

Minor league turf managers honored at winter meetings

BY SUZ TRUSTY

Mike Boekholder, Dennis Klein, Ryan Kasputzke, and Rick Walker are the 2002 recipients of the Sports Turf Manager of the Year Awards for Minor League Baseball. The Sports Turf Managers Association (STMA) sponsors these Awards. The Awards will be presented by STMA Executive Director Steve Trusty at the Baseball Winter Meetings in Nashville December 13-16.

Each of the 16 leagues has selected a winner in recent years for recognition, presented by Major League and Minor League Baseball. The four classification Sports Turf Manager of the Year Award recipients were selected from 2002 league winners.

In 2001, STMA entered a 3-year agreement with Minor League Baseball to honor the Sports Turf Manager of the Year for each of the four classifications. In his letter to STMA on behalf of Boekholder in 2001, Randy A. Mobley, President of the International League, said, "Congratulations on the recently announced relationship between the Sports Turf Managers Association and Minor League Baseball. The increase in the level of sophistication within your industry that has taken place in the past decade is quite remarkable. The recognition to be given the best of these professionals working in Minor League Baseball as a result of this new relationship is certainly well deserved."

In order to qualify for Award consideration, individuals must have been named Sports Turf Manager of the Year for their respective league. (See the list below of individuals so honored.)

These individuals were asked to submit the following information for review by the STMA judging team: Photos documenting the events and staff on the field; a narrative outlining the staff, budget, number of events and/or games per season, cul-

tural practices, brief history of the facility; a narrative on the game day routine outlining the type of equipment used, how it is used, and staff management details; a letter from the League President outlining why the individual was selected as Sports Turf Manager of the Year for that league; a letter from the team's General Manager outlining why the individual should be named the league's Sports Turf Manager of the Year; and an explanation, in 100 words or less, by the individual as to why he or she chose this as a career and the individual's goals for the sports turf industry.

Class AAA

The Class AAA Sports Turf Manager of the Year is Mike Boekholder of Victory Field, home of the Indianapolis Indians (affiliate of the Milwaukee Brewers) of the International League. Boekholder has earned eight league awards in nine years with Minor League teams. His talent, obviously, is transferable. He earned the honor twice with Yakima in the Northwest Leagues; moved to Durham where he won when the Bulls were in the Carolina League, and then when the franchise moved up to the International League. His last four awards were with Indianapolis.

The 15,500 plus seat Victory Field opened in July 1996.

The playing surface features a state-of-the-art sand-based rootzone with a Kentucky bluegrass/perennial ryegrass turf mix. The 12-zone irrigation system is centrally controlled, allowing for remote and radio control of the system via computer modem and two-way radio, as well as amount-specific auto shutdown during rainfall.

The automatically adjusted run time; using ET information from an off-site weather station, is augmented in-season with manually-adjusted run time based upon soil moisture readings taken on-field with a hand-held moisture sensor.



Boekholder's staff consists of a full-time assistant groundskeeper and two full-time seasonal employees. The game staff includes use of four additional seasonal employees, drawn from a pool of nine. Virtually all of the staff, game day and full-time are either college graduates or are currently working toward college degrees.

In 2002, Victory Field played host to 73 Indians games, 16 college, high school, and senior league games, including the eight-game, two-day Indiana State high school championship tournament. Additionally, two clinics/tryout camps were held on the field for a total of 91 events. This all took place between April 4 and August 31.

To accomplish all of this, a complex, closely coordinated field maintenance program is vital and Boekholder has fine-tuned it to a precise melding of the science and art of sports turf management. Extreme environmental challenges in 2002 began with the wettest spring in Indiana in 107 years followed by sustained periods of record-breaking heat and humidity from mid-June through mid-August. Boekholder and his staff met the challenges with an aggressive proactive maintenance program and prevailed. The field performed at top levels.

International League President, Randy A. Mobley, noted Mike's string of being selected as Sports Turf Manager of the Year in his league since 1995 during his progression from different fields, and from Class A to Class Triple A. Mobley wrote, "...The bottom line here is that Mike has a flawless track record and simply continues to be the best at what he does."

Cal Bureson, General Manager for the Indianapolis Indians, wrote, "Last year at this time, I mentioned that one of my goals as General Manager of the Indianapolis Indians is for me to do my job as well as Mike Boekholder does his. I haven't got there yet. I think that I've improved but I also think I'm falling farther behind. The man sets quite a pace."

