



Photos by Andy Wilbanks

STMA 2001 Softball Field of the Year Samford Field of Samford University

BY STEVE AND SUZ TRUSTY

fields—the baseball, football, football practice and soccer fields and the band practice/intramural field, as well as the softball field. His employer is TruGreen Land Care, which holds the turf and landscape maintenance contract with Samford.

Collins says, "Samford softball was started as an NCAA Division I sport in 1986. Irrigation was installed that year, in conjunction with the beginning of the softball program. The system was designed for flag football, which was the primary sport played on the field at that time. There are six stations in triangular patterns going across the rectangular field. Consequently, when the softball fence is replaced, the wind screens hamper efficient water coverage."

Samford Field of Samford University, Birmingham, AL, earned the STMA 2001 Softball Field of the Year Award in the College/University Division. This high-use field gains rave reviews from visiting teams and spectators.

The original field area was planned and laid out approximately 20 years ago. It was designed as a recreational field, shaped as a rectangle with one larger end developed for softball with a skinned diamond in the corner. The soil profile was native heavy clay. The softball fence was removed in the fall to allow the outfield to double as the flag football field. The Samford Marching Band also used this field as an alternate practice site in the fall and summer.

Joe Collins has been the sports turf manager, based at Samford University, since 1995. He is responsible for the turf maintenance for all the University's athletic

Samford Field Maintenance Program

October

- Overseed with perennial ryegrass blend at 10 lbs. per 1000 square feet
- Fertilize with high P, K at seed germination

October through December

- Mow weekly or as needed at 1.25 inches
- Work infield skin daily during fall practice
- Blow or otherwise remove leaves and pine straw as needed

January

- Take soil samples

January through March

- Fertilize with 4-1-2 ratio at 1 lb. of Nitrogen per 1000 square feet
- Apply preemergent weed control with fertilizer combination at half-rate
- Mow at 1-1/8 inch weekly until games begin, then twice weekly. Double cut on game days
- Work infield skin daily

April, May

- Mow at 1.25 inch three times per week, double cut on game days
- Gradually lower turf height of cut to 0.5 inches as bermudagrass dominates
- Apply second half of preemergent weed control on 4-1-2 fertilizer carrier
- Mechanically edge grass areas monthly: infield, warning track and bullpens
- Work infield daily: drag, water based on conditions
- Paint fair line weekly, chalk lines on game days
- If needed, apply corrective materials based on soil test results (not needed past 3 years)
- Mid-May: aerify with half-inch hollow tines; topdress with 102 sand; drag cores and sand back into soil profile; use blower to remove turf debris



June through August

- Mow three times per week; raise mower height of cut by one-eighth inch monthly to reach 7/8 inch in August
- Chemically edge grass areas bi-weekly; mechanically edge grass areas monthly
- Spray weeds on warning track and bullpen areas
- Fertilize mid-summer with 34-0-0 at 1 lb. of N per 1000 square feet
- Mid-June and Mid-July: aerify with half-inch hollow tines; topdress with 102 sand; drag cores and sand back into soil profile; use blower to remove turf debris
- Control weeds if necessary with postemergent herbicide application following standard IPM procedures (primarily yellow and purple nutsedge)
- Apply fire ant bait; both mound treatments and broadcast
- Work infield as needed for summer camps and summer league practices; usually two to three times per week
- Maintain small ornamental plantings around field

September

- Mow weekly; height of cut 1 to 1-1/8 inch
- Chemically edge and spot treat any weeds on skin surfaces
- Work infield as needed; daily when fall practice begins



With the field still extensively used for intramurals, especially flag football, the sand was laser-graded to be most beneficial for that rather than the softball configuration.

Improvements

"In 1997, the field was regraded and a 3-5 inch sand cap added in an attempt to relieve a substantial drainage problem. With the field still under extensive use by the intramural groups, especially for flag football, the sand was laser graded in a manner most beneficial to the football, rather than the softball, configuration. The field is oddly contoured in the outfield and water must drain all the way across the infield skin to exit the field."

In June, following the regrading, the field was sprigged with Tifway 419 bermudagrass at the rate of between 500-550 bushels per acre. Collins adds, "In conjunction with this, I replaced the older irrigation heads, modifying the system to a mix of full and part circle heads, and installed the new heads on swing joints. The turf area is now fully covered, though manipulation of the timing is necessary to achieve the most efficient coverage. I pushed the grow-in with fertilization and irrigation, so we were ready for use in late August. The sprigging gave us a smoother playing surface, with none of the potential layering problems of sodding."

