

Minor League Baseball Sports Turf Manager of the Year Awards

Mike Boekholder, Tom McAfee, Cindy Unger, and Anthony Lee are the first recipients of the new Sports Turf Manager of the Year Awards for Minor League Baseball. These awards are sponsored by the Sports Turf Managers Association (STMA) and were presented by STMA executive director Steve Trusty at the baseball's Winter Meetings held in Boston last December.

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 2001 league winners.

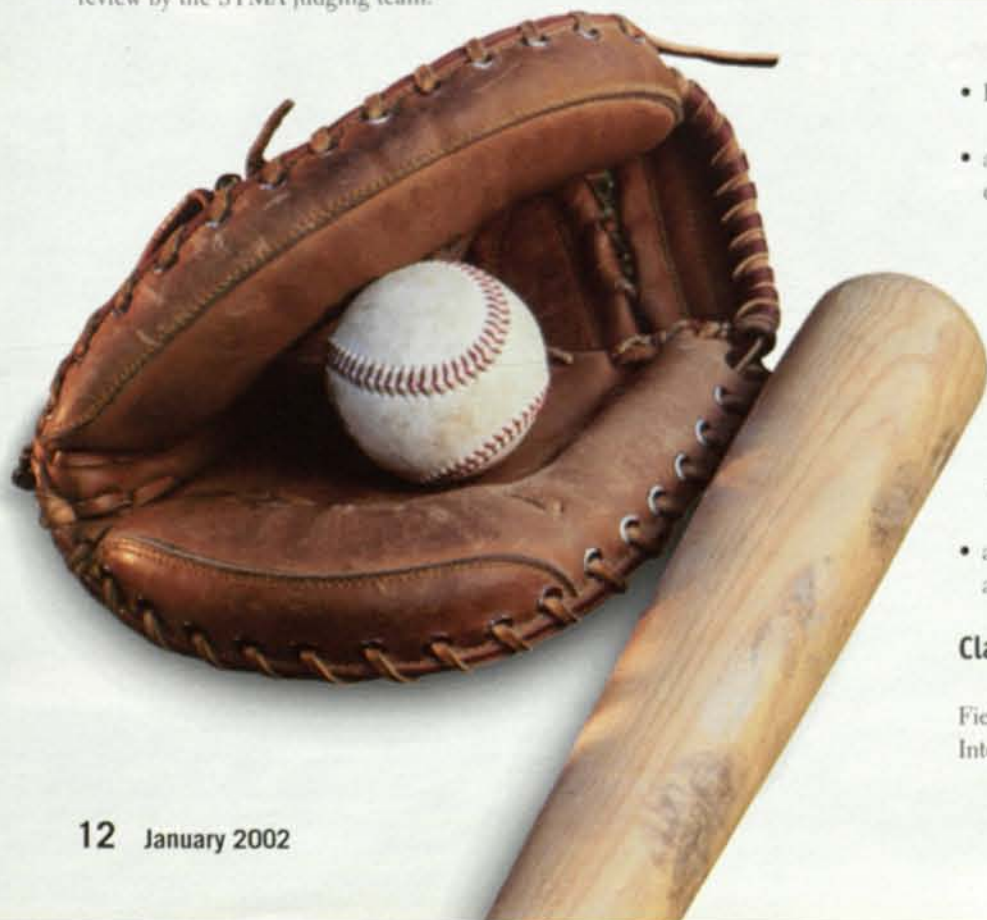
In his letter to STMA on behalf of Boekholder, Randy A. Mobley, president of the International League, said, "Congratulations on the recently announced relationship between the Sports Turf Managers Association and Minor League Baseball. The increase in the level of sophistication within your industry 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."

To qualify for award consideration, individuals must have been named Groundskeeper of the Year for their respective league (see the list on p.19 of individuals so honored).

These individuals were asked to submit the following information for review by the STMA judging team:



Victory Field, home of the Triple A International League Indianapolis Indians and groundskeeper Mike Boekholder.



