

Potter Park Field

1997 Beam Clay Municipal Baseball Diamond of the Year

by Bob Tracinski

The first time teams come from Denver or Colorado Springs to our city of 8,000 for a game, they expect to play in a cornfield or a weed patch. That attitude takes a 180° turn when they see the field. They leave knowing La Junta's Potter Park Field is among the best-maintained fields in the United States," says Michael C. Sexton, CLP, the director of parks and recreation for the city. "Tony Madrid, our ballfield maintenance coordinator, and his crew do an unbelievably great job here. The field is in top shape, and our community takes it for granted that it will always be that way."

Equipped with a BS degree in recreation and a BA in education, Sexton came to the city 13 years ago as recreation supervisor. As he explains it, he was "kind of thrown into the director's position shortly after that."

Madrid joined the city staff as a part-timer shortly before Sexton was hired and worked his way up to his current position. Mutual respect allows them to function well as a team, along with La Junta Recreation Coordinator Richard Sandoval. They share a straightforward style and always strive for the highest standards.

History

Land for the park was donated to the city in 1920, and construction of a football field soon followed. Sexton says,

"Between that period and into the early 1950s, the facility was turned into rodeo grounds and leased by the American Legion for kids' rodeos.

"In 1954, Potter Park was selected as the site for a new municipal swimming pool. The rodeo grounds were moved to the city's Industrial Park, and the land not needed for the pool

replaced the existing snow fence in the mid-1960s. Upgrades in 1984 brought construction of a new backstop, dugouts, restrooms, a concession stand, an announcer's booth, and an automated irrigation system.

According to Sexton, "In 1988, the outfield was extended, a 10-foot high chain-link outfield fence constructed; the existing light poles relocated; and sodium halogen lights installed. In 1989, infield reconstruction to combat the poor drainage of our native-clay soil included installation of a four-inch layer of masonry-type sand topped with bluegrass sod. The infield irrigation system was replaced in 1991. In 1992, a batting cage 75-feet long, 24-feet wide, and 12-feet high was installed behind the first-base dugout. Another batting cage was built along the third-base line in 1993."

Field use

Potter Park Field is used from mid-February to at least mid-November. The Otero Junior College Rattlers and the La Junta High School Tigers hold practices and home games there in the spring. A week after their seasons end, youth baseball leagues take over for the summer. The field gets another three-week break in the fall before the Junior College team starts again. Because spring practices begin as soon as the snow clears, the only real lull comes in December.



La Junta Potter Park Field: 1997 Beam Clay Municipal Baseball Diamond of the Year.

Courtesy: City of La Junta

was converted into what is now known as La Junta Potter Park Field."

The original playing surface consisted of shale that had been dumped over the existing soil. In 1955, topsoil was brought in and the infield and outfield areas were seeded. A five-foot high chain-link fence around the outfield

Sexton says, "Potter Park Field frequently hosts the Colorado State High School District Playoff games for 4A, 3A, 2A, and 1A classifications. It has also been the site of numerous Babe Ruth Summer Baseball state and regional tournaments, and such special events as Fourth of July fireworks shows and donkey-baseball games. It's not unusual for both the Tigers and the Rattlers to hold double-headers on the same day. I think Tony lists the field as his home address for most of the year."

Field maintenance

Each member of the five-person, full-time staff has an area of specialization. Madrid focuses on the athletic facilities, but notes that cooperation is terrific and everyone pitches in willingly wherever needed. He explains, "I've had a five-person, part-time crew of ballfield maintenance workers from early March to mid-September. With the new field under construction, we've moved Mike Romero, a part-timer since 1992, to a full-time position as my right-hand man."

"Our day starts at 7:00

am, and goes until the work is done. When high school and junior college baseball are both active in the spring, we'll start at Potter Park Field. Our field maintenance schedule works around the coaches' scheduling. During the summer, typically we'll spend a couple hours at the coed-adult softball fields, a couple hours at the junior college softball field, and at least an hour at the two tee-ball fields before lunch.

