



# Passion for the Future

Agricultural education, sports turf management, and baseball are intertwined at the City of Peoria Sports Complex.

by Steve and Suz Trusty

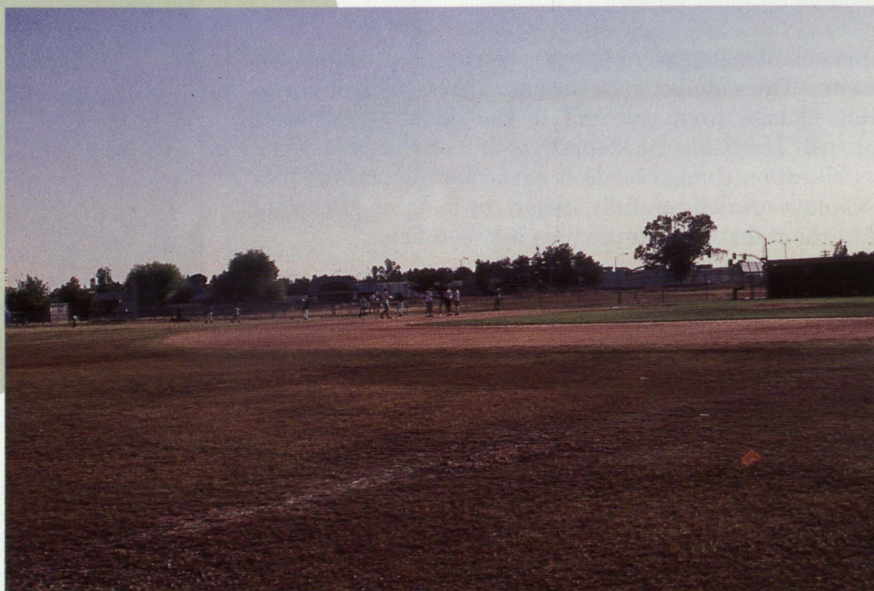
Having a passion for something energizes like nothing else in this world. Imagine teaming up an individual with a passion for the future success of young people in today's agricultural marketplace with an individual with a passion for sports turf management and its future success. The vision here is of fields of thriving green turfgrass and immaculately manicured ball fields under the care of the next generation of competent, well-trained sports turf managers.

You can see that vision up close and personal in Peoria, AZ, thanks to the team of Mike Gillispie, Agriculture Education Instructor for the Peoria Unified High School District, and Chris Calcaterra, Baseball Supervisor for the City of Peoria Sports Complex.

Gillispie says, "Sixteen years ago, our area concentrated on the traditional farm production areas of agriculture. But as the population grew, more than doubling to over 104,000 in the last ten years, we became more urban and suburban, and the job market also changed focus. Our agricultural marketplace now has four major areas of concentration besides farming: turf, primarily sports turf and golf course management; landscape maintenance and installation; nursery management; and biotechnology.

"We've aligned our program's courses to the competencies of the local colleges," Gillispie notes. "Students can earn up to 24 college credit hours at Phoenix College through our program. Arizona State University also accepts these college credits from Phoenix College. Students can do internships, ranging from 50 to 300 hours, in the areas of concentration or in community service.

"Our classes run in 90-minute seg-



The baseball infield at Peoria, AZ, High School is maintained by Mike Gillispie's students.

ments," Gillispie continues. "Each is organized on a crew basis, with crew leaders, and each class has a foreman. This allows us to dig into projects in a work environment. The foreman and crew chief must make sure all repairs are made and all equipment and materials are put away properly by the end of class."

Gillispie teaches the turf courses, horticultural mechanics, and welding. One of the equipment sections of his shop (pictured, top left) is stocked with the same machines used on today's golf courses and sports fields. His students maintain the infield of the school's baseball field, and worked on the laser leveling and renovation of the football field.

A few of the best students move up to the big leagues with internships, and frequently, longer-term, seasonal jobs, at the sports complex of which San Diego Padres outfielder, Tony Gwynn, has said, "Training in

Arizona at the Peoria Sports Complex gives our team an edge and helps to prepare us for the challenges of the upcoming season."

