

Canal Park

by Bob Tracinski

1998 Beam Clay Professional Baseball Diamond of the Year

The Akron Aeros' Canal Park has already sparked the revitalization of downtown Akron. Now this Ohio city's crown jewel shines even brighter as the STMA /sportsTURF/ Beam Clay 1998 Professional Baseball Diamond of the Year.

Director of Field Maintenance Rick Izzo explains, "In 1997, our first year of operation, the Cleveland Indians affiliate Akron Aeros led all of AA baseball in total attendance with 473,232, setting a new Eastern League record. In 1998, Akron again led AA attendance, shattering our own record by drawing 521,122 fans to Canal Park.

"That number represents the fifth-largest total attendance in all of Minor League Baseball for 1998. In fact, Akron became just the second AA franchise ever to draw in excess of a half-million fans in one season." Since many Aeros games are televised locally, these attendance figures are even more impressive.

Izzo says, "As the focus of attention, any flaws in the field undoubtedly will be uncovered. We strive for Major League playing conditions for every game."

He's quick to credit his crew for consistently hitting that mark. D.J. Henretta, Mark Miller, Sam Ashbaugh, Doug Seiber, and Rich Bender make up the core crew. James Hlavaty, Izzo's former assistant, recently moved on to work with the Motz Group in Cincinnati.

"Compliments from players, managers, umpires, and Cleveland Indians officials are not taken lightly, says Izzo. They drive us to do better to improve the field every day. We want those positive remarks to continue to flow year after year."

Just three months after his March 1997 hiring, Izzo was named director to mark another step in an upward progression. Drawn to Florida by the weather, he spent 15 years there. He went to work for a landscape company, and then took a job with a golf course.

Always a football and baseball player, he was excited to accept a position with the Collier Parks and Recreation Department in Naples. After about three years, he moved on to the University of Florida, working in the Gators' "swamp." Here he picked up credits in sports turf management and agronomy.

Izzo moved up to the big leagues when he went to work for Dwight Popvic at the Boston Red Sox Spring Training facility in Fort Myers. Then the opportunity to work with Vince Patterozzi and the Browns drew him back to Cleveland for two years.

He later joined the Norwich Navigators, and worked with two more mentors — Will Schnell and Chris Powell. His grounds care team earned

intervals with a GA 60 aerator. Cores are collected to counteract layering effects. Topdressing follows with the same 90-percent sand/10-percent peat mix as the soil profile.

March soil and tissue testing results become the basis for pH adjustments and the fertility program. For the past two years, gypsum and lime have been added to the initial application of 12-2-6 granular fertilizer.

As temperatures rise, liquid Roots 1-2-3, Premix Astron FG 20, Maxiplex, and other organic materials are added to the granular fertilization program. To balance fertility needs on the sand-based field, application cycles range from 10 to 14 to 30 days.

The crew levels the infield by hand, using a string and laser for accuracy. They level the warning track, and repair the mounds and home plate areas. Irrigation begins anywhere from mid-March to April 1, depending on weather conditions.

"We monitor conditions closely so we can start up the system and not have to shut it down again," says Izzo. "We won't start tarping until about a week before the season opener."

In 1997, the field was overseeded for winter with Scotts Blue 100 at the rate of six pounds per thousand square feet. In 1998, Izzo chose instead to eliminate a creeping Poa problem. He used an aggressive program of three Prograss applications at two-

week intervals beginning in late September.

Repair of the brown, killed-out areas will be part of the 1999 spring program. This may require the first use of perennial ryegrasses on the field.

Mowing starts in March at a height of 1-1/2 inches. The crew uses a triplex reel mower in the outfield, and a push reel mower in the infield. They roll a pattern into the turf every day with the reels disengaged, and perform actual mowing



Aeros player Greg Thomas takes the plate at Canal Park.

Courtesy: Akron Aeros

the Beam Clay Professional Diamond of the Year Award in 1996.

Routine maintenance

While Izzo works year-round, his core crew works the seven-month season. Weather permitting, they generally start March 1, and continue full-tilt through October 1.