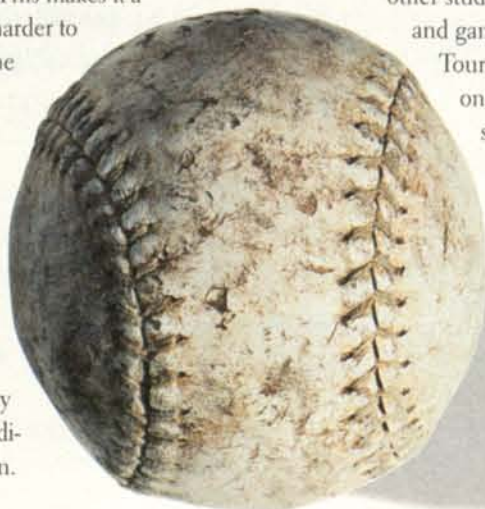
In 1998, the lighting was improved with the addition of two new standards of 10 lights each. Two bleacher sections were added to increase the seating capacity to its current 200. There is standing room viewing around the fence.

Collins says, "In the summer of 1999, new dugouts were constructed, approximately 10-15 feet further down the line from the existing ones. These were designed with bricks and white stone to conform to the campus architecture, Georgian Colonial. The university also added the new soccer field and band field, and decided to move the primary intramural use from the softball field to the band field.

"A 7-ft. wide warning track was extended all around the field. A layer of landscape fabric covers the native soil and is topped with crushed crimson stone. The outfield fence became a permanent fixture. In 2000, the batting cage was enlarged and new bullpens were added. In 2001, the batting cage and the catcher's area of the bullpens were paved and covered with artificial turf. We've added protective tubing at the tops of the fences and upgraded the signage, which has improved the overall aesthetics."

Large pine trees, close to the field, restrict sunlight along the third base line and foul territory in the fall and winter months. Collins says, "This makes it a bit tougher to grow grass in these areas and makes it harder to get the ground to dry out. We also have the issue of the pine straw that falls on field and must be removed."

The skinned area of the field is composed of local native clay, a bit heavier than the standard infield material, closer to mound clay consistency. Little sand or calcined clay is added, so the infield also holds a little more water than is standard. Mark Voisard, head softball coach, and Leigh Ann Ketcham, assistant coach, handle the maintenance on the skinned portion of the field. Though the retained moisture requires extra attention in February and March, it is appreciated during the hot, dry conditions that dominate the majority of the softball season.



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Coach Voisard handles the infield preparation before games and the post-game infield wrap-up. A quick coupler added behind the mound circle can accommodate either a 3/4-in. hose for hand watering or a sprinkler head. A hose spigot also is located at the home team dugout. The team currently uses a retired baseball tarp to cover the field when necessary.

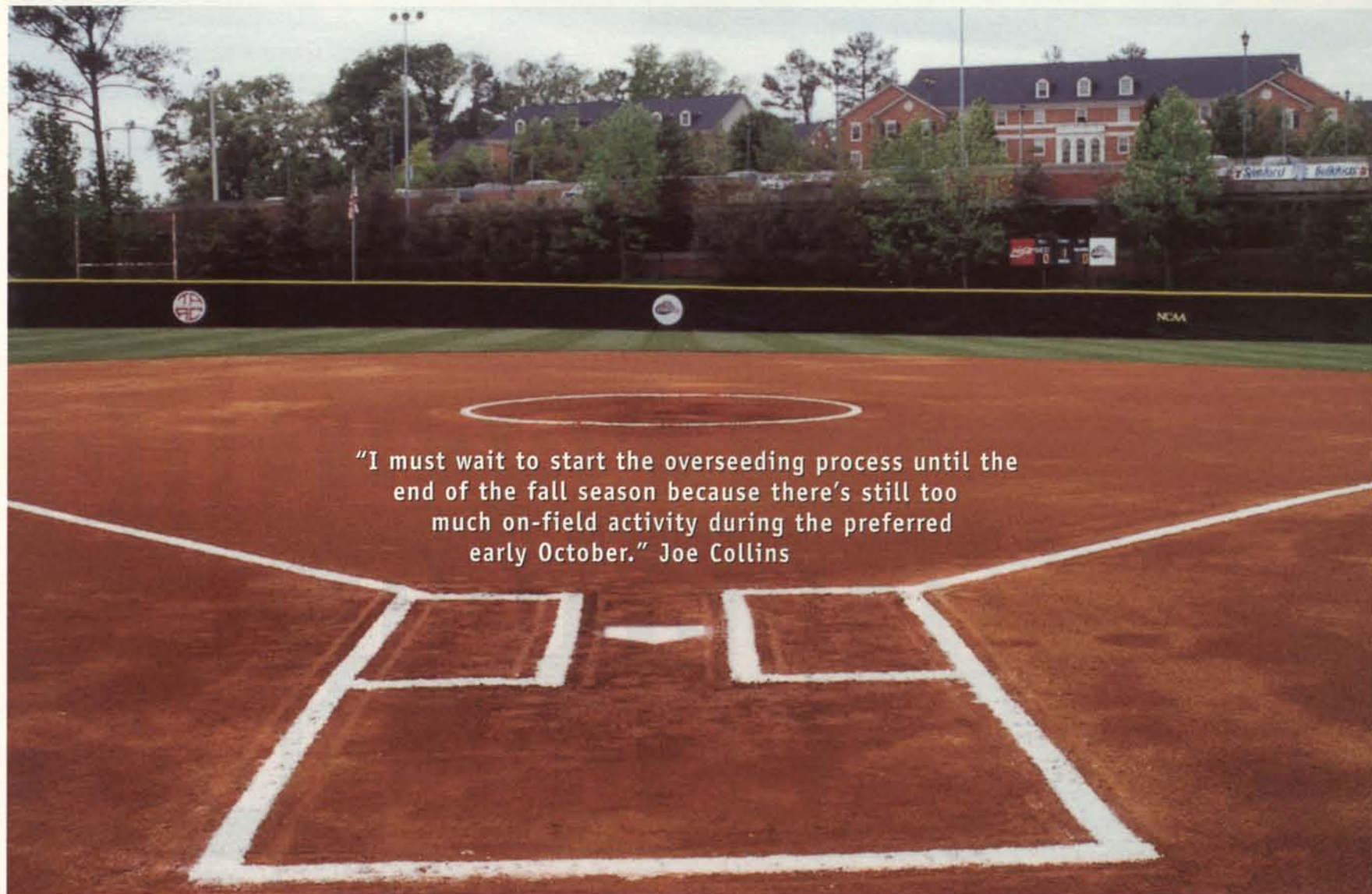
Collins tackles the major lip maintenance and repair during that short maintenance window in the summer. He also backs off on the fertilizer rates when the season is over to give the turf a little down time that corresponds with the reduced level of play.

