



Comet Stadium

1998 STMA High School Softball Field of the Year

Courtesy: Comet Stadium

by Bob Tracinski

When Mark Cuthbertson came to Comet Stadium as assistant softball coach in 1994, the field was essentially unchanged from its 1980 development to accommodate the new fast-pitch softball program at Ohio's Genoa High School.

Grass and weeds had been scraped off the heavy-clay native soil and topped with a thin layer of coarse masonry sand to form the infield. The Athletic Boosters built dugouts and erected a backstop and sideline fences.

Then, Cuthbertson explains, "Something occurred in 1994 that would forever change the way we viewed our athletic facilities at Genoa High School. Our boys' baseball facility was named Beam Clay's National Field of the Year."

Dedicated team

Cuthbertson was named Head Coach following the 1994 season. As is the case with many high schools, Genoa's paid coaching positions evolved to include unpaid groundskeeping tasks.

Coaches Cuthbertson, McLearn, and Moritz form the maintenance crew. Cuthbertson does all the mowing, edging, aerating, and chemical application. The remaining maintenance is split among the three coaches as evenly as possible.

Generally, each coach handles game-day preparations for his home

games. Team members tackle most of the post-game maintenance and the post-practice touch-up work.

In 1994, the weed-ravaged softball field wasn't even included in the budget with the baseball and football fields. Cuthbertson says, "I decided that, if it were at all possible, within four years we would have a softball facility of the same caliber as the boys' 'Field of Dreams.'"

Field improvements

Genoa High School is a small rural facility with a very limited budget, but an unlimited community spirit. The field improvement plan was based on funding by donations and lots of volunteer labor. Cuthbertson and staff also enjoyed support from Athletic Director (now High School Principal) Jim Henline.

Cuthbertson says, "Henline's first big contribution was an offer for us to dismantle an old stable building at a former seminary in nearby Perrysburg. We could rebuild it as a multipurpose shelter house / storage / concession building. He even came with a group of volunteers to do the work.

"Within a few weeks we had our new building in place, complete with vinyl siding, electricity, and phone — all done with no cost to the Board of Education."

Henline also authorized use of fertilizer and weed-control chemicals usually reserved for the football and

baseball fields. It was the first time softball had been afforded this status.

The school had just purchased a small pull-behind core aerator for the football practice fields. Cuthbertson repeatedly put it to use. He says, "The field had ended up as a mix of grasses and weeds — heavy on the weeds. With little field use scheduled in the summer of 1994 and moderate temperatures, I made multiple fertilizer applications using the different fertilizers on hand, and used a lot of weed killer.

With a greatly reduced weed population, we adopted an aggressive overseeding and fertilization program in the fall. Pre-emergence control of the persistent crabgrass was scheduled for spring of 1995 — even if I'd have to buy it myself. And we started begging for an outfield fence."

Early that spring, volunteers installed the fence. "While the installation was in process, we again were shown how people in our community embrace the endeavors of people like us," noted Cuthbertson. "One morning, two boiler pipes, 24 feet in length, mysteriously appeared in the left field. They were just what I'd wanted for our foul poles, and I'd only told two people about it. To this day, no one has stepped forward as the supplier."

By March 1995, Comet Field was much improved, and the previous year's softball program expanded. Cuthbertson says, "When people would say the field was so much nicer,



STMA President Steve Guise (left) presents Coaches/Groundskeepers Mark Cuthbertson (center) and Joe McLear (right) the Field of the Year award.

Courtesy: STMA

Yankees fan, so I tracked down the name of Dan Cunningham, their groundskeeper; called him; told him what we wanted; and he told us exactly what to do and even recommended some products to try.

"I requested samples of what he suggested and similar products. We started plotting the final details of Phase Three. In the meantime, we continued our aggressive maintenance program of aeration, fertilization,

we'd promote the next project. They all bought into it.

"We staged our first softball clinic for young girls, and earned enough funds to buy paint for volunteers to paint the dugouts. For the first time, the summer softball association asked if they could use our facility. Phase One was complete."