"Next we'll groom the field used by the 8- to 10-year-olds. We won't get to Potter Field until after 2:00 pm, to put in another two to three hours of grooming, even without a night game. We do keep someone on-site all during

tournaments. Constant communication with all the field-user groups is one of the most important parts of this job."

The Recreation Department operating budget coordinates maintenance expenditures, and the City Council and City Manager approve capital improvements. Much of the work done to the athletic facilities has been financed through funding from the Colorado Lottery and through grants provided by the Lottery's Great Outdoors Colorado program. The grant applications require evidence of community support through funding and 'in-kind' assistance, which has been provided by the city, county, and field users.



Head Ballfield Maintenance Coordinator Tony Madrid and his team intend to maintain the standard of excellence that won them the prestigious Beam Clay Award.

Courtesy: City of La Junta

in the paths leading from each dugout to the batter's box, in the coaches' boxes, and in the transition area from the home-plate dirt to the grass. The purchase of a utility tractor with groomer, scarifier, painter, and dry liner attachments has allowed Madrid to do more in less time.

Madrid follows an intensive maintenance program to keep the field in shape despite all this activity. He says, "Daily care of the basepath, batter's box, and mound pay off in the long run. Those are areas I care for myself.

"Mowing times and height-of-cut are adjusted to accommodate changing weather conditions, turf growth,

Sexton notes that upgrades to all athletic facilities are made with long-term maintenance efficiency in mind. For example, a warning track of crusher fines installed in 1995 was replaced in 1997 with a more workable red clay mixture. The city also installed a red, poured-mat material

In-Season Maintenance Plan

Daily schedule:

- Clear infield grass edges
- Inspect batting cage nets
- Repair pitching mound and batter's box
- Drag and groom infield skinned area
- Drag warning track

As needed:

- Weed control
- Irrigation system inspection

Fertilization:

- Every six weeks from mid-Feb. to end of active growth period
- 20-20-10 formula and alternating 2% or 7% iron

Aeration:

- Core aeration every six weeks preceding fertilization
- Cores removed from infield; dragged into outfield
- Topdressing with same sand as infield, mixed with compost produced in-house or with straight sand

Irrigation:

- Infield system: 27 Toro Super 700 series heads
- Outfield system: 43 Toro 2001 heads
- Scheduling contingent on weather and field use:
 - 10- to 15-minute intervals three times a week
 - 15-20 minute intervals four or five times a week
 - 25-45 minute intervals seven days a week
- Additional irrigation of grass edges with hand-held hose as needed
- System inspected, repairs made, and water turned on in Feb.

Other:

- Re-sod any worn areas of infield in June, July, Aug., and Sept.
- Overseed outfield in Oct. or Nov.
- Sod cutter cleans infield edges in Oct. or Nov.

and stress of play. The bluegrass infield is mowed with two 21-inch, walk-behind rotary mowers as frequently as every other day. The bermudagrass outfield is mowed at least twice a week with a 72-inch, ride-on rotary mower."

Madrid explains that the coaches and players take pride in the field and do their part to keep it in top condition: "Following the last game of the night, they'll broom-off grass edges, hit the high spots in the skinned area with the rakes, water lightly, and put



Groundskeeper Michael Romero prepares Potter Park Field for an afternoon doubleheader.

Courtesy: City of La Junta

the tarps on the batter's box and the mound. It gives us all a head start the next day."

Sexton adds, "Our goals with the city council and administration are to put forward the positive image of La Junta. Earning the award for Potter Park Field is part of our department's contribution to that. Now that we've achieved that standard, our new goal will be to never fall below it." □

Bob Tracinski is manager of public relations for the John Deere Company in Raleigh, N.C. He also serves as public relations co-chair for the national Sports Turf Managers Association.

The Beam Clay Baseball Diamond of the Year Awards are sponsored by the STMA, sportsTURF Magazine, and Beam Clay. This is the 12th year the 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 Lopas of the Anaheim Angels (AL-West), Ralph Frangipani of the Philadelphia Phillies (NL-East), and Eric Hansen of the Los Angeles Dodgers (NL-West).

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

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

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