Field use

Samford Field is used approximately 47-48 weeks of the year hosting the university's intercollegiate softball program, intramural and physical education activities, and other student and faculty use. Practice for the collegiate season begins in mid-January and games run through early May, putting players on the field 5-6 days a week.

Tournament play may extend that schedule. Intramural play takes over the field once the season ends running into mid-June. Summer camps fill the remaining slots until mid-July, running 5 days a week for 4-5 weeks. Students come back to campus in August and, while no organized practices or games are scheduled, the school's open door policy allows field use for informal practices and pick-up games. This informal activity also fills any unscheduled days during the rest of the good weather season. Collegiate fall practice begins in September and lasts for 6-7 weeks, until the November temperatures become too cold for play.

The only down times fall during the dead of winter, school holidays, and that short window from the end of camps in July until the return of students in early August.



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Making it work

Collins says, "When I came on board in 1995, the field was predominately common bermudagrass with a few scattered patches of various hybrid bermudagrasses. I began overseeding the turf areas with a blend of two to three perennial ryegrass varieties in 1996, and have continued following the 1997 field renovation.

"We do not want the brown of a dormant field or the spotted transition look at any time, whether temperatures are one degree or 110 degrees. I must wait to start the overseeding process until the end of the fall season because there's still too much on-field activity during the preferred overseeding period of early October. Depending on the season, we may start the process any time from late October to mid-November, but generally around the first of November.

"The bermudagrass height will be between 1 and 1/8 to 1 and 1/16 inches. I don't scalp it, but actually cut back on the mowing a bit to let it get a little taller. I broadcast the seed, then cover the turf area with multiple passes using the same wire drag used on the infield skin. This works the perennial ryegrass seed through the bermudagrass canopy to make surface contact. I'll fertilize with an 18-24-10 formula approximately 7-10 days after the seed goes down. The timing is based on the weather, and experience over the past several years. I'll keep the height of cut taller, to retain the color of the bermudagrass until the perennial ryegrass is established.

"The transition out gets a big boost from our weather. I gradually lower the height of cut and let the temperatures take over. The process may last until July 4, but once the stress on perennial ryegrass reaches a great enough level, it checks out on its own and the bermudagrass dominates."

Collins also has continued to modify the soil profile. He core aerifies in May, June, and July, then topdresses with the same sand used in the sand capping renovation. He then drags the plugs and topdressing sand back into the soil profile and uses a blower to remove any turf debris. Since the renovation, this process has added approximately 1 to 1 and 1/2 inches to the sand cap layer.

He also notes the mower height of cut raises in proportion to the amount of sand applied and he leaves it at this level. This allows him to remove only the very top of the green portion of the grass in each mowing, reducing the stress on the bermudagrass and retaining the green appearance.

Fire ants are the major pest problem, to be avoided not so much for appearance, but for the protection of the athletes. Collins uses standard IPM procedures, including bait treatment strategically broadcast in the places of anticipated ant migration and applied in their prime foraging periods of morning or evening. Any mounds that do appear receive a targeted pesticide application.

Collins says, "I prepare the basic maintenance plan in January each year, and can generally keep on target with about 80 percent of it. But with so much field use and the open field policy, I have to be flexible. My motto is overcome, adapt, and improvise to achieve the best possible results.

"Coach Voisard and I work very hard on Samford Field and spend many hours on it. We're proud of the conditions we provide in terms of safety, playability, and appearance. We're also appreciative of the support the Samford softball program receives from the university and from the fundraising projects conducted by the coaches, players, and parents for a variety of needs."

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Joe Collins accepts his STMA Collegiate Softball Field of the Year Award from Rich Moffitt, immediate past president. STMA Board member Tim Moore is behind the podium.