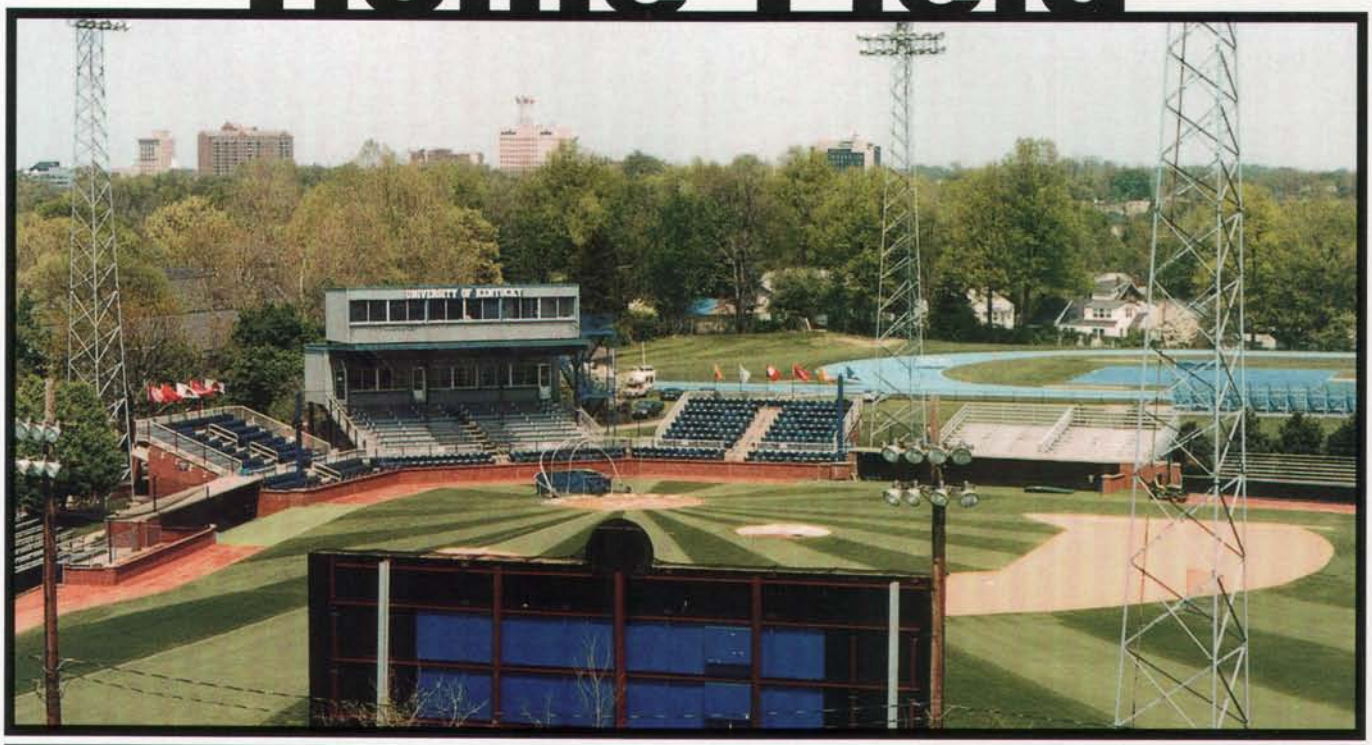
Wildcats *Wild* About Home Field



Beginning with spring practices as early as January, Cliff Hagan Stadium is in use 235 days each year for baseball events only.

by Bob Tracinski

The Wildcats are wild about Shively Field at Cliff Hagan Stadium, the 1999 STMA/Beam Clay/sportsTURF Diamond of the Year in the College Division. Located on the University of Kentucky's campus in Lexington, Ky., it's a source of pride for the school, athletic department and the UK Wildcats baseball team.

The native soil field profile is maury silt loam. Shively Field was opened in 1969 and, other than some minor grade work over the years and sand topdressing of the infield, remains in its original state. Several facility renovations and upgrades have brought the stadium to its present seating capacity of 2,500. Lights were added to the complex in 1983 to allow night games and a 33-foot tall scoreboard was installed in 1997 above the right-center field wall.

