

UC-Davis Softball Field

by Bob Tracinski

1998 STMA College Softball Field of the Year

When you don't have the funding, you've got to have heart. Of course, you also need initiative, commitment, ingenuity, and the ability to see a problem, visualize the solution, and tackle the challenge.

Judges selected the University of California (UC)-Davis Softball Field as the 1998 College Softball Field of the Year because of all of the above. The excellent condition of this facility is a tribute to its sports turf crew: Turf Specialist and Crew Leader Roger Adamson, Irrigation Specialist Matt Forrest, Equipment Operator Ted Richards, and Laborer Cutberto Santana. They share the credit with their supervisor, George Ortiz, and with Grounds Division Manager Sal M. Genito III.

Facility

The softball facility is approximately 30-years old. It includes the field, two bullpens, two field-level dugouts, portable restrooms, and seating for approximately 600 spectators.

Softball-related events occupy the field seven months of the year. The primary field user, the UC-Davis Women's

Softball Team, finished third in the Division II National Championships in 1993, 1996, and 1997. The field also hosts UC-Davis staff games, kid's camps, the Northern California Girl's Softball Tournament and Championship Game, Little League play, and Davis community activities.

History

In the early 90s, statewide cutbacks forced UC-Davis to scale down its grounds division program. The university eliminated the sports turf team, and a generic crew handled field care.

During this period, the sports fields received little maintenance other than mowing and irrigation. The softball field's common bermudagrass turf was invaded by weeds. Minimal maintenance on the skinned areas was handled by Athletics.

Genito came on board 3-1/2 years ago. He explains, "In the fall of 1996, the Grounds Division began a comprehensive turf program on the softball field which included aerification, fertilization, weed control, and overseeding. The field has a native sandy-loam soil in the turf areas and underlying the skinned areas. Our water source has a

high pH level. Regular soil tests were taken, and the pH of the soil was changed from 8.1 in July of 1996 to 7.1 in July of 1997.

"A little over a year ago, I asked George Ortiz to take the helm," continues Genito. "Through sheer determination and initiative, he got educated in sports turf, took the challenge to heart, and built the management program."

Genito offered Ortiz support from the grounds division and the resources to implement a solid, well-developed plan of action within budgetary restraints. Ortiz explains, "When Sal asked me to step in, I first assessed existing conditions, then chose to start upgrading the softball field because it presented the biggest challenge."

Budgeting the project

In planning the upgrade, Ortiz always looked at how much each step was going to cost Athletics and how much it would cost Grounds. This added incentive to consider all the options and be more creative.

The crew did much of the work as volunteers. Members worked around their families' weekend schedules, basically saying, "I can put in a few hours to finish this," or "I'll help you with that."

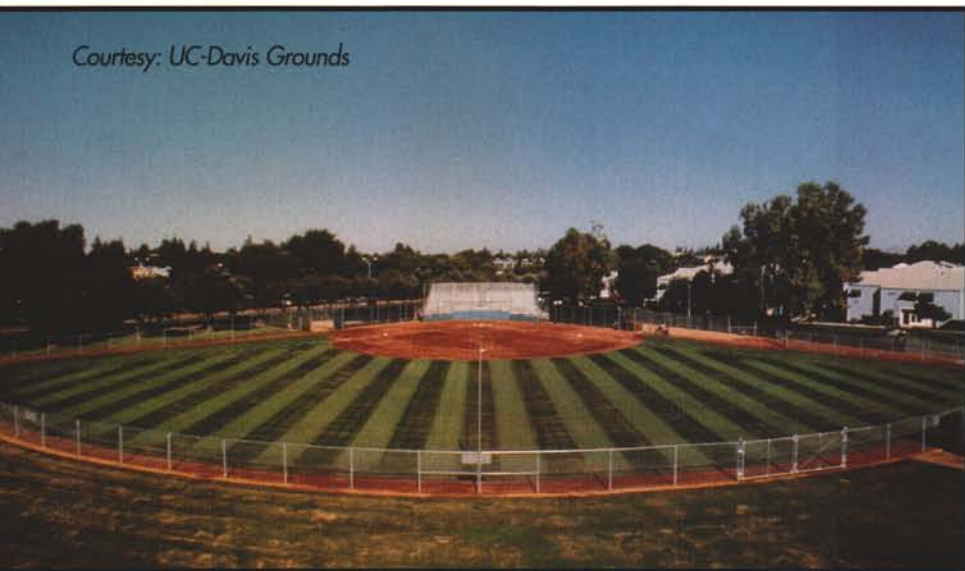
Genito explains, "We looked at it as: 'What are the results of having a higher standard, and what are the benefits?' Once you can demonstrate field quality, the facility wants to keep it.