- Photos documenting the events and staff on the field;
- a narrative outlining the staff, budget, number of events and/or games per season, cultural 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 for Groundskeeper 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 seven league awards in 8 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 after the franchise moved up to the International League, Boekholder has won three more awards.

The 15,500-seat Victory Field opened in July 1996; its 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. All of the staff, game day and full-time, are either college graduates or are currently working toward college degrees.

In 2001 Victory Field played host to 72 Indians games, the Triple-A All-Star game/skills competition, 19 college, high school, and senior league games, including the eight-game, 2-day Indiana State high school championship tournament. Additionally, 2 field days and two clinics/tryout camps were held on the field for a total of 97 events, all of which took place between April 5 and September 1.

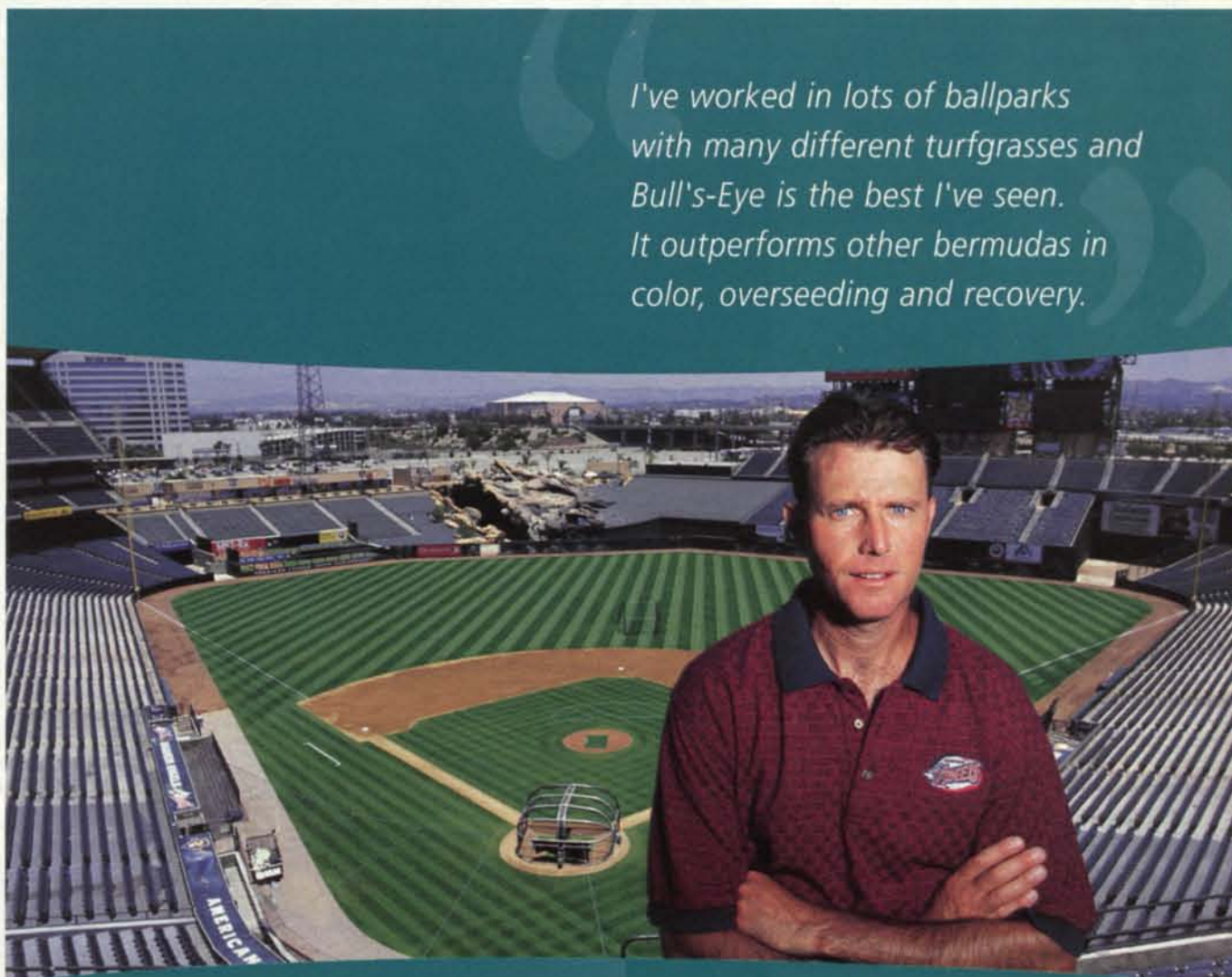
To accomplish all of this, a complex, closely-coordinated field maintenance program is vital and Boekholder has fine-tuned it to a precise melding of the science and art of sports turf management. "There are no secrets," he says. "Just work hard and stay on top of things."

