

FIELD OF THE YEAR



Apopka High School Softball Earns STMA 2000 Field of the Year Award

Steve and Suz Trusty



The softball complex at Apopka (Florida) High School has been a work in progress since 1998, according to Mike MacWithey, head coach, head groundskeeper, and all around everything else.

After serving as the school's assistant softball coach for 12 years, MacWithey accepted the head coaching position in 1996. He says, "When I took over, we had no girl's softball field. We practiced and played our home games at a

nearby city field. Winning the District Championship that first year brought credibility to our program and helped us focus school and community attention on the lack of facilities. The school's very successful boys baseball program provided an example of what is required to build, maintain and operate a beautiful complex. This served as a motivation and an example for our girl's program.

"A concentrated lobbying effort by all

involved earned a commitment for use of the school property between the existing baseball and football fields. With a rallying slogan of 'The Tradition Begins' we set out to build the finest softball facility in the state."

A parent of one of the players surveyed the parcel. The bases and fence lines were marked. The Orange County School Board supplied the infield material. MacWithey selected

a local source with a small amount of sand in the clay to provide a relatively hard infield surface for his power-hitting team.

Then the outfield area was sprayed with glyphosate and tilled. Players were assigned to remove debris and hand rake the area. The area's native soil is high in "sugar" sand, fine in texture, but angular, so infiltration and percolation rates for the outfield area are good.

County personnel and equipment supplied the laser grading for the field. Once the infield material was put in place, they established a one percent slope toward the foul lines and toward the backstop, rather than toward the outfield. Rectangular drains were installed approximately every 6 feet around the side walls in the concrete behind the backstop. The excess surface water is channeled to the backstop and then on to the drains and, even with a typical Florida hard rain, quickly clears from the field.

MacWithey's brother, manager for Century Rain Aid, a local irrigation supply company, assisted with the design the irrigation system and helped with the initial contact with the local Rain Bird supplier who donated Falcon rotors and the system's controller. A large construction company donated the necessary PVC pipe and supplies.

"Next up was an education lesson for our high school girls which we call 'career path elimination.' It's an incentive to stay in school," says MacWithey. "We scheduled a work day and the girls on the team, along with some much appreciated parental assistance, helped dig the trenches and lay the irrigation pipe."

After another round of debris removal and more raking, the outfield was ready for sod. A local sod company, Duda and Sons, was part of a Lake Apopka area environmentally-related land buyout aimed at reclaiming a section of property and turning it into wetlands. They agreed to supply Tifway 419 bermudagrass sod from that property for the softball field at approximately

one third of the regular cost. MacWithey tapped another donor to provide the use of a semi-truck to deliver the sod.

MacWithey says, "This led to another scheduled work day to eliminate one more career path for our players—sod laying. The sod had been stacked

around the infield. The players, some of their friends, and another group of parent volunteers, placed and fitted the sod. We borrowed a roller to finish the job. Now the field was taking shape and excitement was building. More donations flowed in as the community as a whole joined the bandwagon. This added



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Mike MacWithey (right), head groundskeeper and softball coach at Apopka High School, accepts the Field of the Year Award from STMA President Rich Moffitt.

windscreen for the outfield fence, welders for an old set of bleachers, a PA system, the scoreboard and trees for the landscape.”

Dugouts were next on the project

list. MacWithey developed a design for a 20-foot by 50-foot concrete structure on the home team side that would include that dugout, an area for storage, a locker room, an office

and a concession stand. He says, “This became reality with donated concrete blocks, a volunteer block mason, the supervision of a parent who held a contractors license, and, of course, the help of our players who decided to eliminate the concrete and masonry career path.

“At that point, a local Junior College was eliminating their athletic programs and soliciting bids for their field items and used equipment. We didn’t get the bid on the large aluminum bleachers I had wanted. But, with our \$250 bid for miscellaneous sports equipment the only bid received, we got two more sets of wood/steel bleachers, lockers, electric water coolers for the dugouts, flag-pole and flag, batting cage nets, protective net stands, a picnic table, lighting fixtures, and even a 2-foot by 4-foot granite rock to mark the entrance to our complex.”

Lights were the next step. Because so much of the complex was built without cost to the School System,

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the School Board determined they could install and pay for the Musco lighting system.

