

Contract and in-house maintenance thrive in the Volunteer State

BY MEL LANFORD

Editor's note: Each month, "On the Road with the Ace" will profile different people and places that veteran groundskeeping pro Mel Lanford encounters on his travels throughout the United States, visiting ballfields and the many dedicated groundskeepers who make them great.

Nashville, TN—Visit the Tennessee State University main campus any day of the year and you'll not only see immaculately groomed athletic fields but also enjoy lawns, flower borders and buildings throughout the 450-acre setting that reflect quality workmanship. This place shouts, "pride of ownership and professionalism."

TSU is a coeducational urban land-grant university founded in 1912 and that now encompasses more than 65 buildings. What makes the grounds so special at this low-funded state university? No, the school doesn't receive special allowances for horticultural development. Nor does it have students of landscape architecture using the campus as a research site.

What makes the TSU grounds exceptional is the creative use of private contract maintenance, in conjunction with a highly skilled in-house groundskeeping crew. The decision to marry contract with in-house maintenance was made this year by Jerrold McRae, a TSU graduate and former NFL wide receiver with the Kansas City Chiefs and Philadelphia Eagles, and now the assistant director of operations, facilities management, at TSU. Jerrold decided to hire out the mowing and edging, allowing the talented maintenance staff more time to specialize in maintaining the athletic fields and cross training in horticultural specialties. Most importantly, this work change was achieved with no loss of in-house jobs and with an actual overall cost savings. Typically, labor costs are a large percentage of contract work, so Jerrold refrained from filling job vacancies that occurred due to attrition. The dedicated five-man staff now has time to troubleshoot and add extra touches for special events, such as homecoming and graduation.

"As facility director for a predominately black university, funding is the key challenge to ensure that all sports receive funding and somewhat equal representation," said Jerrold. "We have to be continually very creative with our budget. The dollars we saved on labor allows us to be more specialized with our small labor force, making them an even greater asset to the university."

Jerrold has been in his current position for the past 3 years, but it's his background as a TSU student and athlete, and later as a professional athlete that allows him to "set a standard of excellence for the university athletic fields." He shares a passion for sports with his staff, knowing the athletes appreciate the finished product. Before joining TSU, Jerrold was at the Philadelphia Convention Center as facility director and conventions & tradeshow manager. He has also worked for the Nashville Arena as facility director for Special Events, Concerts, Conventions, Arena Football, Hockey and Basketball.

During a recent visit to the campus, I was very impressed with the grounds and the man who oversees the day-to-day operations. Jerrold spends the first 2 hours of every weekday



Tennessee State's creative pairing of private contract maintenance with in-house groundskeeping crew was the brainchild of Jerrold McRae (below).

walking the entire campus, noting details that require attention and assigning crew members to each task. His last stop is usually a visit to the dean and the president to say hello and report on the "state of the facilities." Although most of his days are filled with administrative and management duties, every Friday Jerrold "dresses down" to work clothes and works "hands on" with the staff or contractors.

"One day I may have to run a buffer in a dormitory hallway, or spend the afternoon on a mower," said Jerrold. "There isn't any maintenance task I haven't done or won't do."

Demonstrating this pride of ownership has created a tremendous level of care among the five-man staff that maintains the athletic fields. Nobody on this staff is an 8 to 5 clock puncher. When working the athletic fields, they are under the direction of former teacher and coach, Willie Scott, who now serves as coordinator of athletic fields and horticulture. Both Willie and Jerrold believe in creating a positive work environment that fosters pride. They continually research and pursue new material, equipment, and techniques to improve their program. With contractors handling the common areas, the staff now has time to "go the extra mile" in maintaining the athletic fields and troubleshoot anywhere on campus as different situations arise.

This aggressive management decision at TSU has had a positive effect on the bottom line, and helped transform a nice campus into an exceptionally beautiful facility. **ST**

Mel Lanford, a 30-year veteran of the groundskeeping industry, is the creator and host of the Ace of Diamonds Tour, sponsored in part by Diamond Pro Professional Groundskeeping Products, a division of TXI. Mel travels across the United States year-round presenting hands-on seminars, demonstrating the proper infield and sports turf maintenance materials, equipment and techniques to athletic field managers. For more information, visit www.diamondpro.com or call 800-228-2987.