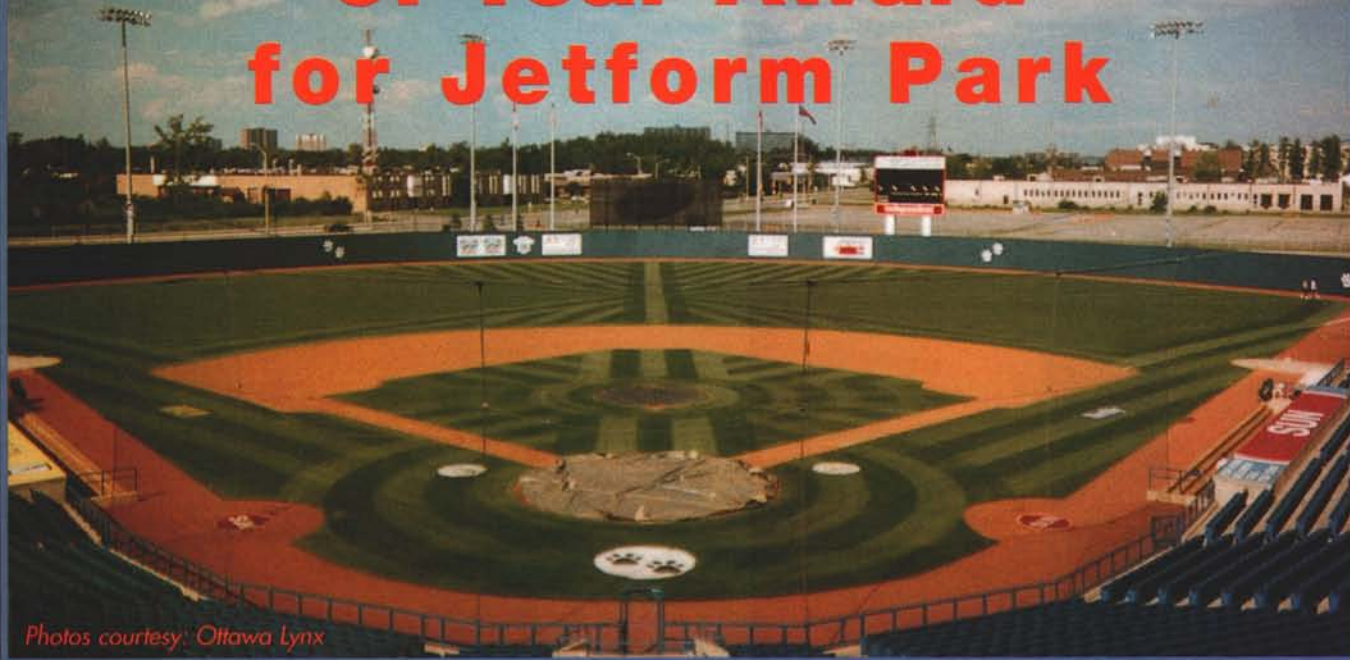


Groundskeepers of Ottawa Lynx Capture 1999 Diamond of Year Award for Jetform Park



Photos courtesy: Ottawa Lynx

Jetform Park's grounds crew changes field patterns at the beginning of each home stand. While recognizing the importance of field aesthetics, the crew knows that a safe field is more important than an attractive field.

by Bob Tracinski

The 1999 STMA/Beam Clay/sportsTURF Diamond of the Year in the Professional Category is Jetform Park, home of the Ottawa Lynx, Triple A affiliate of the Montreal Expos. The stadium is located in Ottawa, 240 miles northeast of Toronto and 120 miles northwest of Montreal. The field is used six months of the year, from early April until late September.

The playing surface was installed at Jetform Park in September of 1992. Play began in 1993. A weeping tile, gravity-based system, embedded in gravel, provides subsurface drainage. The infield and outfield soil and the skinned area mix are only three- to four-inches deep. The soil profile is 60 percent soil and 40 percent washed sand, yet the infield turf drains at a rate of 7-inches per hour. The skinned area contains about 80 percent Beam Clay

infield mix with sand and calcined clay added at approximately 10 percent each. The turf is composed primarily of Kentucky Bluegrass varieties with some perennial ryegrass and turf-type tall fescue mixed in.