MacWithey says, "Our complex now has a seating capacity of 250 with plenty of standing room and chair locations. The facility is fully lighted and includes bullpen areas on both sides of the field and ample warm-up areas away from spectators. We have an additional fence that surrounds the spectator, warm-up, batting cage areas to keep things safe and secure. Our concession stand is fully equipped with an icemaker, refrigerator/freezer, gas grill area, and custom cabinets—all donated, of course. Funds from admission charges and concession stand revenues, approximately \$10,000 annually, are retained for the high school softball program."


Once the facility was completed, the softball field began its marathon of near-constant use. All of the teams practice on the field daily during the



playing season. Slow-pitch softball starts in August and runs into October. In November, the teams begin conditioning drills for the fast-pitch softball season that runs from

January into May.

During the summer, the field hosts summer league games and youth practices and clinics. It also has hosted




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County personnel used laser-grading equipment to establish a one percent slope toward the foul lines and toward the backstop.



The complex has a seating capacity of 250, with plenty of standing room and chair locations.

some college tournaments and a college spring training session that puts 10 games on the field within a week.

The field's only down time is the two-week interval during Christmas break and the month-long break between the October end of slow-pitch ball and the mid-November beginning of the fast-pitch season.

Apopka is one of the 12 high schools within the Orange County Public Schools Metro Conference. Two more high schools will open next year. The Apopka field will host the District Tournament in 2001. This is the third time in five years the field has been awarded this honor. The site is chosen annually by a vote of the local coaches on the best facility.

The growing fast-pitch softball program can draw enough participants to form freshman, junior varsity and varsity teams. In 2000, there were 18 girls on the slow-pitch team, 13 girls on the freshman fast-pitch team, 17 on the Junior Varsity fast-pitch team and 15 on Varsity fast-pitch team. With so much activity, scheduling field time becomes complicated. Practice times for the three teams can overlap, so the hitting stations and tee areas will be used independently of the defensive field practices. To alleviate this situation, plans are underway to construct an additional batting cage and a practice infield by the end of the 2001/2002 school year.

MacWithey says, "The high volume of usage in the spring is the biggest obstacle in maintaining the field in optimum condition. To alleviate the stress on the bermudagrass we rotate practice sites to minimize the traffic. We also have a few foam discs, similar to carpet padding, that can be placed in certain high traffic areas. During tournaments, the section of turf behind first base at the foul line (where the umpire stands) is covered with a patch of green indoor/outdoor carpet. I'll also syringe high traffic areas by hand during the heat of the day to reduce turf stress.

the pitching rubber and in the batters box prior to the start of this season," says MacWithey. "In the past, we'd have pitchers dig a 6- to 8-inch trench during the course of the game that needed post-game repair. You can't just drag the clay over holes like that. Though the bricks took about three hours to

install, they're saving us 15 to 20 minutes per day in post-game maintenance."

The County contracts fertilization and pest control to a grounds service company. Since MacWithey spends at least three hours on field maintenance daily, he works with

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"We installed clay bricks in front of

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Maintenance Practices

GENERAL MAINTENANCE

Mowing: Every other day to 3/4-inch height with triplex reel mower. In-season mowing in circular paths around infield to cut in pattern. Off-season mowing direction changed each time to promote turf growth.

Irrigation: Monitored and adjusted daily.

Aeration: Core aeration in two directions following both spring and fall softball seasons. Spot aeration in high traffic areas if needed during summer playing season.

Topdressing: Field is topdressed with fine builders sand at the beginning of each school year. Sand is

mat dragged into field following application.

Fertilization: Program based on annual soil test results. Applications monthly with nutrient content based on turf needs as reflected in test results, growing conditions and field use.

Pest control: Applications as needed following IPM practices and based on observation and interaction with grounds service company.

GAME DAY MAINTENANCE

Mowing: Field recut prior to game to sharpen mowing pattern.