The season kicks off as early as possible in March. The crew begins by core aerating to a three-inch depth at 1/4-inch



every three or four days. As soil temperatures rise and top growth begins, the crew mows twice a day during a home stand.

Consistency is key to the program. A 2,000-pound roller eliminates any soft spots in the infield to avoid bad bounces and turned ankles. The crew rolls the outfield approximately once a month to keep it level.

A four-day, 10-game college tournament March 25-29 kicks off the spring schedule. Izzo says, "We're shooting for the same Aeros-level conditions we'll hit by our April 12 season opener for these early high school games — and we'll make it, if the weather cooperates. The community's college and high school teams do respect the field and consider it an honor to play here."

If the schedule allows, the crew adds a second core aeration during the first two weeks of May. The year's final aerations come immediately after play ends, and in October. After the last frost of May, mowing height drops to 1-1/8 inches and remains there until the end of play. Then it's back to 1-1/2 inches.

The summer program kicks in at mid-May, and the fertilization program is continually adjusted for turf needs. Izzo and his three-person day crew start at 8:00 am if the field is tarped, and 9:00 am if it isn't.

Izzo says, "The lights play optical illusions. So, unless a day game and the threat of rain force night repair, one person tackles homeplate and mound and dish repair in the morning. This includes



Pictured left to right, the 1998 grounds crew included: Mark Miller, D.J. Henretta, Sam Ashbaugh, Director of Field Maintenance Rick Izzo, Rich Bender, and Doug Sieber.

Courtesy: Akron Aeros

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adding clay, pan tamping with the motorized unit, grading, and checking the consistency of the mound slope with a mound gauge.

"One person mows, generally two or three times a day on game days and once every two or three days when the team is away.

"Two of us work the infield clay. We

have two types of nail drags, and we have a float board for leveling. We may roll the infield if necessary. By July, we'll need to water every two hours and then turn it and water again to keep the consistency right.

"Seventy percent of the day is spent on the infield, homeplates, and mounds. The biggest concern is lip development. We

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power-wash the edges after every home stand, then come back a day later to put in new clay, tamp, roll, and make it consistent."

The crew continually overseeds any wear areas around homeplate, the mound, and first and third bases. Only once, in 1997, was there need to harvest sod from the bullpen sod farm to repair turf damage around homeplate.

"The 'gamers' (three-person night crew) come in about 5:00 pm. But if weather is bad, the day crew stays for possible tarp duty," says Izzo.

"The team concept here is extraordinary. During the day, the whole Aeros staff may pitch in to pull the tarp. It's whatever it takes to get the job done.

"Once play begins, the gamers and I may go in with rakes during the second and seventh innings, and we do the fifth-inning drag. They generally stay about 1-1/2 hours after the game.

"We fix up the foul lines every night. If it's been dry, we may flood the infield clay with water, knowing it will be dry again by morning.

"My crew also cleans dugouts daily, and power-washes them at the end of each home stand."

Post-game irrigation is determined by ET (evapotranspiration) readings and the DTN station outlook. Zones generally run from 10 to 20 minutes a night during home stands, and less when the team is on the road.

Occasional deep irrigation, with each station running for 40 minutes, is performed during dry conditions when the team is away. When temperatures climb into the 80s and 90s, the field is syringed right after mowing, and again an hour before batting practice.

Grubs have been the only insect problem. June and August insecticide applications were needed in 1998.

Izzo adopted an aggressive preventive program against disease. He uses one, two, or more snow mold prevention applications, and treats turf for leaf spot and pythium when conditions are favorable. All crew members are alerted when symptoms appear, and mowing stops at once. Izzo also does daily visual inspections to catch problems before they start.

Canal Park hosted 96 games in 1998: 71 games in the Aeros' regular season, plus post-season games and high school and college play. The annual Alcoholics Anonymous Conference drew another 10,000 people to the field.

The 1999 season is equally full. It promises more days that stretch to 16 hours, but Izzo and his crew are looking forward to every minute of it. □

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



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