

Casey Field

2000 Focus

by Bob Tracinski

Casey Field, STMA's 1997-1998 Football Field of the Year, is the showplace and night gathering spot for many of the 7,198 residents of Covington, VA. The multi-use field hosts football from August through November, and baseball from mid-February through July.

Facility layout

Director of Parks and Recreation Allen L. Dressler explains, "The home side of the stadium is constructed from steel beams and concrete, with fiberglass, bleacher-style seating capable of accommodating 4,000 spectators. It includes a top-level press box with space for the PA announcer, spotters, clock operator, radio stations, film crew, and assistant coaches. Beneath the stadium are restroom facilities, plus fully-equipped locker rooms for both teams, a tape room, and private offices for coaches.

"There are two concession facilities, one on the home side, and the other, which includes restroom facilities, on the visitors' side. It becomes the single concession facility for baseball game attendees."

Organized athletic competition has been played at Casey Field since the spring and summer of 1962. The Boston Red Sox had a Rookie League team at the facility in 1967, and the Houston Astros had a Class A farm club team there from 1968 to 1976.

"What is now Casey Field was once a brick tannery and then a landfill site," says Dressler. "The brick debris became the base, and the landfill materials the subsurface. This was covered with native soil, a sandy loam, to complete the field."

No subsurface drainage system was installed, but Dressler asserts that none is needed, "The bricks underneath the field are the best system we could have. Water infiltrates and percolates through our sandy loam very quickly. Then it's held in the subsurface maze of bricks. When we installed new goal posts about three years ago, we hit standing water. The bricks form a reservoir from which water is wicked up to the turf during the extended dry periods so typical of our summers."

Field use

The double-duty field faces a full schedule with football alone. In 1997, it

1997-1998 STMA Football Field of the Year



Casey's award-winning football field doubles as its baseball outfield. The visitors' bleachers run directly over third base. Courtesy: City of Covington Parks and Recreation

hosted 10 high school junior varsity and varsity football games and 20 youth league football games. Wednesday pre-game practices for the junior varsity team and Thursday pre-game practices for the varsity football team add to the field's traffic.

Baseball occupies the field seven days a week from the start of practice in mid-February through the end of the season in July. The schedule includes 20 high school baseball games, district and regional play-offs, 45 Little League baseball games, a three-day baseball camp, and the annual spring break trip of the Wellsville, NY High School baseball team.

Casey Field also hosts special events, such as Covington's annual Labor Day Celebration, which attracts several thousand people. In 1995, the East Regional and State Senior Little League Baseball Tournament brought in teams from West Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia.

In 1998, high school baseball started February 16. As soon as the season was over, Little League baseball began, wrapping up July 17. Football preparations started July 20. The first scrimmage was held August 15, and the first game was played August 28. The tight schedule allowed only four weeks to make the conversion to football.

Field maintenance

Casey's playing surface consists of a mixture of bluegrass varieties, supple-

mented by an aggressive overseeding program. For the majority of the year, the overseeding mix contains five or six bluegrass varieties as a method of disease resistance. A mix of perennial ryegrass varieties is added to the bluegrass mixture for faster fill in during the football season.

Generally, the Friday night varsity game is followed by youth league play on Saturday, so divot repair, overseeding, and irrigation regularly take place on Mondays. Soil temperatures are still warm enough for major overseeding when football wraps up in late October or early November. Turf blankets are used in the wear areas until late February to achieve maximum germination.

Dressler keeps the turf between two and 2-1/2 inches in height for football and baseball. He maintains a three-inch height during the heat of summer, saying, "If anyone complains that the grass is too tall, I just tell them we're using it to teach those kids to hustle: to run to the ball, not wait for it to come to them. Besides, I used to play football as tight end and defensive end, and I never had a grass plant trip me."

The facility uses a riding mower with mid-mount rotary deck. To achieve a light and dark pattern, chelated iron is sprayed in the end zones, and in alternating five-yard strips up to the 40-yard lines. Iron is applied to the five-yard strips on both sides of the 50-yard line, resulting in a 10-yard, dark block.