Class AA

The Class AA Sports Turf Manager of the Year is Dennis Klein, Sports Turf Manager for the Round Rock Express Baseball Club, Class AA affiliate of the Houston Astros. Klein started in baseball on the tarp crew of the Texas Rangers at age 15 and worked his way up to the assistant position. In 1999, he was selected for the head position with the Express and seized the opportunity to put everything he had learned with the Rangers to work on the new field. The Dell Diamond stadium opened in April 2000. The turf area soil profile is 80 percent sand and 20 percent peat, topped with Tifway 419 bermudagrass overseeded annually with perennial ryegrass. The infield dirt is 45 percent clay, 50 percent sand and 5 percent silt. Klein relished the challenge of selecting the right turf, adjusting to different climate conditions and establishing a year-round maintenance schedule to achieve top field performance. In 2001, the Dell Diamond earned STMA's Baseball Field of the Year honors in the professional

category.

During the 2002 season, the field hosted 73 Round Rock Express games, 48 high school games and 18 college games. In addition, it hosted various tournaments, playoff games, the Texas State High School Championship Series for all 5 classes, and two college tournaments. And there's more; 40 days of baseball camps, concerts, corporate softball games, an early spring training for local professional baseball players and such special events as the Relay for Life. All this field action took place despite the added challenge of alternating periods of too much and too little rain.

Klein's staff consists of two full-time personnel and three seasonal part-time employees during the baseball season.

He says, "These are the most reliable, detail-oriented people I have ever been associated with. Our common desire to protect the field from excessive damage throughout the season and our detailed approach to our daily tasks allow our facility to be used to its fullest potential."

Texas League President, Tom Kayser, wrote, "Day in and day out, the playing surface at the Dell Diamond looks and plays like a Major League surface. In the difficult climate of central Texas, Dennis has managed, through extreme diligence to detail and a profound dedication to this job, to present a field to players and fans alike that is always brilliantly green and seemingly without flaw."

Jay Miller, Vice-President and General Manager for the Round Rock Express Baseball Club, wrote, "The work performed by Dennis and his crew is a tremendous source of pride not only for our team and administrative staff, but our fans and sponsors as well. I have always personally believed that one of the strongest selling points of a ballclub is the facility itself. For us, that begins literally at the 'ground level.' . . . Dennis leads a group of very dedicated people, the first ones into work every day, and the last ones to leave at night. These are individuals who work as a team, and who take immense pride in their work, expending whatever time or effort is necessary to attain perfection."

Class A

The Class A Sports Turf Manager of the Year is Ryan Kaspitzke, Head Sports Turf Manager for the Dayton Dragons. During the 2002 season the Dayton Dragons played 70 regular season games and one playoff game at Fifth Third Field. All of the team's sponsors are permitted to use the facility for one day, adding another 30 possible on-field events. In addition, the Dragons' lease with the City of Dayton permits the city to host up to 20 events in the facility. Thus, it's possible for the field to play host to 127 events within a season of approximately 180 days.

Kaspitzke holds a BA degree from the University of Toledo along with a degree in Sports Turf Management from Michigan State University. During his previous experi-



It's possible for groundskeeper Ryan Kaspitzke's Fifth Third Field in Dayton, OH, to host 127 events in a 180-day season.



Dennis Klein relished the challenge of selecting the right turf, adjusting to climate conditions and establishing a maintenance schedule in Round Rock.

ence with the Toledo Mud Hens, Durham Bulls, Indianapolis Indians and the New England Patriots, he also moved from a crew position, to assistant, to his current head position with the Dragons. He puts that background to use, working with his staff of one to two full-time assistants and four game day crew members.

The Field opened April 2000. Due to construction delays, the entire playing field was installed in approximately four weeks and the sod installation completed six days prior to the first game. During this process, Kaspitzke was an essential liaison between the Dayton Dragons organization and the field management company contracted to install the field and irrigation system. The team then played 36 games on the field in 44 days. Kaspitzke and crew kept the turf in top condition throughout that challenging year and continue to do so. In addition to the playing surface they maintain three lawn seating areas that hold an additional 1,000 fans. And, if it's possible, they focus even more attention to detail on top playability for the non-turf area of the field. A further compliment to Kaspitzke's expertise is that he has been selected to serve on three different Super Bowl crews.