Dan Bergstrom, head groundskeeper for the University of Kentucky Athletics Association, says, "Cliff Hagan Stadium is in use 235 days each year for baseball events only. It's the Wildcat's home field. The team's spring practice begins in January with sessions on the field whenever weather conditions allow it. The spring season begins in February and we hope it runs through the College World Series in June. Several high school games are played each spring and the state high school championships are held here each June. Baseball camps move in for about six weeks in June and July. August often brings several touring AAU and other youth leagues to the field. The UK baseball team fall practice season runs from mid-September through October.

"The University of Kentucky is the northern-most school in the Southeastern Conference (SEC). With Lexington at the northern edge of the transition zone, bermudagrass struggles at times to make it through our winters. We opened the '97, '98 and '99 seasons in the snow and usually have to cancel at least one spring game due to low wind chill factors."

Bucky Trotter became the university's first turf manager in 1991. Bergstrom joined the staff in 1996, after earning his BS degree in Horticulture with a major in turfgrass management from Iowa State University in 1995 and serving as assistant groundskeeper with the Cleveland Browns from 1995 to 1996. Bergstrom moved up to his present position eight months later, when Trotter accepted the position of director of sports fields and facilities maintenance at the University of South Carolina.

Full-time crew members are: Assistant Superintendent Tommy Davis, with 21 years of service; Mechanic Dave Thomas, with 17 years of service; Chuck Stivers and

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Matt Divine, both with four years of service; and Ryan Hix with two years. This staff, along with seven part-time employees, is responsible for 53 acres of Athletic Department grounds.

Bergstrom says, "This crew does a tremendous job of keeping up the standards Bucky established and putting in the extra effort for our players and coaches. We rotate our staff members as needed to handle the different fields but, in the early spring, conditioning the baseball field surface for the team takes priority. In-season routine maintenance is scheduled in the mornings so the crew can work elsewhere when practice begins. A five-person crew works the field at game time and performs a quick fifth-inning drag for college games. As much field preparation as possible is accomplished post-game."

Bermudagrass is the base turf for the field, despite the transition zone challenges. Vamont bermudagrass is used on the infield. The outfield was converted from Kentucky bluegrass to Quickstand bermudagrass during the summer of 1996 to better accommodate the heavy field use during the hot summer months.

