



GREAT RESULT AT CENTRAL PARK'S GREAT LAWN

BY BOB TRACINSKI

CENTRAL PARK AND ITS GREAT LAWN ARE THE OUTDOORS *for the people* OF NEW YORK CITY. AS A PART OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK PARKS SYSTEM, THEY **BELONG TO THE PEOPLE**. LOCATED IN THE *heart of the city*, THIS GREEN SPACE IS THE **MOST PRISTINE AND BEST MANICURED** THE CITY HAS TO OFFER AND IT ATTRACTS USERS LIKE A **MAGNET**, DRAWING APPROXIMATELY **THREE MILLION** OF THEM EACH YEAR. AS A MUST SEE TOURIST *attraction*, IT RANKS NEAR THE STATUE OF LIBERTY. THE GREAT LAWN RANKS AT THE TOP IN FIELD QUALITY AS WELL, *earning* STMA'S SOFTBALL FIELD OF THE YEAR HONORS IN THE MUNICIPAL/PARKS AND RECREATION CATEGORY.

The Great Lawn was designed in the 1930s by the American Society of Landscape Architects, under the influence of Robert Moses, then the City of New York Parks Commissioner. In 1997, the Great Lawn restoration was completed by the Central Park Conservancy, the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation and various contracted consultants. This \$18.2 million multi-dimensional renovation project focused on the approximately 11 acres within the Great Lawn oval and the additional 2 acres adjacent to it. Included were the six softball fields within the oval and the two softball fields just outside the oval, the pond, pinetum, obelisk, basketball courts and the surrounding landscape and pathways.

Russell Fredericks, turf program manager, says, "The un-permitted activity on the fields and lawn, the annual concerts and other special events and heavy daily use, coupled with the relatively heavy native soil, lack of irrigation and inadequate drainage, had taken their toll. The softball fields that had been installed in the 1950s still had clay infields for play, but no lawn remained on the outfield areas.

"Extreme care was taken by our in-house capital projects division, under the direction of Vice-President Chris Nolan, to preserve the character and atmosphere of the original design and the existing landscape throughout the project. The existing trees were preserved, as was the native soil profile around the trees. The existing grades were preserved throughout the project site. New trees and shrubs were planted. The pond was completely refurbished and new marginal plants were installed."

A sand-based soil profile was installed within the oval and in the turf areas of the field and lawn of the adjacent 2 acres. The material is 90 percent sand with a combination of other inorganic materials and between 3 to 4 percent organic matter. An extensive drainage system was installed throughout the sand-based area. There is no field lighting, and there are no bleachers around the fields.

Fredericks adds, "The Great Lawn's sophisticated irrigation system now consists of a central pump station and an Osmac 5000 Toro irrigation system with 275 athletic pop-up heads. We use the same style adjustable heads for the infield areas with changes in the nozzles and arcs.

"The outfields and other lawn areas are between 80 and 90 percent Kentucky bluegrass, consisting of five different varieties. The remaining percentage of the lawn area turf is a combination of three varieties of perennial ryegrass. We've added turf-type tall fescues, chewings fescue and creeping red fescue beneath the large trees."

Under a contract with the City of New York/Parks and Recreation, the Conservancy, under the direction of the Central Park

Administrator Doug Blonsky, handles day-to-day operations, ongoing maintenance for turf and horticulture and litter pickup and removal.

In his position as turf program manager for the Conservancy, Fredericks is responsible for park-wide turf maintenance, working together with Vice President of Operations Neil Calvanese. From the time he joined the staff in the fall of 1997, the turf program has quadrupled, growing in area, equipment and staff. The newly renovated North Meadow ball fields have just opened, adding seven baseball, five softball, and six soccer fields—an



Photo courtesy of Sara Miller

The Great Lawn serves as an ideal location for New York City's residents and visitors to play and relax.

additional 20 acres of fields and lawn turf. That's a total of 26 ball fields and approximately 70 acres under a high-level, high-visibility turf maintenance program of the approximately 300 acres of turf in the 843-acre park. Along with coordinating the program, Fredericks directly oversees the turf crew of four full-time and four seasonal personnel working the athletic field turf and turf areas, the North Meadow staff of eight and the reservoir crew of three zone gardeners. He coordinates with Great Lawn Supervisor Maria Hernandez, who directly oversees three full-time employees and four seasonal employees working on the daily and weekly tasks in other horticultural areas. This entails maintenance and installation of trees, shrubs, perennials and the marginal plantings around the pond. Hernandez also oversees the volunteers who assist in those tasks.

Fredericks says, "An innovative measure, used park-wide in the horticultural area, is the zone gardener management program. A section supervisor and several 'zone gardeners' take care of the same areas (zones) every day. They form a common bond with regular park users and help encourage their stewardship and sense of ownership over their park."

To keep the Great Lawn in top condition, field use is on a permit-only basis and only passive recreation and low-impact sports are allowed on the Lawn. The Lawn also is closed to activity during inclement weather. Entrance sites are changed frequently to avoid damage. A black, vinyl-coated range fence surrounds the oval. As turf begins to show stress at any entrance site, that section is closed and another section opened. The previous area is then aerated and overseeded.



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Fredericks notes, "There are some who don't use the Lawn gently. People do walk across it in their in-line skates, roll their bicycles over it, or participate in a pick-up soccer game—cleats and all."

Orchestrating Concert Survival

Even passive activity makes its mark. Consider the concerts, at least four each summer. The two Metropolitan Opera concerts each draw over 25,000 attendees; the two Philharmonic Orchestra concerts each draw approximately 50,000. Two of these concerts are held in June and two in July, when the turf generally is the most stressed due to heat, humidity and limited natural precipitation.

