

Drowned by Bertha, the University at Albany's Athletic Fields Rise to a Giant Challenge

by Dennis Smith

The Giants are coming!" This was the official announcement at the March '96 news conference held by New York State Governor George Pataki, Albany Mayor Gerald Jennings, and University at Albany President Karen Hitchcock. After several months of reviewing potential sites, the New York Giants football team named the university as the summer home for their training camp for the following two years.

The "easy" part was done. Now, as agreed by the university, state and city officials, and local business sponsors, the existing football, soccer and practice fields had to be upgraded to accommodate nearly 160 New York Giant players, coaches and support staff for their four week stay in July and August.

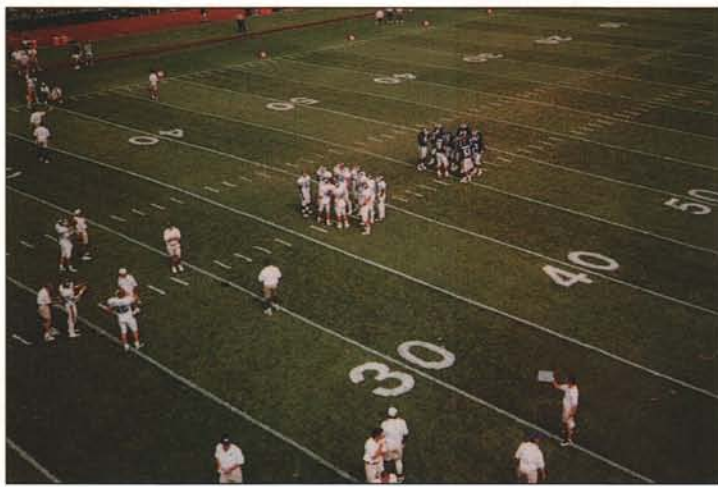
In the end, three months of constant effort would completely rehabilitate most of the fields. This mammoth task would include the re-sodding of

more than a quarter-million square feet, and would require more than six thousand hours of manual labor. The improvements would be another step

before training camp was set to begin, Giants Athletic Field Coordinator (and former University at Albany Assistant Director of Facilities) Karl Scharl started looking to update the University's equipment to prepare for the event. "We were facing some serious work ahead, and needed to make sure we had the proper equipment to get the job done right," explained Scharl.

The first task involved the main football and soccer fields. These were the only fields that did not require total rehabilitation. Time constraints prohibited the installation of a new irrigation system, so the maintenance team set out to upgrade the existing equipment. The team installed a versatile rotor that allowed insert nozzles of 5-24 gpm. They went on to aerate the field in three directions using a

42-in., three-point tractor-driven aerator with 3/4-in. slotted tines. The team proceeded to break up the dried plugs with a heavy-duty drag mat.



The Giants scrimmage on their new practice field at the University at Albany during training camp, 1996.
Courtesy: Toro.

forward for the University at Albany, which had been upgraded to a Division II sports program in 1995.

At the start of May, just two months

The crew overseeded the field with a triplex ryegrass mixture. They spread the mix in two directions with a slit seeder at a rate of 7 lbs. per 1,000 sq.ft. The team then fertilized with a slow-release starter fertilizer, using 1 lb. of Nitrogen per 1,000 sq.ft.

A topdressing mixture of 90 percent sand and 10 percent sedge peat completed the operation. The team applied the mix at a heavy rate, as the Giants were set to arrive in only eight weeks.

In mid-May, KSM Athletic Field Services was given the job of improving the fields. John Liburdi, head groundskeeper at Heritage Park Sports Facility in Albany, headed the team. Local athletic field expert, Brian Wimble, joined as head groundskeeper to fill out the very experienced group.

"We knew we would need a total of five practice fields, including the main football field," said Liburdi. "So we

not ready in time."

"The existing turf had to go," added Wimble. "It had 80-90 percent weed content, which we needed to destroy." A local company came in to roto-till the existing sod. They also supplied 270,000 sq.ft. of a new combination bluegrass blend mineral sod to complete the job.

Before sodding began, Liburdi and Wimble discovered a significant drainage problem in the fields. "The existing irrigation system was more than 20 years old and had leaking mains," explained Liburdi. "We began a drainage project around the perimeter of the four fields using 8,000 ft. of 6-in. drainage material." The lateral drainage lines were installed on 20-ft. centers, and trenches were

back-filled with appropriate filter sand.

The team tested the drainage sys-

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The grounds crew overseeded the fields with a triplex ryegrass mixture to prepare for the Giants. Courtesy: Toro.

decided to re-sod four fields, and use the main football and soccer fields for practices only if the new fields were

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tem early, and it worked very well. "Almost to the day we began laying the sod, mother nature really became uncooperative," recalled Liburdi. Nearly 50 inches of rain fell between May and mid-July that year.

"To make matters worse, what remained of Hurricane Bertha came along on July 6. It dumped 5-1/4 inches on us in about four hours, but the fields were playable about five days later," said Liburdi.

In most soil conditions, laying sod would have been nearly impossible with so much rain-fall. Fortunately, the campus was built on the former Albany Country Club, and it was blessed with a sandy soil and a thick layer of organic matter.