In his letter of congratulations to Kaspitzke, Midwest League President, George H. Spelius, wrote, "This prestigious award was based on the following criteria as rated by the Field Managers of the 14 member MWL teams: quality of playing surface, playability and texture of infield skin, preparation of the field, condition of infield turf and outfield turf, quality of pitching mounds, and overall professionalism of your staff. Your dedication, work ethic, and leadership were definitely a mark of excellence in all areas."

Robert W. Murphy, President of the Dayton Dragons Professional Baseball Team, wrote, "One thing that most impresses me about Mr. Kaspitzke is the fact that our organization never has to worry about the condition of the field. His attentiveness to detail, the weather, and the prevention of rainouts (when at all possible) is tremendous. His hours of work range from early morning, to late in the evening. His time is spent mowing, edging, fine-tuning, scheduling of part-timers, ordering supplies and products, and then, after all is done, he comments on how he needs to get better. He is consistently striving to raise the bar and improve himself and his department. This, to me, is true leadership."

Short Season A

The Short Season A Sports Turf Manager of the Year is Rick Walker, Head Sports Turf Manager at LeLacheur Park, home of the Lowell Spinners Baseball Club of the New York - Penn League. The Lowell Spinners are a Boston Red Sox Class A affiliate.

Edward A. LeLacheur Park was built during 1997 for the 1998 seasons of the Lowell Spinners and the University of Massachusetts at Lowell baseball programs. The field has served both programs for five seasons, with the majority of events taking place under the lights. The turf area playing surface consists of 100 percent "Midnight" Kentucky bluegrass sod established on a 95 percent USGA sand-based root zone mix.

U-Mass Lowell's season begins in early March and extends to May 19; then resumes on September 5 and extends to October 19. The Lowell Spinners' season begins on June 10 and runs to September 4. The playing surface is used 8 months of the year. During 2002, U-Mass Lowell held 54 practices and 56 total games. The Lowell Spinners held 46 practices and 38 home games, and there were 26 additional events. That adds up to 220 scheduled on-field activities.

Walker's staff varies depending on the time of year. During the U-Mass season he is generally solo with part-time help 4-hours per day only during the Northwest 10 and NCAA Regional Tournaments. During the Spinners' season he has a full time assistant, Gareth Markey, and one part-time staff member, Tom Mullins, for pre and post game procedures. Additional part-time staff is added for the initial 8-hour per day mini-camp running June 10 to 17. Jack Schmidgall serves as field consultant to Walker and Dan Beaulieu, the Stadium Manager, is willing to help out when needed. At the completion of the Spinners' season, Walker is once again solo with the exception of tournaments or special events. Nutrient applications, aeration, dethatching and topdressing are performed by contract under

Walker and Schmidgall's supervision.

New York - Penn League President, Ben J. Hayes, wrote, "Throughout 2002, Mr. Walker maintained the playing field in optimal, if not immaculate, condition. Even in the most adverse conditions, Mr. Walker's experience, management skills, and, most importantly, tireless efforts permitted the Lowell club to play, and complete, virtually all of its home games."

Shawn Smith, General Manager of the Lowell Spinners, wrote, "Rick has worked for us for over 6 years and has continued to improve his knowledge and skill in finding and developing techniques to keep our grass durable and our infield skin smooth and firm. I have had numerous conversations with managers, coaches, players, and trainers over the years and the one common theme that is expressed by

all is that our field 'plays true.' That sentiment provides a great deal of comfort to me in knowing that Rick is on top of his game."

2002 League Sports Turf Manager of the Year Winners:

- International - Mike Boekholder, Indianapolis
- Pacific Coast - Matt LaRose, Sacramento
- Mexican - Sinuhe Rodriguez Ambrosio, Oaxaca
- Eastern - Jake Tyler, Binghamton
- Southern - Matt Taylor, Greenville
- Texas - Dennis Klein, Round Rock
- California - Jesse Sandoval, San Bernardino
- Carolina - Pat Coakley, Myrtle Beach
- Florida - Keith Blasingim, Fort Myers
- Midwest - Ryan Kaspitzke, Dayton
- South Atlantic - (tie) Bill Butler, Lakewood, and Josh Ingle, Delmarva
- New York-Penn - Rick Walker, Lowell
- Northwest - Boyd Mauer, Boise
- Appalachian - Mike Thompson, Burlington
- Pioneer - Ken Kopinski, Ogden
- Gulf Coast - Manuel Lopas, Pirates

STMA extends congratulations to all of these well-qualified professionals on their commitment to providing the best possible sports surfaces for their field users. **ST**

Suz Trusty is communications director of STMA.