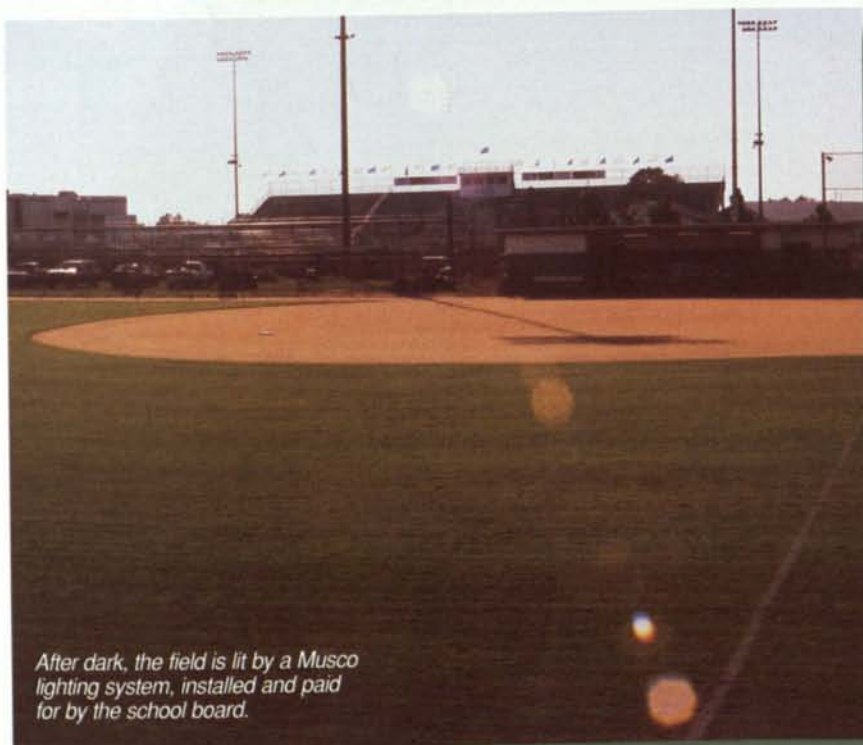
Edging: Lawn edger and loop hoe used wherever grass and clay meet.

Marking: Outfield lines repainted. Bases, home plate and pitching rubber painted. Chalk lines placed following final pre-game drag.

Clay work: All turf edges are broomed and the field dragged, including removal and replacement of bases, and the clay area irrigated lightly at the end of every practice and game so conditions good for following day. The pitching rubber and batting boxes are broomed and the dugouts cleaned with a blower after every practice and game.

The batters box and pitching circle are inspected and repaired if necessary prior to each practice and game. The clay area is dragged and irrigated lightly prior to each game.

maintenance



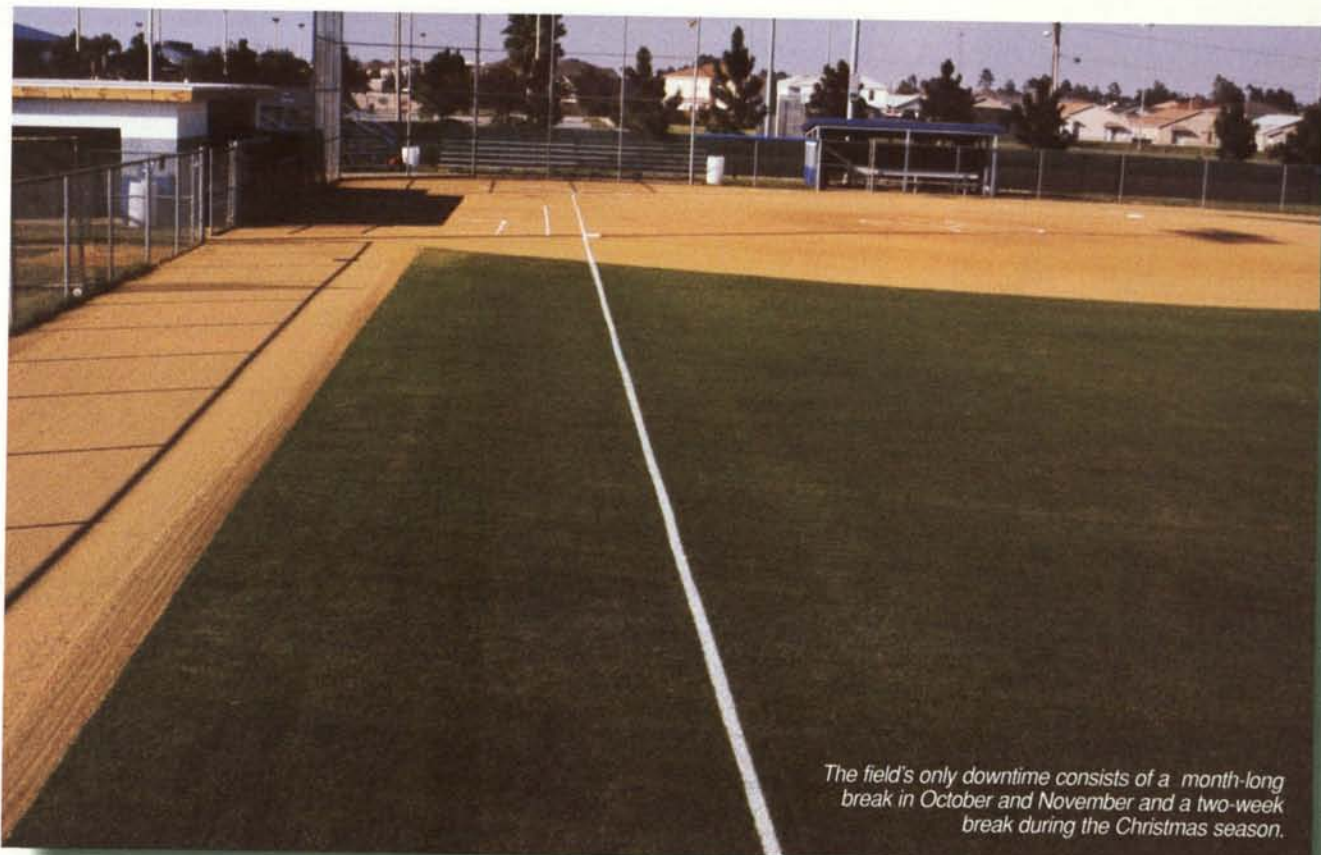
After dark, the field is lit by a Musco lighting system, installed and paid for by the school board.

