games extended its season and took more time away from the project.

Despite these limitations all went well, and the field was in great shape when the work was completed. Unfortunately, the winter of 1996 was a real killer. It wiped out bermudagrass in much of the South, including the new sod that had been installed at the Met.

With the baseball season underway and the perennial ryegrass phasing out, quick replacement with a thick-cut, sand-based sod offered the only logical solution. Horne says, "With the help of the dedicated efforts of my assistant at that time, Pat White, and of the crews of the City of Hoover and Southern Turf Nurseries, and with more than a few prayers, we replaced over 45,000 square feet of sod during the team's eight-day road trip. When they returned, the field was again in great shape."

Mike Zullo came on board in the early part of 1997. Before joining the Barons, Zullo had gained football field experience at Ole Miss. He had also spent a year handling multiple fields of every type as athletic fields supervisor at Itawamba Community College. He had worked with Horne when they were student managers at Ole Miss, and then again as full-time employees there. They shared the same drive for perfection.



Pictured from left to right: Barons President & GM Bill Hardekopf, Head Groundskeeper Steve Horne, Asst. Groundskeeper Mike Zullo, and Vice President Tony Ensor. Courtesy: Hoover Metropolitan Stadium

1997 was an easier year. With a "normal" winter and no major field renovations on the schedule, Horne aimed for an award-winning field. He says, "All the basics were now in place, so we concentrated on fine-tuning the overall program and polishing the details. It's a big goal for a two-person crew, and we couldn't have accomplished it without the equipment provided the Barons by Tieco Equipment of Birmingham. Ransomes and Tieco deserve a huge thanks for all their help."

With the multiple uses of the Met's field, there's always the conversion factor. The mound is torn down, and all skinned areas are covered with sod to prepare for football in the fall. Then it's back to baseball before winter closes.

But Horne relishes a challenge - his eventful 1996 proves that. During that one year period, he made the move to Birmingham, tackled the field renovation and sod replacement - and got

married. Fortunately, his wife Iris is both supportive and understanding.

Juggling multiple priorities is part of sports turf management; keeping the focus is essential. Horne says, "Player safety has always been my top priority for the field. Players understand and appreciate things the fans never see - like turf that allows the ball to make a clean roll to the glove, or a skinned surface with a soft top layer so they can lay out for a base and a firm under layer so they can run flat out.

"You can't be set in your ways in this type of work. I'm always open to learning better ways to do things. But my philosophy is simple: I give 100 percent every day and expect my crew to do the same."

Awards, like ball games, are won by consistent performance. Zullo says, "Aiming for the Beam Clay Award helps motivate you to dig a little deeper, to do that little bit extra for both safety and aesthetics that puts your



Horne maintains his award winning field, even with its seasonal conversions. Each year, the mound is torn down, and all skinned areas are covered with sod to prepare for football in the fall. *Courtesy: Hoover Metropolitan Stadium*

field over the top. Once you see your field at that level, that becomes the motivation to keep it there."

Horne adds, "It all comes down to the basics. Always leave the field a lit-

tle better than when you walked on it that morning." □

Bob Tracinski is manager of public relations for the John Deere Company in Raleigh, N.C., and public relations co-chair for the national STMA.

The Beam Clay Baseball Diamond of the Year Awards are sponsored by the Sports Turf Managers Association, sportsTURF Magazine, and Beam Clay. They recognize excellence in maintaining safe and professional quality diamonds. Winning baseball diamonds are selected in three categories: professional, college, and schools/municipalities/parks.

This is the 12th year the Beam Clay Baseball Diamond of the Year Awards have been presented. Each year, four major league groundskeepers serve as judges. This year's judges were: Tom Farrell of the Toronto Blue Jays (AL-East), Barney Lopus of the Anaheim Angels (AL-West), Ralph Frangipani of



Horne submitted Hoover Stadium for consideration of the Beam Clay Award "on behalf of the Barons Ball Club and the wonderful people of Birmingham." *Courtesy: Steve Horne*

the Philadelphia Phillies (NL-East), and Eric Hansen of the Los Angeles Dodgers (NL-West).

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Field Focus continued from pg. 10

Hoover's Basic Maintenance Plan

Standard turf maintenance

Fertilization: The plan is based on four to five soil tests per year; light granular applications at two- to three-week intervals between February and September; and a base nitrogen rate of 3/4 lb. per 1000 sq.ft. The nutrient mix is adjusted according to soil test results, turf performance and weather conditions. Winter fertilization is based on field needs and weather conditions. Liquid iron is applied monthly during active turf growth. Annual lime applications are based on test results.

Aeration: Core aeration is performed four to five times each year. Cores are collected, and topdressing follows twice a year.

Pesticides: Minimal insect control is needed, and a preventative fungicide application program is in place.

Mowing: The field is mowed daily during baseball season: the outfield with a ride-on reel greens mower, and the infield with a walk-behind reel greens mower. Outfield turf is maintained at a one-inch height, and this is changed to a 1-1/4-inch height in the fall. Infield turf is kept at a 3/4-inch height, and is moved to a fall height of one-inch.

Mound and skinned area maintenance

Standard Program: Repairs to the pitcher's mound and bullpen mounds follow each game. Mounds are watered lightly and tarped. The nail drag is used on skinned areas at least once a week.

For a 7 p.m. game: Groom the infield with a field rake at 9 a.m.; saturate skinned areas after grooming;

water again at noon and 3 p.m.; apply less water each time; paint foul lines and bases. After pre-game workouts: touch up the mound and home plate with a hand rake; if you mat drag the skinned area, hand rake the first 36

inches bordering the grass line, and the rest of the area only as needed; water lightly; line the baselines and batters box with chalk liner and string; make a final pass to sweet-tracked material from the turf.

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The BEAM CLAY® Baseball Diamond of the Year Awards are sponsored by BEAM CLAY®, the Sports Turf Manager's Association, and sportsTurf Magazine to honor excellence and professionalism in maintaining outstanding, safe, professional quality baseball diamonds. Winners are selected by a special awards committee of major league head groundskeepers.

This year's judges were (AL-EAST) Tom Farrell, Toronto Blue Jays; (AL-WEST) Barney Lomas, Anaheim Angels; (NL-EAST) Ralph Frangipani, Philadelphia Phillies; (NL-WEST) Eric Hansen, Los Angeles Dodgers.

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