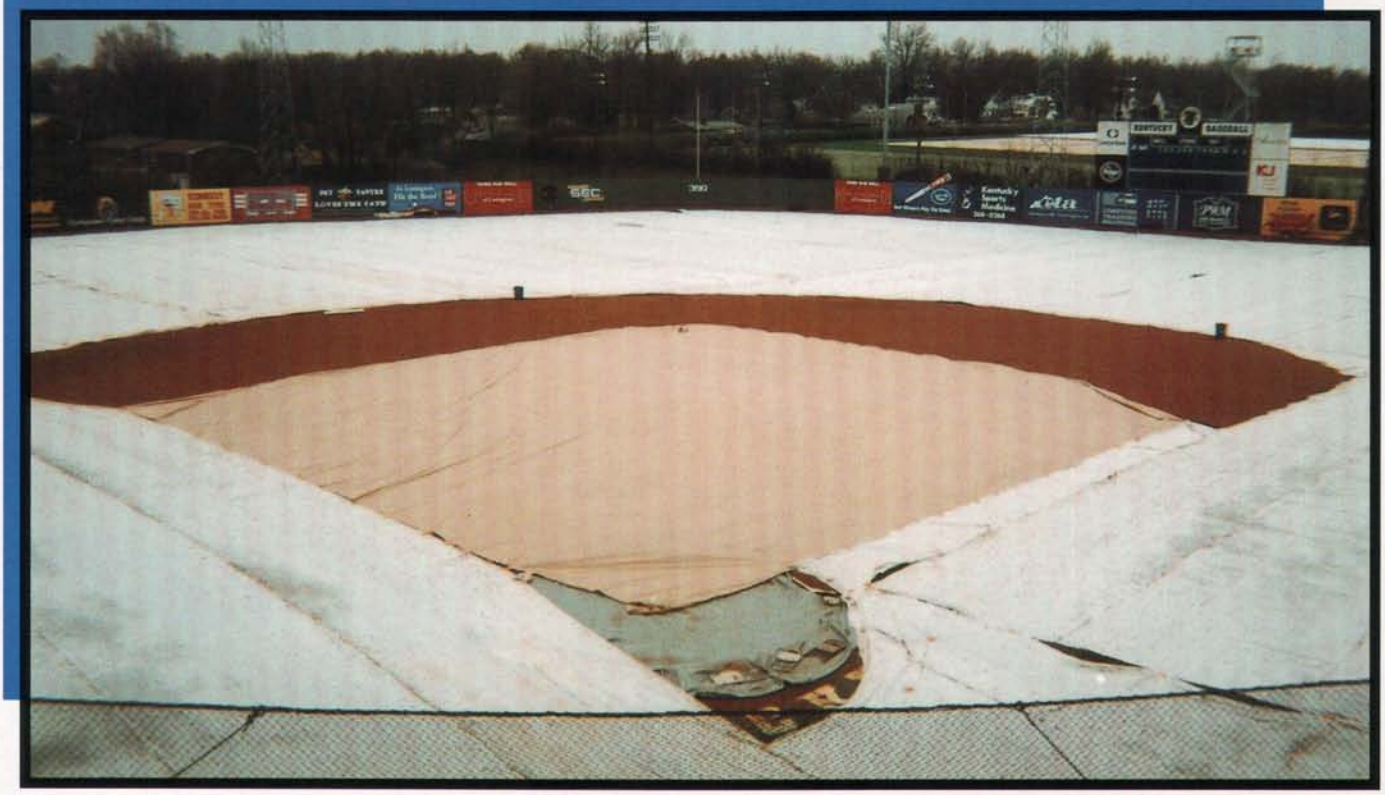
Bergstrom notes, "We selected Quickstand because it grows quickly when conditions are right. If it's sunny and 75 degrees Farenheit, we'll not only get growth, but also lateral development from it. The Vamont needs the full 80 degree temperatures coupled with the sun to grow well. It may be mid- to late June before temperatures are consistently in the 80s here.

"The winter of 1997 was a tough one and we lost 90 percent of the Quickstand. When we transitioned out the perennial ryegrasses that spring, we had little remaining bermudagrass to get us through the camp season. We resprigged the outfield with Quickstand in July. Then we purchased enough geotextile blanket to cover the entire field to protect the bermudagrass from the winter and to keep the overseeded perennial ryegrass actively growing. We choose the white cover to increase the light factor. There are 14 sections of cover, and each is labeled for placement on the field."

The bermudagrasses are overseeded in late October with a three-way blend of perennial ryegrasses: Prism, Brightstar II, and Stallion. The blend was selected for its excellent germination rate, great color, and performance under the geotextile cover. The college baseball season is played on the perennial ryegrass. Summer camps and the Wildcats fall practice season are played on the bermudagrasses.

Managing the transition has been a learning curve for Bergstrom and crew. Initially, they wanted the perennial ryegrasses out by the second week in June for the high school games, but the bermudagrasses weren't active enough at that point. Now the transition back to the bermudagrass starts during June, shortly after the Bermuda has broken dormancy and begins aggressively growing as days near 90 degrees F and the nights hold in the upper 70s. There may be some perennial ryegrass lingering into August.

After the college season, the crew steps up cultural practices to wipe out the ryegrass and encourage the bermudagrass. Fertilization rates increase and infield mowing height drops from 7/8 to 5/8-inch. They may aerify at a rate of 30 holes per square foot on a hot June or July day, then top dress and drag the area with the chain drag. Bergstrom has even



Groundskeepers cover the entire field with geotextile fabrics to get an early jump on the growing season.

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Dan Bergstrom, left, accepts the 1999 STMA/Beam Clay/sportsTURF Baseball Diamond of the Year Award for the College Division from then STMA President Steve Guise.

Shively Field at Cliff Hagan Stadium, home field for the University of Kentucky Wildcats' baseball team: sportsTURF's college field of the year for 1999.

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the summer compensating for that skinned area sand content by putting more water on to keep the desired moisture levels.