the company service technicians to identify field problems and develop solutions. Effective control of mole crickets, the areas most nagging pest problem, is just one example of the benefits of this relationship.

Inconsistent Florida rainfall requires constant monitoring and irrigation system adjustment to fit rainfall amounts and evapotranspiration rates. The field's only rainout of a scheduled game in four years occurred last fall due to pouring rain on game day.

Generally, the irrigation system is set for a 30-minute per zone, heavy-watering cycle, before daybreak every other day. A 10-minute per zone, light-watering cycle, is programmed for the end of field use each day.

The infield dirt is watered down before and after each game. Most of the infield area can be covered by the



The field's only downtime consists of a month-long break in October and November and a two-week break during the Christmas season.

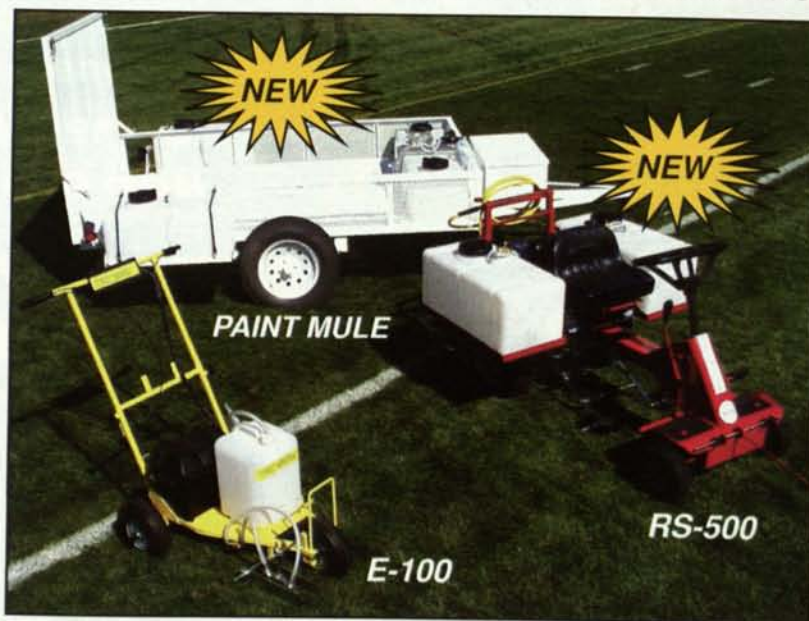
large irrigation nozzle positioned just behind the pitching rubber. A quick coupling outlet at each dugout can be equipped with an impact head or with a hose and nozzle to hand water behind the plate and any areas missed by the center rotor.

All of MacWithey's coaching, field maintenance and donor solicitation are possible because of his decision to devote the time to the game he loves. Rather than pursuing a career using his degree in electrical engineering from the University of Central Florida, he decided to develop his own business as an independent newspaper delivery agent for the flexibility it afforded him. The success of the softball program, along with the support of the players, parents, School System, and community show this was the right choice for him. That 2000 STMA Field of the Year sign posted under the softball field scoreboard is further affirmation.

Steve and Suz Trusty are partners in Trusty & Associates of Council Bluffs, Iowa. Steve is Executive Director of the Sports Turf Managers Association.

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