Peter Webb and Brad Keith are head groundskeepers for the Lynx. Webb started working on the crew in the summers while he was still in high school. He's worked on the field through its seven full seasons. Keith has been with the team for five full seasons. Initially the two worked under Al Dungey, now facility manager for Frontier Field, Rochester, N.Y., who was with the team until June of 1996, and with Jamie Whalen, now with the Carleton Golf & Yacht Club, who also was with the team until 1996. They took over as head groundskeepers four years ago.

Webb has a degree in kinesiology from the University of Western Ontario. Keith started out in political science at Carleton University and is now in his second year of law. Both are taking cor-

respondence courses offered through the Horticulture program of the University of Guelph and are currently working on the turf management course.

Webb says, "When I first started, we had a 14 person crew. But there have been tight times. The Lynx have been last in the League the past four years and the harsh spring weather makes it hard to draw great early-season crowds. We now have a grounds staff of four. Brad and I are full-time; Matt Horan and Steve Bennett are part-time. So our maintenance program has to be well planned and executed. Matt and Steve do a great job and are dedicated to achieving field quality. Everyone knows what needs to be done and who will handle each assignment. We have just 4-1/2 minutes after batting practice to get the field ready for play and we have the drill synchronized to the second."

With tight budgets, those part-time hours must be allocated carefully. For a night game, Horan generally comes in

during the afternoon to help set up for batting practice. Bennett comes in around 5:30 p.m. One of them will leave after the fifth inning drag, keeping the hours in balance.

The field's in-ground automatic irrigation system has 11 different zones and a total of 44 sprinkler heads. They're set to miss the skinned area as much as possible. Quick coupler connections are located behind second base, about a foot into the grass, and in front of each of the dugouts.

Webb says, "We have our sprinkler heads perfectly level and so well hidden the coaches and players don't even know where they are. We have to mark the heads with straws when we aerate to keep from hitting them."

Coaxing Spring

The cold climate creates challenges. Winter moves in fast in the fall with snows usually continuing to be frequent and plentiful. Field snow removal begins in mid-March, and starts the process of coaxing spring's arrival. Webb says, "Our season opens anywhere from April 6 to 11. All early season games are in the afternoon; it's too cold to play or for anyone to watch us at night. It can snow into April and we have been snowed out on opening day."

Except for the bullpen mound covers, tarps are kept off the field all winter. They're moved from the parking lot storage area into a covered bay for winter storage so the crew won't need to dig and chop them out for spring use.

Microclimates within the stadium may produce a snow-free right field with 1-1/2-feet of snow standing in left field and a drift of snow along the screens by the bullpen mounds. The warning track is crushed brick topping gravel and snow lingers there as well.

Even with the snow removed, left alone, the turf wouldn't show much green until the end of April. Webb says, "As soon as grass starts showing in April and it's dry enough to step on the field, we hand rake the turf in two directions with a fan rake to get some air on it and get any mold out of there. We use our old black and white infield tarp, black side up, to keep a bit of heat in the turf and we hope for sun. By manipulating the tarps and turf we can get green-up about two weeks earlier. We leave turf height at one and three quarter-inches over the winter and obviously there's no growth to mow at this point. If conditions are dry enough, we roll in a pattern, covering the field with the reel mower, with

the reels disengaged to improve the aesthetics.

"After the first home stand, we'll apply an iron treatment to boost the green. The second week after the home stand, we dethatch, vacuum the debris and hand rake with fan rakes again to tease the turf into faster growth. We have turf to mow by the end of April and by mid-May we're usually mowing three to four times a week."

Manipulating the infield dirt can

be even more delicate. Frost remains deep in the ground at the start of the season and may not have disappeared at the end of April. Keith says, "As the sun warms the surface, moisture rises from the frost layer below. The bullpens and any spots that get spring shade retain the frost longer. You can't put a tarp under the skin, so we have to monitor all the skinned areas very closely and play with it a bit to hit the right moisture



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content. We'll be working some areas heavily to speed drying at the same time we're irrigating other spots."

Coping With Heavy Scheduling

The 1999 season included 72 Ottawa Lynx games; 51 Little League, Junior League or high school games; a charity game; a Junior Lynx Clinic for 200 youth; a Little League Clinic for 500; a Girl's Clinic; and several Major League tryout camps. Then there was the Stardust Picnic, a multiple-band concert, which drew 10,000 people. Besides the stage extending over second base and the edge of the grass and the sound stage set up over home plate, there were vending stands along the edge of the stadium wall. Webb and Keith put in almost 76 hours straight covering that event.