"Then the job is helping them understand why funding is needed. The field is important to UC-Davis not only from the public relations aspect, but also from the playability and recruiting aspects. This field and winning this award have helped us achieve a greater level of support and funding."

Field upgrade

The field upgrade began in earnest in February 1998. The dugouts were rebuilt, leveled, and clay was added. The area around the scoreboard was cleared and topped with decomposed

Courtesy: UC-Davis Grounds





Courtesy: UC-Davis Grounds

granite to reduce maintenance and make a cleaner look.

To combat continuing lip issues, a row of turf surrounding the infield skinned area had been cut away. However, because of time and budget constraints, it wasn't replaced. With wear, a lip had developed again.

The crew cut and removed two rows of sod circling the infield, leveled the area, and re-laid the sod. To bring the infield back to its proper dimensions, they brought in a row of sod from along the outfield fence. Ortiz wanted to create a warning track, and this was a perfect opportunity to recycle the sod.

The crew sprayed to eliminate weeds and any lingering bermudagrass in the area where the sod had been removed. They raised the outfield fence line surface to prevent ball roll-outs, which had previously caused problems during play.

Next, the crew spread a mix of 80-percent red cinder and 20-percent clay in that area. They rolled it, hard packed it, and watered it in to create a narrow warning track.

Two weeks later, they applied glyphosate and a pre-emergent to ward off any weeds. They also placed some of the cinder-clay mix in the area where the outfield turf meets the infield. Since this meant disrupting part of the field surface, they opted to rework the irrigation system at the same time. In the existing system, a single zone delivered water both inside and outside the outfield fence, reached onto the infield area and bullpens, and even watered the dugouts.

Irrigation reconstruction

"All of our sports turf crew members have had some irrigation experience," explains Ortiz. "In our initial crew meeting on the field, Matt Forrest, our irrigation specialist, had

volunteered to come up with a plan. Once he had that developed, we all got together again, provided input on things we'd seen on other systems and field problems we wanted to eliminate, tweaking it all together in the final plan that gave the flexibility we wanted."

The crew trenched all along the back warning track and down the center of right field where the main connection was located. They moved existing pipe to establish irrigation lines all the way around the warning track and to move the heads in from the fence.

They installed new Hunter I-40 and I-80 heads on swing joints for safety and uniformity. Two new irrigation valves split the outfield turf and areas outside the fence into separate zones.

The crew trenched to a main valve on the outskirts of the facility to set up a separate manual irrigation system with a series of portable sprinklers for the clay areas. They installed new quick couplers on the foul area edges and hose bibs on the outfield edges to allow hand watering.

Re-leveling the skinned area alleviated puddling problems. Added clay helped sheet off water, and a calcined clay application improved the play area.



Left to right: Grounds Division Manager Sal M. Genito III; STMA President Steve Guise; and Supervisor George Ortiz. Courtesy: STMA

Maintenance schedule

"Field use starts in mid-September with our Aggies team softball practice, which lasts into the early part of November," says Ortiz. "This gives us a maintenance window until the early January practices begin. These last up to the start of the game schedule in February. Play ends with the mid-May playoffs.


"There's another window for maintenance until June, when all our other field users become active. They contin-

success from the ground up.

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Courtesy: UC-Davis Grounds

ue play and practice through August. In July, we have some of the Northern California Softball League tournament games, and their finals are held here. We have a third short window for maintenance at the start of September.”

The crew overseeds the common bermudagrass with a perennial ryegrass blend at 10 pounds per 1000 square feet in October, as weather conditions dictate. Team play continues, and players help work in the seed.