International League President, Randy A. Mobley, wrote, "Triple-A Baseball was quite proud to have held its All-Star Game at Victory Field this past July. As expected, Mike had the field in immaculate condition, even after the area had received inches of rain just days before. On July 11, a national television audience was able to see in part why Victory Field has been named the best Minor League Ballpark by *Baseball America*."

Cal Bureson, general manager for the Indianapolis Indians wrote, "In my opinion, Mike Boekholder is the best groundskeeper in professional baseball. One of my goals as General Manager is for me to do my job as well as he does his. I still have a good ways to go."

Class AA

Tom McAfee is the Class AA Sports Turf Manager of the Year. He oversees the city-owned and operated Nelson Wolff Stadium, home of the Seattle Mariners AA affiliate, and the San Antonio Missions, of the Texas League. McAfee got his start in Major League Baseball as an assistant with the Texas Rangers from 1990 to 1992. He then moved to Huntsville in the Southern League for five seasons and to Nashville in the Pacific Coast League for 2 years before joining the Missions.



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Field Manager
Edison International Field,
home of the Anaheim Angels
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Field of the Year

The stadium's sand-based field is topped with 419 Bermudagrass. The irrigation system was converted to recycled water in late 2000 to allow at least limited irrigation, within the restraints of established guidelines, during periods of water restrictions.

The field staff consists of McAfee and three additional full-time personnel. They are responsible for a total of 40 acres, including the trees, flower beds, and grass berms for seating, as well as the playing field. During McAfee's first year at the facility, they tackled renovation of the main mound and bullpens before spring play and reworked and laser graded the infield-skinned area following the season. Post-season work in 2001 includes removing the infield turf, regrading the infield surface, and laying new sod of Tifsport Bermudagrass.

The stadium, which opened in April of 1994, was built to host a variety of events. In 2001 this included high school regular season and playoff baseball games, college baseball, softball games, men's Senior Baseball League games, concerts, an exhibition game between the Mariners and Missions, the Texas League All-Star game, a Seattle Mariner tryout camp, plus the Missions' regular season games and three Mission playoff games, for a total of more than 100 events from February into October. The stadium is also the site for Little League team pictures with nearly 30 teams posing on field between April and June.

Tom Kayser, president of the Texas League, noted, "Tom McAfee is the first groundskeeper with professional baseball experience to be hired and assigned to Wolff Stadium. The procedures and processes he has implemented in less than two seasons in San Antonio have elevated the surface from one in constant distress to one of the better surfaces in the Texas League."

Burl Yarbrough, president of the San Antonio Missions, wrote, "During the course of the 2001 baseball season, Tom McAfee did another outstanding job making our playing surface the best in the Texas League and in our opinion the best in minor league baseball. This is Tom's second year working with our organization, and in that time we have seen our field transform from subpar to being recognized as the best in the league."

"In minor league baseball we often fly by the seat of our pants, creating promotions that often have the opportunity of reeking havoc on the field. This season we drove a first pitch vehicle and six-wheel ATV on the field nightly. In addition, we landed a helicopter before a game, had skydivers parachute in for the first pitch, and had Boy and Girl Scouts camping in the outfield during the course of the season. Even with all of these events going on, Tom never failed to have the field at in tiptop condition."

