

# Olivet Nazarene upgrades fields for Bears' camp

BY NATHAN ODGAARD

**H**ometown pride among Chicago Bears fans has blossomed in Bourbonnais, IL. That's obvious to anyone who has recently driven along Interstate 57 past the three-city community of Bourbonnais, Kankakee, and Bradley, about 50 miles south of Chicago. A 170-ft. tall water tower standing just off the highway boasts, "Bourbonnais, Summer Home of the Chicago Bears."

Last year the Bears announced that they were moving to Bourbonnais after 18 training camps in Platteville, WI. The Bears will begin practicing on Olivet Nazarene University's athletic fields this month in preparation for the 2002 NFL season.

While the community is pumped up for the Bears' arrival, Olivet's athletic department has a reason of its own to celebrate. Though Olivet must now share its facilities, the Bears' move is Olivet's gain. In preparation for the Bears' arrival, 14 acres of the university's game and practice fields underwent major renovation last year. The enhancements resulted in healthier, safer and more durable fields that Matt Whitis, director of physical plant, believes are now one of the best in the NAIA.

"Our athletic department has really benefited from this because (the Bears' move to Bourbonnais) brought renovation to the forefront," Whitis said. "We had nice football and soccer fields before, but we just bumped that up to another level."

Renovation to the fields, estimated to cost about \$400,000, was part of a \$1.5 million facelift to the entire facility in the second half of 2001. The incentive to serve as the training camp site for the Bears drew the financial backing necessary to upgrade Olivet's facilities, Whitis said. Most of the funding came from private and corporate donations.

## Starting from scratch

With the summer nearly halfway over last year when the Bears made their announcement, the Olivet grounds crew had to move immediately to complete renovation before winter. The crew had to tackle the football team's game field, Ward Field, and two practice fields, and the soccer team's game and practice fields.

Olivet first had a soil analysis taken of the fields in July. The analysis, which revealed the soil's texture and characteristics, helped determine its top-dressing and fertilizing needs. Sod was stripped off the three practice fields, as renovation to the game fields was put on hold until the end of the teams' seasons. Roundup herbicide was used on the bare surface to ensure that no remaining grass would creep into the new sod.

"We had to do a complete kill because we had a lot of aggressive grass that we had to get rid of," Whitis said. The old sod consisted of a mixture of bluegrass, tall fescue and ryegrass.

Next, the land was tilled. In August, a topdresser spread 60 tons of Turface on each field, which was then tilled 4-6 inches deep into the fields' existing soil, a Midwestern silty-clay loam.

Olivet's native soils "are really prone to compaction and have a tendency to hold water, which is one of the reasons we brought in Turface, to help improve drainage," said Larry Berry, Olivet manager of grounds.

In September, underground sprinklers were installed. Whitis said the new sprinkler system will save the grounds crew invaluable time each day and will be more reliable than the university's walking sprinklers. The underground system operates automatically, which will save the crew from having to manually move the sprinklers, including in the middle of the night.

"We can water fields in a few hours, whereas before it would take a couple of days," he said.

In October, new sod, made up of bluegrass mix, was laid. That same month the grounds crew completely renovated Olivet's soccer game field. In December, the crew left the sod on Ward Field but installed an underground irrigation system, aerated and



**In preparation for the Chicago Bears' training camp, Olivet Nazarene University hustled last year to complete a \$1.5 million renovation project, which included laying new sod, installing an underground irrigation system and adding TURFACE MVP to the fields.**

then top-dressed the field with amendment. "We had an abnormally warm December, which allowed us to get the sod down, and we couldn't have asked for better temperatures in the fall," Whitis said.

## Fields ready for Bears

Since their renovation, the five fields have sat dormant. The area has been roped off, almost daring the Olivet athletes and intramural players to step foot onto the plush, rich-colored bluegrass. The Bears, however, get first crack. Training camp runs every day from July 26 to Aug. 14; the rest of the year, the fields belong to Olivet's football and soccer teams. During training camp, the fields will be mowed and watered daily. Olivet's grounds crew will topdress by hand, using a grass seed/Turface mix, to fill in divots, and will aggressively aerate the fields immediately following camp.

Whitis commends the university's teams for their patience while having to arrange practices off campus. "Our coaches have been willing to make sacrifices because they know the quality of the end product they're going to get," Whitis said.

Quality of the fields is just one factor that helps make Olivet an ideal training camp site, Ken Mrock, the Bears' head groundskeeper, said. "The practice fields at ONU are everything that a pro team could want. The site is expansive, finely manicured and brand new," he said. "When we embarked on the building of these fields, the big reason to build four fields was to have the flexibility to rotate the play on these fields and enable the ONU athletes to have the same fine surface that our players are going to enjoy."

Whitis said Olivet would be able to accommodate the thousands of fans that are expected to attend training camp each day.

In addition to the field renovations, other projects completed to fit the Bears' needs were: the addition of lights to Ward Field, new locker rooms, a new training room, new storage units and enhancements to the university's landscaping.

Whitis' pride and enthusiasm for the new-look Olivet is as evident as the message on Bourbonnais' water tower.

"We're extremely ecstatic with the end product that we have," he said.

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