The 145-acre Peoria Sports Complex was the only two-team baseball spring training facility until 1998. Since 1994, it's been the spring training home to the Seattle Mariners and San Diego Padres, both teams having signed a 20-year lease. The \$34 million complex features a stadium that accommodates 11,000 for baseball and up to 20,000 for concerts. Each team has its own executive office, training facility and 40,000-sq-ft clubhouse. There are 13 practice fields on site, 6-1/2 for each team.

Calcaterra says, "Our fields are used over 320 days a year. Once the Padres and Mariners wrap up the Cactus League Spring Training, the other groups move in. For baseball, the complex hosts Extended Spring Training, Summer Rookie League,

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Japanese Major League Baseball, Fall Instructional League, Arizona Fall League, Little League, Babe Ruth, and Fantasy Camps. A wide range of other community events are held here, as are numerous city-sponsored festivals and concerts and the city baseball leagues as scheduled by the recreation department."

Spring training for the Korean and Japanese teams begins in early January. The Padres and Mariners start their spring training in mid-February and it runs through March. Another prime season begins in August, with that stretch running through the season of the Arizona Fall League team, the Peoria Javelinas, who complete play in October or November. The spring/summer gap is filled by all the other activities listed above. There are approximately 45 days of "slow" time between mid-November and early January.

Calcaterra's typical seasonal crew size ranges from 15 to 20. Of that crew, seven or eight are high school students. He says, "Obviously we observe all the OSHA rules, standards and factors, and all other national, state, regional and local regulations as they relate to all employees. There are some functions our high school students are too young to perform. But there are many advantages that make up for that. These students are trained in working within a crew, meeting quality standards, and producing consistent results. They're dependable, punctual, interested in learning the job and enthusiastic about working at our facility.

"Mike does an excellent job of matching the abilities of the intern to the demands of the internship position," Calcaterra notes. "These kids are good. So good, in fact, I've kept several each year in my pool of part-time seasonal and special event employees. They can work after school and on weekends, just not more than three days a week during the school year.

"The cross training Mike's program provides is an additional benefit," Calcaterra continues, "because ours is a multi-use complex and we maintain the entire grounds, not just the sports fields. For example, on Arbor Day, we had three of Mike's students here digging holes and demonstrating proper tree planting procedures as part of a



Mike Gillispie (left), Agriculture Education Instructor for the Peoria Unified High School District, and Chris Calcaterra (right), Baseball Supervisor for the City of Peoria Sports Complex, have developed a win-win student internship program.

community horticultural outreach program."

The benefits are mutual. Gillispie says, "The interns get a taste of the 'real world' work environment. They go through the interview process, and they become part of a crew consisting of long-term employees and other seasonal personnel that are older and more experienced. Chris gives the students an opportunity to perform multiple tasks and see what real sports turf management entails. They're accountable for their job performance to their foreman, to Chris and to me and our program."

And that's just part of the picture.

The agricultural welding classes can build to order on special needs for Calcaterra. They made the hitches to attach hose racks to the Gator utility vehicles. They're currently working on welding sturdy screens for the baseball fields.

The close connection leads to sharing in other areas. Equipment purchases are coordinated with multiple use in mind. The school may own one piece of equipment, the sports complex another and the golf course another, and all share in their use.

Gillispie's students just finished rebuilding the on-site golf facility, with a chipping green, putting green, bunker and surrounding turf, fencing and land-

scaping. This was necessitated by the construction of the Peoria High School Engineering and Biotechnology Facility, providing more and better space for the total agricultural education program.

The Peoria Agricultural Education letterhead shows this tag line, "FFA makes a positive difference in the lives of students by developing their potential for premier leadership, personal growth, and career success through agricultural education." That's certainly reflected in the results of the school's program.

In addition, Gillispie has been one of the FFA leadership instrumental in the development of an 800-page, CD-ROM-based instructional material resource guide for the National FFA Council. Such industry leaders as Scotts, Toro and John Deere have provided input and funding for this project. Gillispie is one of the trainers for the state of Arizona in the golf and turf instructional material.

The Peoria Mike and Chris team's vision is spreading nationwide.

For information on the Peoria Sports Complex contact Chris Calcaterra by phone: 623-412-4226 or email: ChrisC@peoriaaz.com. For information on the agricultural education program and the instruction material resource guide, contact Mike Gillispie by phone: 623-486-6323 or by email: mgillisp@peoriaud.k12.az.us.