Class A

The Class A Sports Turf Manager of the Year is Cindy Unger, field operations manager for Roger Dean Stadium, Jupiter, Florida. Unger, one of the handful of women in head sports turf manager positions, has been in charge at the 90-acre, 13-field Jupiter complex since February 1999. She got her start on golf courses in West Palm Beach, switched to the municipal stadium there, working with Murray Cook, and moved on, as



Nelson Wolff Stadium, home of the Double A Texas League San Antonio Missions and groundskeeper Tom McAfee.



Roger Dean Stadium, home of the Class A Florida State League Jupiter Hammerheads and groundskeeper Cindy Unger.

additional 10 field laborer positions are added for the spring training period and additional staff is brought in for any large-scale tournament or concert-type event.

Cindy states, "I'm not so sure that I selected baseball groundskeeping as a career or rather that it chose me. I slowly became consumed by baseball and the significance of the playing surface on the game."

Chuck Murphy, president of the Florida State League wrote, "The recognition of Cindy Unger is highly deserved because of her dedication, enthusiasm, work ethic, knowledge, and supervisory capabilities. She is a credit to her profession."

Robert E. Rabenecker Jr., general

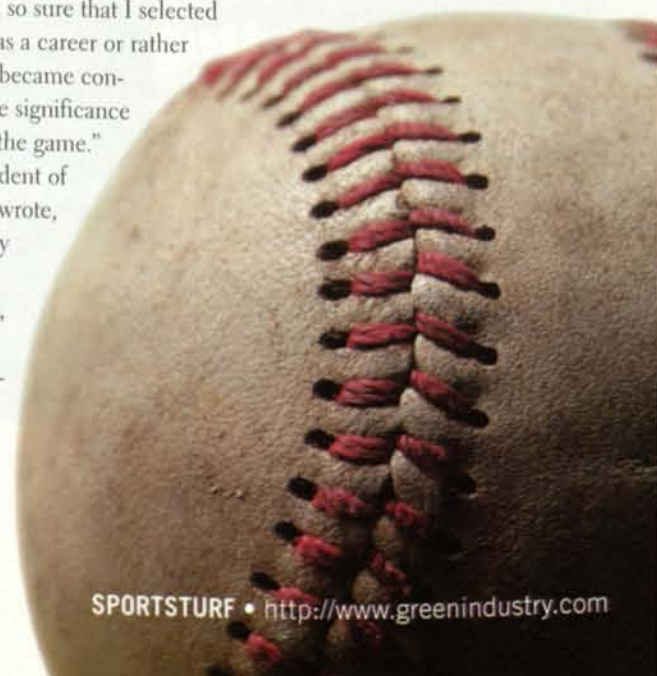
Cook did, to the Disney Wide World of Sports complex near Orlando, before accepting her current position.

The main diamond of the Jupiter complex is sand-based, constructed to USGA specifications. The 12 practice fields have a native sandy soil profile. All fields have 419 Bermudagrass turf. The four major league practice fields and the main diamond are overseeded with perennial ryegrass in December.

Jupiter Stadium, which opened in February of 1998, serves the Montreal Expos and St. Louis Cardinals minor and major league spring training needs. Each club has six practice fields available, two fields for major league workouts and a quad of fields for the minor leagues. The teams share the 7,500-seat main stadium field for spring training games. That puts a spring training game on the main diamond every day in March, for 30-plus games.

In April, Jupiter Stadium begins its stint as host to the Montreal Expos Class A affiliate, the Jupiter Hammerheads of the Florida State League. Seventy home games are scheduled from April to Labor Day with numerous promotional game-day clinics and softball games. In 2001, the National Softball Association Girls World Series opening ceremony brought more than 8,000 athletes to the field. The Jupiter complex has hosted several 13-field tournaments and such other events as concerts, church services, and even cricket matches. For 6 weeks in September and October, the Expos and Cardinals conduct a Winter Instructional League, which puts an additional 26 games on the main diamond.