In addition, the City of Ottawa, owner of the Stadium, can book an event with only 24 hours notice as long as the event doesn't occur on previously



From left to right: Jamie LaFramboise, stadium staff; Matt Horan, part time crew member; Pete Webb, head groundskeeper; Lloyd Moseby, Syracuse coach; Steve Bennett, part time crew member; Brad Keith, head groundskeeper.

scheduled game days. And there's the annual "Diamond Dig" team promotion that not only brings fans onto the field, but also has them digging into it. While all this creates additional challenges for

the maintenance schedule, Keith and Webb understand the importance of such money-making ventures and the positive impact they have on the public's image of the Lynx.

Field Maintenance Schedule:

General:

- Snow removal as needed in March and April
- Spring turf and infield preparation in early to mid-April

Mowing:

- Begins in April at 1-3/4 inch. Drop mowing height to 1-1/2 inches in late April or early May as warranted. Keep foul territory mowing height at 1-1/2 inches throughout the remainder of the season.
- In June, drop outfield mowing height to 1 inch; infield mowing height to 3/4 inch if moisture conditions allow it. Always vary mowing directions. Change field patterns for each home stand.

Fertilization:

- Iron application immediately following first home stand.
- Take soil samples in late April; get separate results for the infield and outfield. Base fertilization program on soil test results. General application of 3/4-pound N, 1/4-pound P and 1/10-pound K per thousand square feet at six-week intervals.

Aeration:

- Monthly, alternating coring and spiking, both always in at least two directions. If coring, schedule at end of home stand. If spiking, schedule at beginning of home stand. Collect cores.

Irrigation:

- Adjust irrigation levels gradually to prepare turf for dry to drought summer conditions, using water sparingly

and irrigating infrequently, but deeply.

Pest Control:

- No insect or weed problems
- Disease problems infrequent and generally controlled through cultural practices.

Painting and Lining:

- Advertising painted on artificial turf used in coaches boxes, behind home plate and for fungo circles at start of every, or every other, home stand and when advertisers change. Maintained daily.
- Canadian flag painted in center field for July 1 and maintained throughout home stand.
- Turf lines painted; skinned area lines chalked for each game.

Skinned Area Maintenance:

- Daily mound and home plate maintenance is performed immediately after games and these areas tarped.
- Brooming and leveling of skinned area edges, picking up of foul lines and nail dragging of the skinned area performed immediately after games.
- Bullpen mounds and plates are prepared on game day mornings.
- Finishing touches are made to the field mound and home plate.
- Skinned area generally nail dragged three times a day and watered five times a day, matching amount of water applied to moisture level of material and current and anticipated weather conditions. Keep subsurface firm, top 1/4 inch soft.

Keith says, "Spring is the hardest season for maintenance; fall is the easiest. Our clay in the boxes and mound is just 4-inches deep. When it dries out and the boxes dry out, the players keep digging deeper. In the fall, the stadium blocks the sun so the late afternoon shadows cover both the mound and plate. All the skinned surfaces, mound and home plate area retain the pre-game moisture levels throughout night game play."

Webb and Keith have an excellent relationship with the players. They both love baseball and may even go out and take a few ground balls. It makes communication flow more easily.

Webb says, "We're working with players who are making, or will soon be making, enormous sums of money. It's extremely important that we do everything possible to keep them off the disabled list. Safety always is our first priority. The infield dirt must be firm enough to allow a hard plant of a foot when a quick change of direction is needed, yet have enough give in it to prevent sprained ankles, twisted knees or broken legs. The edges of the field must be perfect to prevent bad hops and the bases must be at the right height to prevent caught fingers during slides."

Keith says, "We trust our coaches and players. We listen to what our players say about field conditions and how the field plays for them. Then it's up to us to use our skills and professionalism to do the things it takes to create and maintain that high level of playability. We understand it's the job of the groundskeeper to hand the two teams a playing surface at game time that will allow the players to decide the winner."

Webb says, "Once we reach our goals of safety and playability, we can work on aesthetics. Having a product that is a joy to look at is usually more important to the fans than the players. In Ottawa, a lot of people come out just to see what the pattern is that week. There's nothing better than going to a beautiful ballpark on a sunny afternoon and catching some rays and maybe even a foul ball." 🧢

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.



Players go through pregame warm-ups at Jetform Park, Ottawa.



Because of the park's cold climate, snow removal is a major part of spring field transportation. April snow storms have caused the cancellation of opening day.



Concerts and other events can create a serious strain on the field and interrupt normal maintenance routines. This concert drew 10,000 people to the stadium, with hundreds of guests standing on the turf and skinned areas.