In late summer 1995, Cuthbertson learned of an old scoreboard at a community softball field that was being replaced by a housing addition. A phone call confirmed that it was theirs for the taking. A few more calls rounded up the donation of the 12-conductor underground cable, and the funds for a new control panel.

Again, the volunteer brigade sprung to action. Cuthbertson says, "Right after the scoreboard was in place, a folded American flag appeared in my mailbox. My full-time job is as a process technician at an oil refinery. When I told people at work about the flag and need for a flag pole, another mysterious surprise occurred.

"One morning, a 25-foot long, heavy-gauge section of boiler pipe appeared at the field. All I needed to do was get the concrete and set it in place.

"Also that summer, volunteers helped us install the bullpens. We completed our Phase Two by purchasing much-needed softball equipment and uniforms. By spring of 1996, our facility was becoming the envy of our opponents."

Infield renovation

In 1996, Cuthbertson and McLear took the J.V. and varsity softball teams to Atlanta for pre-season scrimmages. The teams played on the manicured turf and crushed red brick infield of Kennesaw State College and the girls loved it.

Cuthbertson told them that they'd have their own red infield in two years. He says, "I'm a big New York

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overseeding, and weed control."

The Athletic Boosters agreed to fund the softball infield renovation. "Because the field had been tiled well for its previous agricultural use, internal drainage is good," notes Cuthbertson. "With no crown and the shallow layer of masonry sand over the heavy clay, there were some high and low spots, and surface drainage was a problem."

McLear and Moritz tapped their fire department connections for infield reconstruction volunteers. Moritz also secured a pile of clay removed from a nearby limestone quarry. Another fire department member volunteered his equipment and services to do the grading.

The athletic department paid for rental of a commercial roto-tiller. The crew used it to till the existing heavy clay and masonry sand to a four-inch

depth. They topped this layer with approximately 100 tons of the quarry clay.

The coaches used the school's front-end loader to level and work in the

final grade.

The crew topped the infield with coarse masonry sand, which formed the playing surface for the 1997 season. This provided a softer finish than desired.

Funds from 1997 clinics and other donated materials led to the installation of an outdoor batting cage, and Phase Three was complete. Cuthbertson says, "We started Phase Four late in the summer of 1997, when two picnic tables were donated for our shelter and 32 Austrian pine trees were planted around the outfield fence by our Vocational Agriculture Department.

"I liked some features of the field at Ohio Northern University, where my daughter plays, and decided to make the infield surface smaller, going to the rule-book minimum, and having grass areas down both foul lines and behind



Courtesy: Comet Stadium

clay. During the process, they spotted a small vein of blue gumbo clay. They dug it out and put blocks of it inside the dugouts for later use. The volunteer grader operator completed the

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home plate. Laying this out on paper led to the walkway design that's now a feature of Comet Field.

"Using a 50/50 mix of Kentucky bluegrasses and perennial ryegrasses, some donated straw, and lots of TLC, we had a beautiful new stand of grass by late fall. Our Athletic Boosters approved funds for the purchase of a new infield surface. Now I was seeing that red infield as close to reality."

Later that fall, the crew worked the masonry sand into the soil profile. Without access to a topdresser, the crew waited until the ground was frozen to bring in the selected red infield material, dumping loads of it in piles across the field.

The volunteers turned out once again to move the material with hand

rakes to form and level the one-inch layer that now tops the infield.

The blue gumbo the crew had

believe what we were able to accomplish with so little money in such a short time.



"Our facility is a great source of pride for all those who had contributed their time, labor, and money for the team, and for the entire community," says Cuthbertson. "I can't begin to express how thankful I am and I know my assistants are for all the help and all the cooperation from the Athletic Department, the Athletic Boosters, and all the supporters throughout the community."

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retrieved provided a base for the batter's boxes, catcher's box, and pitching area.

Cuthbertson says, "That red surface completed Phase Four. Few could

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