The year-round full-time staff for all this numbers 23. This includes a building manager with staff of three, a mechanic, irrigation technician, spray technician, landscape foreman with 2 laborers, assistant operations manager, and three baseball foremen. An additional



manager, Roger Dean Stadium, wrote, "Cindy was able to put her arms around the entire operation and quickly insure that the grounds crew was working as a team; dollars were being spent smartly; economics and savings were being realized where possible; and a plan was being implemented to insure the facility's future over the life of the (20-year) lease. Cindy, since having been brought on board (in February 1999), has taken what was a 'cigar box' operation and turned it into an efficient and

well-run department with an eye towards maintenance and growth."

Short Season A

The Short Season A Sports Turf Manager of the Year is Anthony Lee, who earned the honor with the Spokane Indians of the Northwest League. Lee has since moved on to El Paso where he will be the Diablos' sports turf manager in the Texas League next season.

Lee honed his skills working with Chad Mulholland, who was at the time the head sports turf manager for the facility. Lee became Mulholland's assistant and, when Chad went to the Triple-A Richmond Braves in the International League, took over the top position in Spokane.

Avista Stadium, home of the Spokane Indians, was originally called Fairgrounds Recreational Park when it was built in 1958. More than 6 million fans have passed through the stadium gates since then. The Brett brothers purchased the Spokane Indians in 1985 and, with a focus on family entertainment, some stadium upgrades, and a genuine interest in creating a quality sports venue, have helped baseball thrive just as strongly today as it did 43 years ago.

High school play starts the season and the short season players arrive by mid-June. Lee and his field maintenance staff, consisting of an assistant and three crew members, have the field polished to perfection. Most of the work is done by hand, with the exception of the aerating, tilling, sod cutting, and mowing. Lee says, "This means extra time, but extra effort means extra care. Our motto is start strong, finish strong, and we truly try to live by that code."

On top of the regular home games, Avista Stadium plays host to a number of high school (Greater Spokane League) playoffs and championship games, as well as American Legion, Men's League, youth camps, and sponsor fantasy camps. The field also is donated once a year to the Spokane Crosswalk, a non-profit group that helps homeless teens.

Robert D. Richmond, president of the Northwest League wrote, "The true experts on the playing surfaces around the Northwest League are the managers and coaches that travel the League every summer. As such, they vote on the annual Northwest League Groundskeeper of the Year award. Tony has won this award 4 consecutive years; in that time, we have had numerous managers of the various clubs, but they all agree that Spokane is the premier playing sur-

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Avista Stadium, home of the Short Season A Northwest League Spokane Indians and groundskeeper Anthony Lee.

face in the league. From my communication with field managers, umpires, and major league staff, they consider Spokane to be one of the finest minor league playing surfaces in baseball."

Paul J. Barbeau, vice president-general manager of the Spokane Indians, wrote, "Tony has reached the highest level of success on the short season level. The award, voted on by the league managers, reflects Tony's dedication and care for the playing surface. Teams that visit Spokane find a beautiful, safe, fair playing surface as well as a grounds crew that accommodates any of their needs or special requests.

2001 Groundskeeper of the Year winners and their respective leagues

- International:** Mike Boekholder, Indianapolis
- Pacific Coast:** Steve Horne, Memphis
- Mexican:** Javier Cab, Campeche
- Eastern:** Justin Spillman, Altoona
- Southern:** Bob Shoemaker, Tennessee
- Texas:** Tom McAfee, San Antonio
- California:** Ken Patterson, Visalia
- Carolina:** Pat Coakley, Myrtle and Darren Johnson, Lynchburg
- Florida:** Cindy Unger, Jupiter
- Midwest:** Ryan Kaspitzke, Dayton
- South Atlantic:** Erik Hagen, Lexington
- New York-Penn:** Mike Procups, Brooklyn
- Northwest:** Anthony Lee, Spokane
- Appalachian:** Mike Whitson, Johnson City
- Pioneer:** Ken Kopinski, Ogden
- Gulf Coast:** Douglas Lopas, Marlins

"In my conversations with visiting teams, major league personnel, and major league scouts, they usually tell me that they have heard a lot about the field in

Spokane. Tony and his crew never fail to exceed their expectations."

STMA has entered a 3-year agreement with Minor League Baseball to honor the Sports Turf Manager of the Year for each of the four classifications. **ST**



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