

Joy Christian Athletic Complex

1997 STMA Softball Field of the Year

by Bob Tracinski

Reach out with worship, songs of praise—and softball? That's the belief of Bellevue Baptist Church, a congregation of 23,000 in Cordova, TN. Why not serve your people and your community through sports? If God wants the best for his people, why shouldn't this include top-notch athletic facilities? The Church's Joy Christian Athletic Complex, STMA's 1997 Softball Field of the Year, was created to fulfill this philosophy.

Bellevue Baptist Church makes effective use of its 375-acre property. Its first sports-related facility, Grace Family Life Center, was completed in 1994. It houses four basketball courts and a running track.

The Joy Christian Complex lies just across a parking lot shared by the two sports facilities. Work began on its three softball/baseball fields in late spring 1995, and the fields were ready for play at the start of the 1997 season.

Five lakes, four retreat areas, a pavilion, a gazebo, an amphitheater, and 10 additional lower-maintenance athletic fields complete the impressive layout of Bellevue's grounds.

Director Robert Bodi oversees the entire property. He says, "Over 119 teams use these fields, split between 13 leagues ranging from Lassie through Senior girls, Midget through

average 150 games a season; the fields in the complex between 200 and 225—and that doesn't count the practices."

Six full-time and 12 part-time employees handle maintenance. The ballfields and retreat areas are maintained by one full-time supervisor, Clifford Smith, and two part-time grounds personnel.

Smith joined the grounds staff part-time while attending college in Memphis. He began incorporating some field maintenance practices he'd observed as a baseball player. After graduation, he moved to full-time status and became involved in development of the new complex.

Bodi says, "Coordinating all this is like eating an elephant. You take one bite at a time. We look at one area, assess the needs, and when we accomplish that objective, move on to the next project."

Bodi has 20 years experience in the landscape/irrigation business. He joined his father in business immediately following high school. He has taken courses for design and



A collective effort helped Bellevue Baptist Church's Joy Christian Athletic Complex earn the 1997 STMA Softball Field of the Year Award. Director Robert Bodi designed the master irrigation system himself. Courtesy: Robert Bodi

Major boys, and men's and women's separate and coed softball leagues. We play on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, and some Saturdays, with eight fields going each session. The outer fields each

installation/building of landscaping and irrigation.

He's quick to cite the Irrigation Association (IA) and its certification programs as instrumental influences in his educational process. He's an IA Certified Irrigation Auditor (CLIA), Contractor (CIC), and Designer (CID), and is certified with Rain Bird for Maxicom systems.

Bodi put this background to work by developing a master irrigation system for the main campus. The system incorporates a 1,200-gallon per minute, variable-frequency drive pump station, and a 6,800-foot long, 8-inch mainline loop of piping, all controlled by a computerized Maxicom system.

All buildings use potable, county-supplied water, but landscape and field irrigation water is drawn out of the main lake. Bodi asserts, "In four to six years,

the water savings alone will cover the cost of the system components



From left to right: Facility Director Robert Bodi, Supervisor Clifford Smith, and Floyd Perry of Grounds Maintenance Services presenting the Field of the Year plaque at a Mid-South Chapter STMA meeting. *Courtesy: Chip Houmes*

and the labor costs."

Bodi also developed the field,

landscape, and irrigation system designs. Grounds department personnel handled the irrigation installation, sodding, sprigging, and finishing of the playing surface. Contractors installed the Musco lighting system, most of the hardscape features, and the fencing.

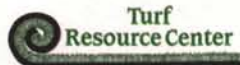
Each of the three new fields is 285 feet deep in every position and has a turfgrass infield, a warning track, lighting, and bleacher seating for approximately 100 spectators. During construction, workers skimmed the area soil and filled it to develop a level surface. They augmented the native clay-based soil with composted chicken manure and a white-washed sand. The fields have no underlying drainage systems. A crown of approximately

one foot per 100 feet provides surface drainage.



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The Joy Christian Complex stands adjacent to another of the Church's excellent facilities. Grace Family Life Center houses four basketball courts and a running track. *Courtesy: Robert Bodi*

Workers cultivated the skinned surface with four tons of Pro's-Choice soil amendments per field, and topped each with a crushed-brick Crimson stone. They topped the warning track with Crimson stone as well.

"The fields have a high-performance Rain Bird irrigation system consisting of R-70, Falcon, and T-Bird heads controlled by the Maxicom Central irrigation system," says Bodi. "The separate skinned or turf area zones also can be cycled in the field from hand-held digital phones. Hose outlets are strategically placed for quick water access."

In late August 1996, the grounds crew sprigged the fields with Mississippi Choice, a new hybrid bermudagrass that features thick, vigorous growth characteristics. Supervisor Smith says, "We fine-tuned the fertilization and irrigation to get good sprig establishment. We then overseeded with perennial ryegrass at two to three times the nor-

mal rate to prevent winter kill. The fields looked great in early spring of 1997, but cool weather kept the perennial ryegrass active through summer and fall. We didn't need to overseed.

"Following the cool, wet spring of 1998, the bermudagrass finally kicked in well. Because the fields are in play by April, we want the extra top growth, and will overseed again this fall."

