

# Strongsville (OH) High's new field

## 83 days from ground-breaking to game

BY CHRIS HARRISON

**I**n a project that should give a lot of professional sports teams pause, the Strongsville High School Mustangs went from a rough old field behind the school to a state-of-the-art football stadium in just 83 days.

"It was 83 days from turning the first shovel to completed stadium," says Mike Catan, the ramrod behind the project.

The stadium features a blend of four kinds of Kentucky bluegrass. Known as Pat Catan Stadium (after Mike's father), it seats 5200 fans and is expandable to 7200. It is, as Catan notes, a mini-college stadium.

The stadium setting is spectacular. It sits just to the east of the high school in front of the practice fields. The stadium backdrop for fans in the stands on both sides of the field is woods. In fact, the appearance of red fox and deer from the woods several times gave construction workers pause.

### The turf

The turf was specified and installed by ATD Sportsfield Services & Design, Garfield Heights, OH. "We had 45 grow-in days for the turf," says Don Kaib, site coordinator for ATD. The sod, from Medina Turf Farms, Medina, OH was rolled out on July 7. The first game was August 30.

The turf was all grown from seed provided by Lesco. It consists of 25% Limousine, 25% Imperial, 25% Wildwood and 25% Shamrock Kentucky blues. It was produced on a typical Western Pennsylvania clay-based soil and shipped to the job site in one day.

The project got rolling early in 2002, when ATD got a call asking for bids on a football field. "The pro-

ject grew and soon it became a whole stadium," Kaib says.

The existing native soil field was in pretty poor shape. Although there was a pop-up irrigation system in place, both sides of the field were on a different grade.

"We added 175 tons of topsoil and made it into a uniform one percent grade," Kaib continues.

The old drainage system had to be modified, too. It was a sort of half-herringbone diagonal system. "We added a five-line straight pattern across the field from goal line to goal line," Kaib says.

Mother Nature was quite cooperative this year, both with the construction crews and with the turf. The summer was almost rain-free so workers could be on the job every day. ATD had almost total control over how much water was applied, since it was all irrigated. About 1/2 inch of water was applied to the field every other day throughout the grow-in. Although it was hot, the irrigation system worked well until just before the first game when there was a problem with the irrigation valves. So no water applied for the last 10 days before the playing season started.

That may have been a blessing in disguise. Kaib wanted the grass kept at a 4-inch height, and would have preferred to see it cut no less than 3 inches as the playing season started. Less water kept the growth down.

"Mowing started at 4 inches initially," he says. By late August, they were mowing at 2 3/4 inches. The lack of irrigation slowed growth in what were otherwise perfect conditions for grass. For the health of the grass, Kaib would prefer less than one-third of the existing growth be taken off at any mowing."

Lack of rain did not hurt the eighth-ranked



As field and landscape installation proceeded this past fall, signs warned spectators to give the grass a chance to grow.

Strongsville Mustangs who won their home opener by decisively thumping seventh-ranked Euclid 42-14.

As with any grow-in, there were a few spots that needed to be filled in before the home opener. "We made a divot mix of sand, soil and seed and filled them by hand," Kaib says. They used the same mix to fill up around the irrigation heads.

The sod was fertilized before it was sent to Strongsville and then was sprayed both with liquid N-P-K and with trace minerals in the summer.

## Maintenance

One concern is on going maintenance. Current plans call for the school to continue to do the maintenance as it has in the past. According to Joe Lynch, athletic director for Strongsville High, the school will follow a program similar to what it had in the past. The school works with Gordy Glissman, a local landscape contractor. "The basic year-round program is laid out for us by Lesco," Lynch says.

Catan wants to see on-going maintenance sub-contracted to a professional crew. "I hope that we find outside maintenance and field maintenance companies so in 3 years it looks the same as it does now," Catan says.

He continues, "My next job is to beat up the Board over maintenance. We gave them a diamond. They have to keep it up." He wants the Band Boosters and Athletic Boosters to raise funds and turn the maintenance over to a field management outfit.

This fall, Kaib recommended an aerification and rolling after the season is done. "I'd put down one fall fertilization and leave it alone," Kaib says. "There's not a lot you can do with it this year."

Next year, and on a continuing basis, Kaib says the grass should be aerified again in the spring. It should see five or six feedings through the season, one application every 5 weeks.

The turf will need care although the actual stadium structure is low-maintenance. Bathrooms are block with epoxy floors that can be hosed off. Bleachers are aluminum.

Other structures are low-upkeep.

The \$1.85 million stadium was paid for entirely with private funds—no taxpayer dollars were used for the project.