The first lining process takes place one week before the first home game, and it's repeated approximately four more times during the playing season. The same strips are sprayed at each application.

Field layout marking and painting are completed on Friday morning, followed by a final, aesthetic mowing once the paint is dry. Combined with the striping program, this Friday mowing really gives the field a manicured finish.

There is no automatic irrigation system, so watering the playing surface is a challenge. Dressler explains, "We use four tripod sprinklers, alternating coverage areas periodically through the morning hours. In 1997, annual rainfall was 6.5 inches below normal, intensifying the challenge."

In 1998, spring rains created near monsoon conditions. This made irrigation unnecessary, but shifted the challenge to mowing and general maintenance. Despite preventive measures, disease stressed the turf.

A switch to hot, dry weather coincided with the heavy traffic of baseball play. It hit hard on the double-use section of the field. There was only one measurable rainfall between early June and August 31: a total of 1-1/2 inches of natural moisture. However, the crew managed to have the field in great shape entering football season.

Dedicated crew

Dressler became director of parks and recreation in 1993. He says, "This top-level field wouldn't be possible without the expertise and dedication of Crew Supervisor Charlie Baker and our three groundskeepers: Joe Morris, Gene Crawford, and John Hutcheson. Another key member of our staff and my right hand in coordinating all this is Administrative Secretary Jane Tucker."

Since Casey Field earned the Field of the Year Award, \$110,000 has been invested in facility improvements. The bulk of the money has gone to minor repairs to the concrete, painting, bleacher improvements, and the addition of ramps and a platform to comply with ADA requirements. The original chain-link fencing, installed around 1962, was replaced. Dressler says, "We installed 7-foot tall chain-link fence around the entire sports complex because we didn't want the field hidden. This is the community's resource, and we want the taxpayers to see where their money is going and the kind of results it is producing."

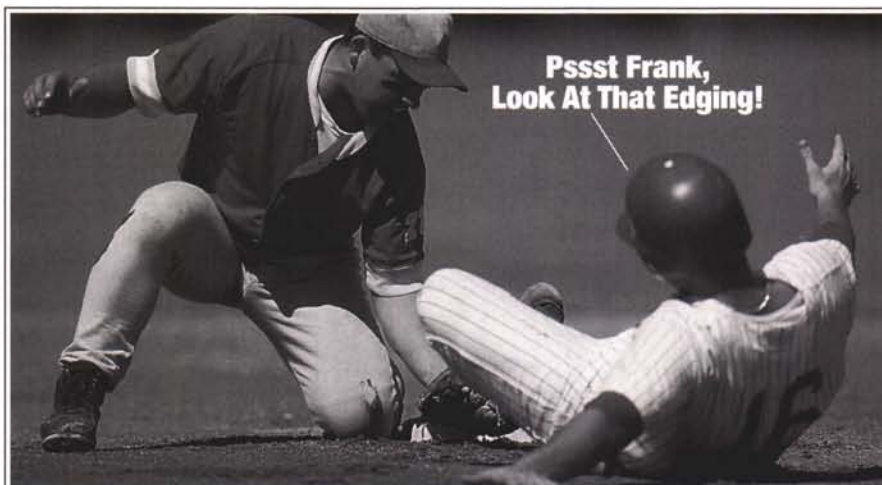
Dressler sees field maintenance as three parts of a whole. He says, "Our number-one goal is providing a safe, playable product for the athletes. Then

comes giving our attendees good accommodations. Finally comes the aesthetics of the field and facility.

"The answer to what it takes to make our field look the way it does is simple — PRIDE. We don't have the budget, fancy equipment, or the in-ground irrigation systems that some of our constituents are fortunate to have, but we do have four individuals who work hard and care about their facility as though it were their

own front lawn. Even those who don't understand the game of football can understand that a lot of pride went into game-time preparations." □

Bob Tracinski is business communications manager for John Deere in Raleigh, NC. He is public relations co-chair for the national Sports Turf Managers Association.



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