Supervised by Wimble and Liburdi, a crew of 17 laid sod from 5:00 a.m. to 10:00

p.m. for 21 consecutive days. After treating the fields with a biostimulant, they cut the 4-ft. wide, 60-ft. long sod rolls at a

half-day in an attempt to dry the soil. For four hours, the helicopter created a downdraft over extremely wet spots to dry them enough to be sodded.

As the crew rolled out the sod, they significantly reduced rutting in the saturated ground by renting a tractor with large balloon tires. Once it was laid, they smoothed the turf by tracting one-ton rollers in five directions.

A deep-tine aeration helped the new turf drain, and aided the new roots in penetrating the soil profile. Additionally, since aeration was practically non-existent in the university's program, the deep-tine aeration assisted the existing



The team rolled out 270,000 feet of sod, four feet at a time. Courtesy: Toro.

depth of 1/2-3/4 inches.

Because conditions were so wet, Liburdi employed a helicopter for a

core aeration in opening the fields.

Again, the team applied a light top-dressing with 90 percent sand and 10

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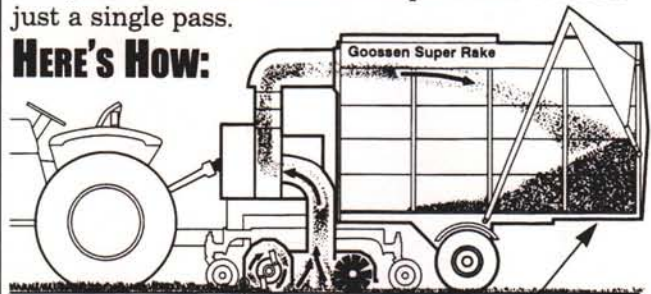
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After two months of intense preparation, the fields were ready to host the Giants. Courtesy: Toro.

percent sedge peat. They followed by broadcast overseeding the fields with a triplex ryegrass mixture. As the sod began to establish, a slow release fertilizer enriched the soil at the rate of 1 lb. of Nitrogen per 1,000 sq.ft. Finally, the crew sprayed the fields with liquid iron, with an omni-directional wetting agent, and with a microbial biostimulant to enhance color and improve rooting.

As stipulated by the Giants, all of the fields were mowed with a two-wheel drive, 72-in. wide-cut triplex reel mower with eight-blade hydraulically-driven floating cutting units. The crew maintained a grass height of 1-1/4 inches, and for the first time, they mowed the football field in a striping pattern.

When New York Giants management arrived in July, they were extremely pleased with the results, particularly in light of the adverse weather conditions the crew was forced to overcome. However, early in training, during an afternoon practice following a previous night's rain, Giants Head Coach Reeves felt the field was too soft.

"I was concerned about the safety of my players, as well as the possibility of tearing up a quality field unnecessarily," recalls Reeves. Head Groundskeeper Wimble applauded the coach's decision to move to another practice field, observing, "It was nice to see that Coach Reeves was a 'turf guy.'" At a press conference on July 18, Reeves remarked that the University, state, city and local businesses "had completed a wonderful job in a relatively short period of time."

Perhaps the greatest testament to the achievement came from a person with "hands-on experience." Giants Quarterback Dave Brown remarked, "The turf provided great footing, and

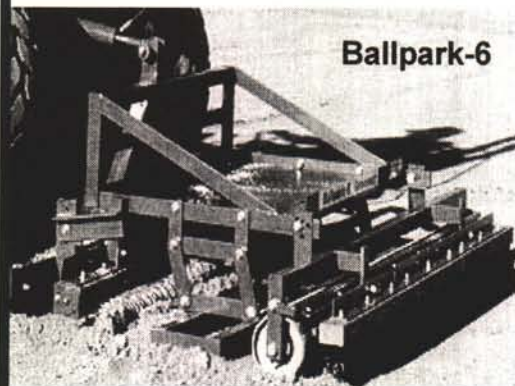
allowed our team to get through camp with fresh legs because it was so soft. The condition of the fields can be attributed to the people who worked on them and to their equipment."

In an effort to protect the university's investment, Scharl and Wimble developed a maintenance plan to keep the new athletic fields in quality shape. With these efforts, and with future plans to upgrade its other fields, the University at Albany contin-

ues to build a higher athletic profile. This commitment to quality paid off when the Giants agreed to use the university's fields during training camp for six more years. □

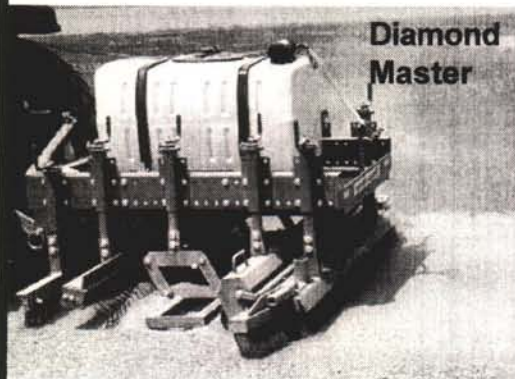
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