

Roger Bossard on the industry: today and tomorrow

When it comes to groundskeeping and sports field maintenance, Roger Bossard, head groundskeeper for the Chicago White Sox, is in a league of his own. In Major League Baseball for more than 35 years, he's been through the famous days of former owner, Bill Veeck, Disco Demolition Night and, more importantly, pioneering the sports field techniques used with the latest retractable domes and other ballpark innovations.

For Bossard, the game is in his blood. He's a third generation Major League groundskeeper. Grandfather Emil and father Gene are remembered for their "masterful groundskeeping techniques" and the entire family has a reputation for doing their part to deliver checks to the "Win" column for nearly a century. He's emerged from the long shadow of his father and grandfather and their famed 17 Tricks of the Trade, which were touted for delivering a real home field advantage in the old days. Today he's recognized, in his own right, as one of the premier groundskeepers in baseball.

"From the age of 8 or 9, I was dragging a hose around for the crew," remembers Bossard. "It took me 6 years to move up through the system to make assistant groundskeeper. I wasn't even allowed to water the field for the first 5 years because my dad always said that no two days were alike and I needed to be able to recognize what the field needed."

Today, he's known for his impeccably manicured infields that give the true, clean hops that all major league players love. Bossard is also a premier sports field builder, designing major and minor league ballparks around the country.

He works with a team of experts. People like Dr. Hank Wilkerson of the University of Illinois, and Andy Wright of Muller Mist Irrigation are among the industry's leading professionals. Each brings years of experience in his field of expertise, including turf management, drainage and irrigation systems, and other important facets to every project.

They have built six of the last 10 baseball ballparks in the U.S.: Comiskey Park in Chicago, St. Louis' renovation to turf at Busch Stadium, Seattle's Safeco Field, Bank One Ball Park in Arizona, Detroit's Comerica Park, and Miller Park in Milwaukee. They've designed minor league and spring training facilities in Tucson, Tampa, and Juniper, FL, and all the natural turf soccer fields for the Royal Family of Saudi Arabia. Bossard also consults for twelve major league teams.

Groundskeeping today

Because of his unique position and years of experience, there's no one better to reflect on the challenges of today's groundskeepers and what their futures hold.

"I've seen a lot of change throughout the league during my years with the White Sox. Everyone in the game works for people who expect perfection," said Bossard, "and everyone, managers, players, even the umpires, expects that perfection from the groundskeeping crew. The groundskeepers are often the first people blamed—one bad hop and your name's mud. For the new groundskeepers out there, that's a lot of pressure. It takes experience to be able to handle situations like that."

"These guys are putting in 14-17 hour days and having to deliver on the demands of the players and others in the organization," said Bossard. "Now days the job is much more like a business. When I started, it was like a family around the league."

Many of the managers and owners recognize the importance of the groundskeeping staff. Some even refer to them as the 10th man on the field. But, there can also be a stigma as being just a "glorified grass cutter."

"In today's game," explained Bossard, "it's exceedingly important to understand the importance of a good groundskeeper and help train them



Bossard, pictured here with his late father, Gene, is the third generation to work in the big leagues. Including his grandfather, father, uncle and cousin, the Bossard family has a combined total of more than 200 years of experience.

to do their job to the best of their ability and reward them for their significant contribution to the organization."

"I think that working with other groundskeepers is the best way to learn," said Bossard. This year he's planning a training camp during December in Arizona to work with groundskeepers and managers from around the country to help them be the best at their jobs. This Professional Sportsfield Institute will be geared toward anyone interested in maintaining high-quality sports fields at any level of play. During the 3-day camp, the attendees will actually re-construct three of the spring training fields at Tucson Electric Park.

"I'm very excited about it," added Bossard, "they'll get an opportunity to get some real hands-on training and work with a couple of major league groundskeepers. I think it will be a very beneficial program and add to the credibility of the profession."

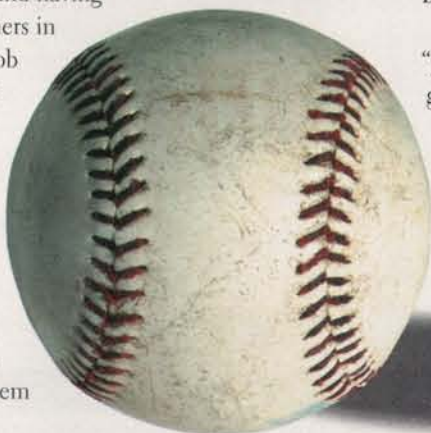
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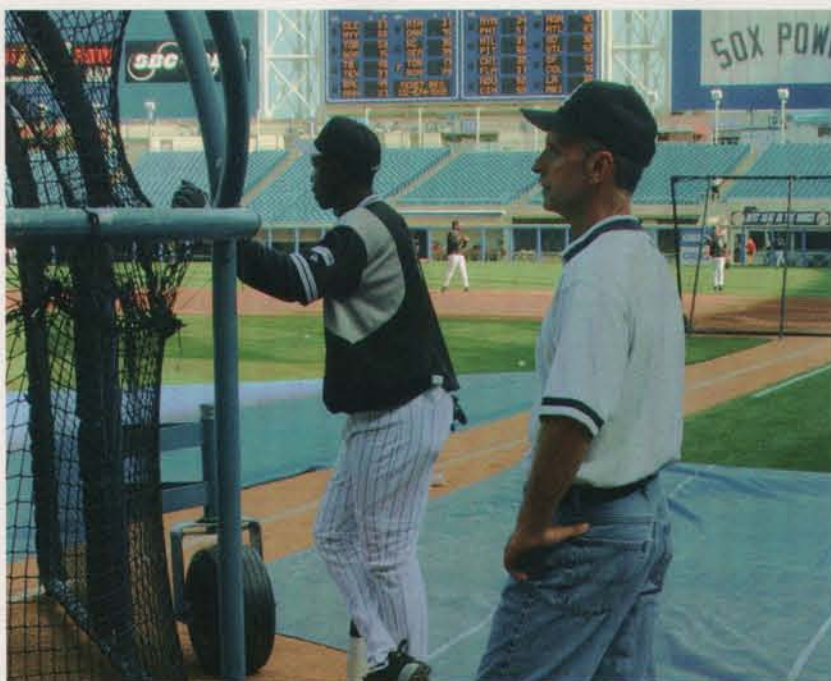
"When it comes to maintaining a field, the most important thing to remember," said Bossard, "is that 70 percent of all the action takes place on the infield, so that's where your resources should be focused." Keeping the infield conditioned and in play is critical. "A rainout can cost you close to a million dollars in the big leagues," said Bossard. The effects of rescheduling games at any level can seem almost as daunting.