If temperatures haven't dropped sufficiently, the crew applies Primo to

slow down the bermudagrass and give the ryegrass a chance to outgrow the competition. If there's time, they core aerate before overseeding, and top-dress with a 50-percent peat moss / 50-percent native-soil mixture following seed application. They fertilize in fall with 21-0-0 Sulfate of Ammonia.

Ortiz says, “We aerify with the slicer during the season, usually in late February or early March, and then again in late August or early September. The spring aerification is followed by an application of 6-20-20 fertilizer and an application of Dimension as a pre-emergent to control annual grasses and the listed broadleaf annual weeds.

“The heat usually makes the summer transition back to bermudagrass fairly easy. If necessary, we'll go in with a flail to cut down the perennial ryegrass to lessen the competition for the bermudagrass.

“We also make an application of 15-15-15 fertilizer (Endure Polycoat and Sulfur coated). Because of our high-pH water source, we do monitor the soil pH. We use glyphosate to control weeds in the warning track and to spot treat in any other areas.

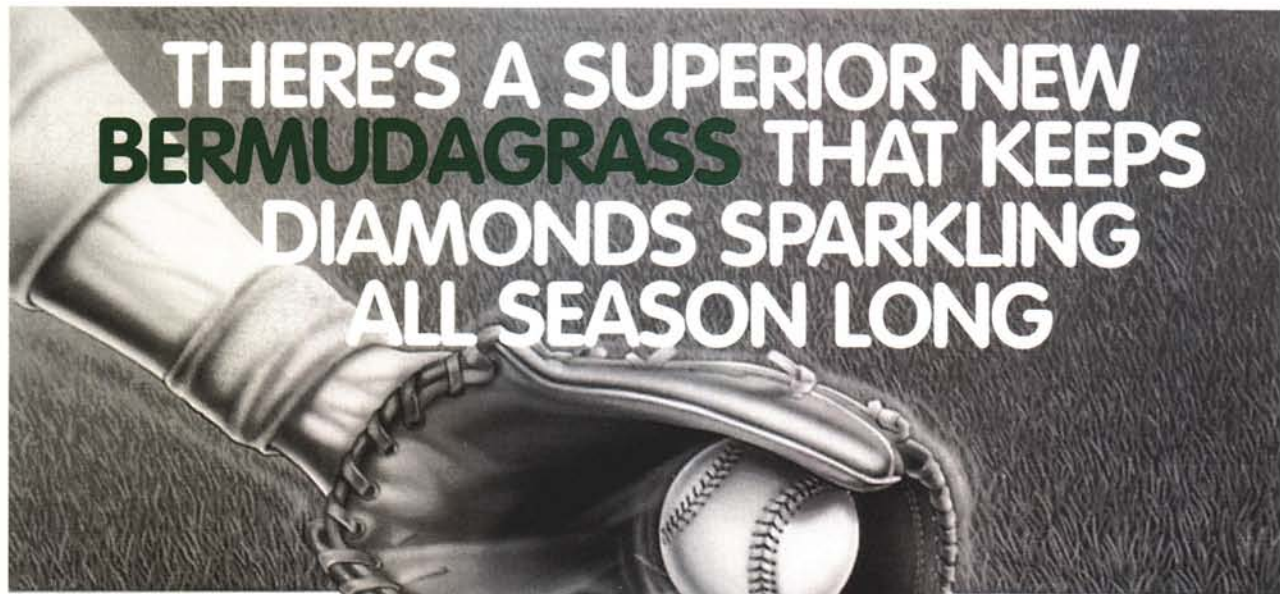
“We keep the turf mowed at 1-1/2 inches during the playing season because the team likes a faster field. During the summer, we raise the height of cut to 2 inches to produce a better canopy to keep the soil cool and reduce water needs.”

The skinned area surface of red cinder and clay and the underlying sandy-loam provide good drainage. Surface water infiltrates quickly. The crew has never had to cover the infield or cancel a game because of rain.

Ortiz explains, “With athletic field maintenance, you're more likely to be recognized for what you didn't do, than for what you did. Our motivation is meeting the high standards we've set: giving our players a safe, great-looking field so they can concentrate on their game.”



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