Bergstrom says, "The irrigation system was installed in the early 1980s and provides full coverage of all turf and skinned areas. There are 59 Hunter I-40 and I-25 heads in 15 zones controlled from a Rainbird control box. City water pressure of 65 psi is increased to 90 psi by our booster pump. Having irrigation on the infield skin saves many labor hours in the summer. We can get the same results with turning on the zone for a half hour as compared to five crew members hand watering with hoses for two hours."

A natural vein of clay was found when the University built their soccer facility three years ago. For budgetary considerations this is now the source of the mound and home plate clay. Bergstrom notes, "Straight clay requires different management techniques. There's a fine line between wet enough and too wet. If it becomes too wet it can get greasy and slippery."

The infield baselines were converted to grass in the early 1980s to trim maintenance for the coaches who, at the time, were responsible for field maintenance. The grass baselines have since become a tradition. They eliminate four lips and cut down on the chalking. For practices, the crew places heavy grade geotextile around the home plate area to protect the turf and batting practice tarp on the infield to cut down on wear from batted balls. They also place artificial turf mats, 8 feet long by 4 feet wide, on the baseline with one starting at home plate and extending toward first base, and one starting at third base and extending toward home plate. Bergstrom says, "The rest of the first base line holds up well because each runner has a little difference in stride and takes a slightly different line.

"Practices cause more wear than games because of the repetition of drills," Bergstrom says. "The grass lines are painted once a week during the season. We've determined the grass lines save our crew five minutes in pre-game raking and chalking. We do resod the first baseline near home plate after each spring season, but the cutouts near first and third bases keep those areas in good shape."

The field is core aerated with 3/4-inch hollow tines at least twice each summer. All cores are drug back into the field with a mat drag and the infield is topdressed with sand once or twice. During the collegiate season, aeration with 1/4-inch solid tines is used bi-weekly on such traditional wear areas as around the pitcher's mound and home plate and the turf edges around the infield.

The Vamont outfield is maintained at a 3/4-inch height through the summer and fall. The Quickstand infield mowing height drops to 5/8-inch through the summer. The perennial ryegrass is maintained at 7/8-inch through the collegiate baseball season. A walk-behind reel mower is used on the infield, a ride-on triplex reel mower in the outfield. The field is mowed five days a week in the spring and

daily during the summer's prime bermudagrass growing cycle.

Preemergence herbicides are applied for weed control in mid-March as soil temperatures dictate. Post-emergence spot treatment of grassy weeds is needed occasionally. No insecticides have been used for the past four years. Though there is some grub activity, the bermudagrass tolerates it with no noticeable effect.

Balancing nutrition is a perpetual challenge in the transition zone, especially when funds are limited. Bergstrom uses liquid fertilizers to wake up the turf in February and March, and even in January when conditions allow it, dissolving urea to apply 1/10 of a pound of nitrogen (N) per week to stiffen up the leaf blades of the perennial ryegrass. As the first game approaches, he'll add some iron to improve color. By mid-March, as soil temperatures reach the mid-50s and into the 60s, he switches to granular materials. The main fertilization program calls for a balance of nitrogen and potassium (K) at π pound of N and K per week or 1/2 pound every other week as weather allows. Phosphorus triggers poa annua and other weeds, so is used only in the 18-24-12 application made when overseeding with perennial ryegrass. In mid-June he switches to a hotter fertilizer, using either urea or ammonium nitrate at the rate of 1 pound of N per week for three to six weeks to kick off the bermudagrass and stress the perennial ryegrass. He then cuts the rate to 1/2 pound every two weeks through November. An application of slow release N at the rate of 1 pound per thousand square feet is made around Dec. 1 to maintain the turf until that first January or February fertilization.

Mentoring and networking have provided great support for Bergstrom. He's a former STMA undergraduate scholarship recipient and he made connections with Trotter at the STMA Annual Conference in Anaheim. He's keeping up those traditions as well. He's currently serving as President of the Kentucky Turfgrass Council and is an active member of STMA. Bergstrom says, "This industry is a complex mix of science and art. Everything we can share with each other makes our fields that much better for the athletes and that's what it's all about."

Bob Tracinski is the business communications manager for the John Deere Worldwide Commercial & Consumer Equipment Division headquartered in Raleigh, N.C. He serves as public relations co-chair for the STMA.