"While research data and the science of growing turf is important," said Bossard, "you have to use it in the context of what makes a good athletic field." A successful groundskeeper has to be knowledgeable about soil structures, turf growing, and irrigation, but they also have to be able to communicate with the players and deliver what they want.

"I get real satisfaction when I know my field looks great and plays great," said Bossard. "Of course when an athlete tells you he likes the field, that means a lot too."

Bossard says construction and renovation projects take a specialized knowledge that not every one has. "Only about half the people who are installing and renovating fields—architects, landscapers, etc.—really grasp how what they do affects a sports field." The wear and tear, the needs of the players, and





While the concerns of a professional groundskeeper include management and player needs, the techniques they use on their field can be applied at any level.

the ability to recover between games are all-important factors. "I don't understand how people can call themselves an athletic field consultant if they've never talked to the players, know their needs or even walked on a field," added Bossard.

Future of industry

According to Bossard, times have really changed over his 35 years in the business. He's not sure if he were starting off today if he'd choose the same path.

"I've been blessed to spend my whole life doing something I like," reflects Bossard. "Not everyone gets to say that. There are great people in this industry and it just keeps getting better. If there were one thing I'd like to see change, it would be that the good groundskeepers coming up through the ranks get the opportunities to learn

that they didn't ask me something because they didn't want me to think they didn't know what they were doing. Don't be afraid to call the experts in the industry. We all like to talk about our victories as much as the players."

"It's always better to talk to some one in the business," said Bossard, "you just can't learn a lot of what goes on out here in a book." He suggests "rookie" groundskeepers look for internships with A or AA teams.

When asked how he wants to be remembered in this industry, he replied, "As someone who was able to bring professionalism and a certain amount of respect to this job, and as a straight shooter." He's been achieving that goal, and a lot more, his whole career. **ST**

This article was contributed by Oil-Dri Corp., maker of Pro's Choice soil amendments.

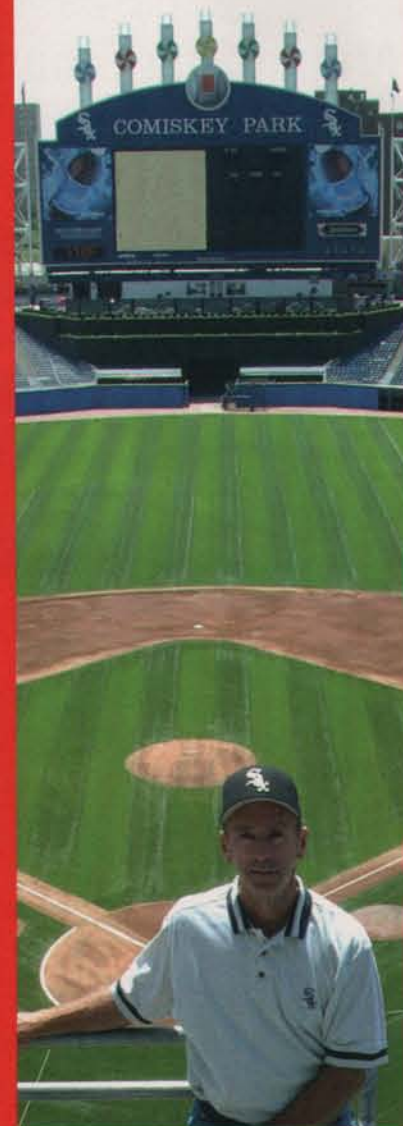


Bossard believes to be a valuable part of a baseball organization, you must start with a good education. But nothing beats a real sports field understanding and experience.

their craft from true sports field experts. I think it is really important that more of the ballpark savvy is learned. It's just as important as the science. Also that they get the pay and recognition they deserve for being the important part of the sports organizations that they are. As Bill Veeck once said, 'A good groundskeeper is worth 10-12 games a year.'

How does a groundskeeper become such a valuable part of their organization? According to Bossard, "A good education is a great start but nothing beats real sports field understanding and experience."

He counsels, "Always ask questions. Chances are someone's had the same problem. I hate when young groundskeepers say to me



Roger Bossard's Professional Sportsfield Institute

For three days in December, you can work with Roger Bossard, Head Groundskeeper for the Chicago White Sox and world-renown sports field builder. As a third generation groundskeeper, he will share his expertise while you get on-the-job-training in Athletic Field Design, Construction and Renovation. This is a one-of-a-kind educational opportunity for anyone interested in maintaining high-quality sports fields at any level of play. You'll even help re-construct three fields at Tucson Electric Park, home to White Sox spring training camp. For more information on this course and how to register for the Dec. 5-7 program please call, space is limited...

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