Fredericks says, "With set-up and teardown, concerts are three-day sessions. We've developed systems to minimize damage. The stage is set on the north end of the Lawn, in the two adjacent ball fields. We use plywood pathways for the trucks and other heavy equipment, picking up each section of plywood once they get into place. We don't place plywood under the tractor-trailers, the sound booths and speakers, or any chairs we place on the Lawn. We use a turf tractor with a forklift to move speakers

and sound booths to the Lawn. For those three days, the crews also must work necessary maintenance around the concert equipment. This often entails hand watering of the turf to ease it through the stress.

"The crowds are great, generally very well-behaved. They bring blankets or folding chairs, or both, and picnic along with the concert. We channel them into the Lawn area through barricades and, as individual's stake out their places, natural walkways develop

within the oval. With 25,000 or more people moving back and forth along the same paths, wear lines form.

"Once teardown is completed, the entire turf area is raked, aerated and overseeded, with intensive overseeding concentrated in the wear lines, stage

area and everywhere trucks and equipment were placed. These spots do stick with us and require extra attention for an extended period."

Fertilization Factors

Fredericks has developed a comprehensive fertilization program to manage the sand-based turf areas through the wide-ranging climatic conditions of New York

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"THE PASSION, ENTHUSIASM AND ENERGY FOR WHAT WE DO SHARED BY ALL THOSE WITHIN CENTRAL PARK CONSERVANCY, IS THE MAIN REASON THIS IS A SUCCESS."
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


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The Great Lawn in Central Park, New York City

Additional Maintenance Details

Aeration:

Core aerate twice in spring, twice in fall.

Overseeding:

- All turf areas are overseeded following fall aeration.
- Entrances to Great Lawn and Ball field backstop area are overseeded every 10 to 14 days.
- Other high traffic areas are overseeded as needed throughout growing season.

Irrigation:

- The Great Lawn is irrigated every other day from July through September, with adjustments for natural precipitation.
- Irrigate as needed for the remainder of the year.

Pest Control:

- Apply Pre-emergent in mid-March for annual grassy weed control.

Monitor conditions daily:

- Hand pull any broadleaf weeds as they appear; spot treat if necessary.
- If signs of disease activity occur, pull samples for analysis.
- Monitor grub activity.
- Identify any other destructive insects.
- For all pests: use chemical controls only if all other methods fail to achieve acceptable results.

Infield:

- In February or March, before spring season begins and in October or November, when fall season ends:
- Re-edge ballfields.
- Bring in additional clay and repair batting and pitching areas and any other damaged areas.

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- RUSSELL FREDERICKS

and the nearly constant heavy use. Fertilization is based on the results of monthly soil tests and biweekly tissue tests from late March into November.

A granular combination of preemergent and fertilizer is applied in mid-March. A granular organic fertilizer is the base of the program to build up microbial activity in the soil profile, to eliminate burn potential in the summer months and to provide a gradual release of nutrients for consistent growth and color. The first application of the 8-3-5 organic fertilizer is made in mid-April at a rate of one-half pound of nitrogen (N) per 1,000 square feet. Applications continue at this rate every four weeks into November. The

last application of the season is at the full pound rate. This is augmented by a continually fine-tuned fertigation program. Iron, a micronutrient "package" and a 20-3-3 fertilizer are the basic components and are used at minimal rates.

Separate granular applications of magnesium and calcium are made as needed. In 1999, one application of magnesium was made in the spring and another in the fall. Lime or a high calcium-based product will be applied depending on nutrient level fluctuations and pH levels.

While potassium levels often are monitored closely as a key factor

affecting wear, stress and heat tolerance, Fredericks has focused more closely on the calcium and magnesium levels. He has found that the calcium level especially is as important, or even more important, in the turf's ability to take the wear on a sand-based field.

Mowing and Grooming

The turf crew mows the majority of open turf, for the fields and lawn area, twice a week with a 16-foot rotary mower to maintain a height of 2-1/2 inches. Zone gardeners mow the hard to reach sections along fence lines and around shrubs and trees with 21-inch or 48-inch walk-behind mowers. They follow up with string trimmers as needed. Clippings remain on the turf.

Infield grooming varies per field based on condition and use schedules.

Zone gardener Joaquim Pereira handles the majority of the field grooming, including general grooming using the multiple attachments of a ride-on field rake and the repair of depressions or wet spots.

Zone gardeners also wet down



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To keep fields in top condition, only passive recreation and low-impact sports are allowed.



Russell Fredericks (left), turf program manager of Central Park's Great lawn, accepts the Field of the Year award from past STMA President Steve Guise.

the infields, set the pitching rubber, repair the home-plate area and stripe the foul lines.

Coordinating all this—takes all the wide-ranging experience Fredericks has accumulated. He earned his BS degree from Rutgers Cook College in 1991 with a major in environmental planning and a minor in plant science. He has managed his own lawn/landscape maintenance company and worked for a corporate maintenance company; a design/build company with a corporate and estate lawn/landscape maintenance division; and as an assistant golf course superintendent for American Golf in their contractual maintenance agreement with the City of New York. This background has equipped him for his position with the Conservancy.

Fredericks says, "The passion, enthusiasm and energy for what we do, shared by all those within the Central Park Conservancy, is the main reason this is a success. Everyone I work with takes great pride in the park and in their role in making and keeping it a beautiful, user-friendly place for the people of New York and for visitors from all over the world. No aspect of the maintenance program is equal to the dedication and enthusiasm of the organization that makes this sort of commitment to excellence." ■

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 national Sports Turf Managers Association.

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