The crew sodded areas surrounding the new fields in early April 1997. They topped the warning track and skinned areas with red stone at the start of the 1997 season, but the skinned surface was softer than desired during wet periods. Smith says, "This spring we worked in some Pro's Choice, but didn't remove the old material. We're fine-tuning the mix there and on the mounds to find the right combination to withstand our level of play."

Fertilization is based on soil tests, and granular applications are made at three- to four-week intervals. Smith explains, "We spike aerate at a four- to six-inch depth, covering the field twice. Our first aeration occurs about mid-May. This year we plan on monthly aeration during the playing season. We're topdressing following aeration with approximately a 1/4-inch layer of the same sand used in the field construction."

The 10 older fields have skinned infields and common bermudagrass turf. Maintenance is less intensive, and includes twice-a-week mowing and game-day grooming with the field rake. The outfield lines are painted and the batter's box chalked.

"We control field use in bad weather, which helps keep the low-maintenance fields in safe, playable condition," says Smith. "We meet with our activities director at around 2:00 pm, make the decision, and put the play or no play message on a team hotline."

Though maintenance schedules incorporate IPM practices, both pre- and post-emergence herbicide applications may be needed on the new fields. Non-selective controls are used around the warning tracks and fence lines. In 1997, the grounds crew applied Primo to control growth on the new field turf and the surrounding turf areas.

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Regular maintenance

The in-house crew mows the playing surfaces approximately every other day using a ride-on reel mower. Turf is maintained at a one-inch height from March through May and in October and November, and at a 3/4-inch height June through September.

The grounds crew works from 7:00 am to 3:00 pm, so no crew member is on hand for post-game maintenance. This presents a maintenance challenge, especially during rainy conditions.

Smith says, "Another major challenge is the constant changing of the pitching rubber and base pads to accommodate the wide range of leagues that play on a single field. With softball and baseball pitchers and coach-pitch ball, we have a throwing distance variance from 30 feet to 54 feet. We reset the mound according to who is playing that day.

"To counteract 1997 turf damage at the front of the traditional mound, we borrowed a tip from BOB (Bank One Ballpark in Phoenix, AZ) and

cut out a strip of turf from the mound to home plate, converting it to skinned area material on two of the three fields."

Standard excellence

Bodi and Smith have found that the high standards set for the complex have helped raise the level of field care. "Parents see the conditions here and ask for the same kinds of fields at home. Earning the award increased that exposure," says Bodi.

Each spring, the Church rededicates the playing fields in prayer. All the teams' members turn out in uniform, along with coaches, supporters, youth band, banner carriers, and parents. They all march from the church to the fields for prayers of dedication, and then each team plays an inning of ball.

Bodi says, "Seeing those 4,000 people coming in joy to our ball fields made all the work worthwhile. I just started to cry—for these kids, these families, and most of all, for the Lord." □

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

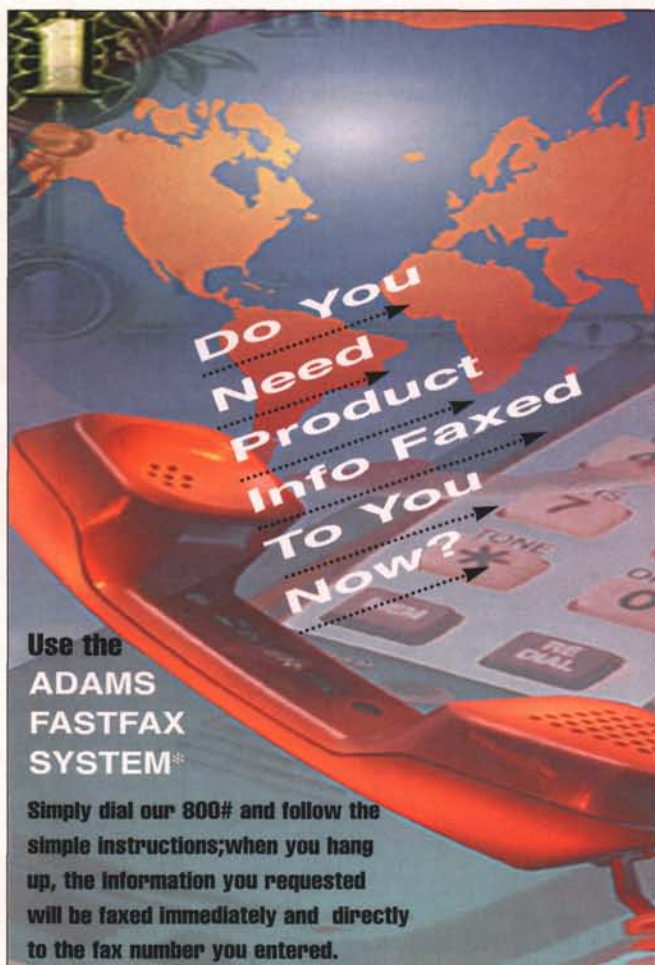
Game Day Preparations

- Trash patrol and clean restrooms at fields
- Spruce up flower beds
- Repair mound and home plate area by hand
- Mow (every other day or as conditions warrant)
- Use sprinkler system to lightly irrigate skinned area
- Use field rake to groom skinned area
- Hand rake skinned surface in two-foot border around turf
- Sweep off turf edges with broom
- Use irrigation system again to lightly irrigate skinned area
- Smooth out warning tracks
- Paint foul lines; chalk batter's box
- Clean up and prepare dugouts

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