Mike Catan and James Prandi, both local businessmen, started a campaign to build the stadium after local taxpayers twice refused to approve bond issues to finance a replacement for the aging Taliak field behind Center Middle School. Catan, president of Darice, Inc./Pat Catan, a local craft supply store and wedding boutique, donat-



The management team for the stadium included, from left: Bernie Bischof, project manager; Bob Kalfas, carpentry; Allen Helms, electrical; Mike Catan, overall spiritual leader; Marvin Cox, Sandy Plumbing; Jim Ottobre, Pat Catan's.

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**“Local people wanted the field to be a success. We all cut prices for the job but we made it work.”**

ed \$400,000. That’s about one fourth of the total cost of the stadium.

Like other businesses, Catan does a lot of construction, especially of warehouses. He was able to call in some favors and twist some arms.

Strongsville High, home to approximately 2250 students, had used a 50-year old facility that sits behind one of the district’s middle schools. Years ago, the middle school was the high school. While the high school moved to a new facility, the stadium stayed where it was. Not only was the structure inconveniently located for high school athletics but the turf was worn out and the stands were getting old.

“I was sitting in Taliak field at a game (in 2001) and thought to myself, ‘this place is a dump,’” Catan recalls. Although he never played for Strongsville, and his four sons attend a rival high school, Catan’s business has been in Strongsville since 1966. He has always been actively involved in sports. “It’s as important as an arithmetic book as far as building confidence and character,” he says.

Strongsville is a member of Ohio’s Pioneer Athletic Conference and the team regularly ranks in the top 10 in Northeastern Ohio.

The facility features a modern electronic scoreboard, a 54-foot press box on the home team side and a smaller box on the visitor’s side. It also includes two mini-meeting/locker rooms, large restroom facilities, concession stands and a small area for local boosters groups to sell game-related items.

Fans enter the stadium through a tall, arched, brick entryway. Outside, there is parking available for more than 2,000 cars.

“It’s too bad all jobs don’t go this easy,” says Marvin Cox, owner of Sandy Plumbing. “We had weekly project meetings and I don’t think even one voice was raised.”

Cox attributes much of the success to using local contractors. “Local people all wanted it to be a success,” he says. “We all took price cuts on the job, but we made it work.”

**Nothing artificial**

One place where a lot of money was saved was the elimination of artificial turf from the original plans presented to the taxpayers. “That saved about \$1 million,” Catan says. “We went with natural turf,” Catan says. “I sure wouldn’t want to play on artificial turf.”

Some small colleges in the area, John Carroll and Mount Union among them have gone to artificial fields, so there is precedent. And, the original plans called for artificial.

“It was a combination of cost and the installation time,” says Lynch. “Cost was the main factor, but we really wanted to get the field ready for this season.”

Planners saw there was huge dollar savings with natural grass, even though the cost of rubber-based artificial fields has dropped recently from a tad under \$1 million to the \$650,000 range. Sod for the Strongsville field cost about \$25,000.

“I just wish we’d had a little more time to grow the field in,” says Kaib. “By next year, I hope it’s the showpiece of Northeastern Ohio,” he adds.

“It’s the biggest breath of fresh air for the kids,” Lynch says. Even after two-a-days, the players were hyped. “You knew they were excited when they would walk over to the field as it was being built rather than go home,” Lynch says. “It was a great project and I’m totally impressed with the quality of the work and the speed with which it was done.”

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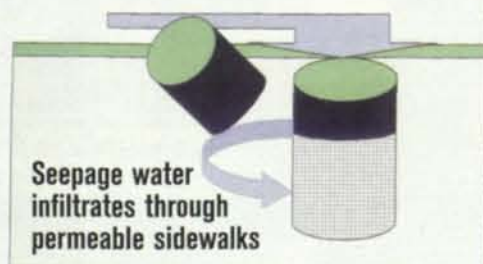
Chris Harrison is a free lance writer in Ohio.

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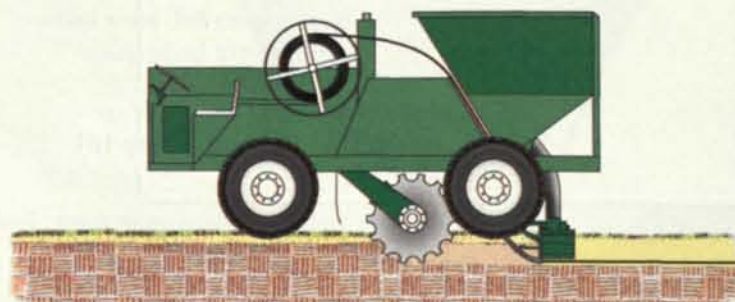
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