

# Passion Play

Who could forget Greenville baseball, or great guys like Butter Ball?

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.*

**G**reenville, NC—Born and raised in a city dubbed "The Heartbeat of Baseball," Chris "Butter" Ball claims his first key influence in baseball and in life as a small boy, and even now as a young adult, was a fellow by the name of "Crash" Davis, the character depicted by Kevin Costner in the movie "Bull Durham." Butter's grandfather, Grandpa Charlie, was Crash's longtime friend and neighbor in Durham and was as well known in that town as Crash. Both were star college athletes, Grandpa Charlie at Carolina and Crash at Duke. Crash and Charlie made their love of the game a cornerstone for their lifelong friendship. Young Butter inherited his passion for baseball before he could walk or talk, and even before he received his first mitt, ball, and can of "gloveoleum" from his dad, Lee, at the tender age of six. Two years later he was christened "Butter," a handle he still answers to proudly today.

North Carolina was the first hotbed for minor league baseball in the United States and has a colorful history dating back to the early 1900s. Stories of fans arriving at early stadiums by horse and buggy are recalled some 100 years later. Greenville's love of baseball has remained at the center of attention, with Greenville Little League dominating the Southeast programs for the past 50 years. The city has long been considered the "Birthplace of Baseball" in the rural U.S. and has participated in the regional and national finals of the Little League World Series.

Just take a look at the town's 1998 baseball record, considered a typical year in Greenville:

**Little League:** 2nd in the United States; 3rd in the World

**Babe Ruth:** Southeast Regional champs

**Senior Boys:** Southeast Regional champs

**Rose High School:** State champs (33-0)

**American Legion:** Finals in State Playoffs

**East Carolina University:** Lost to LSU in NCAA tourney regionals

This winning tradition for the youth of Greenville begins at Elm Street Park, the town's beloved 50-year-old, 2,500-seat, Little League ballfield. In 1999, Hurricane Floyd threatened to alter the direction of Greenville's youth with a 10-foot wall of water that flooded the field. At that time, Butter Ball was the head groundskeeper of the new baseball stadium at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, and his alma mater. He immediately enlisted his industry partners, Jake Holloway of the



Neil Avent (left), Assistant Baseball Coach, U.N.C.G. and Chris "Butter" Ball at the UNCG Baseball Field.

Greensboro Bats baseball club, Joey Simmons of the Charlotte Knights baseball club, Chad Price of Carolina Green field construction, and me, a representative of Diamond Pro professional groundskeeping products and founder of the Ace of Diamonds Tour.

Together, we donated material, equipment, and our expertise to help save the historic Little League ballfield. Remarkably, with the help of hundreds of local volunteers, the field repairs were completed in just 2 1/2 days. So important is baseball to this city that officials decided to put the ballfield project ahead of other recovery projects, knowing it would become a rallying point and catalyst to the reconstruction of an entire community following a devastating natural disaster. Today, Elm Street Park continues to serve as a testament to Greenville baseball's history and the pride of this dedicated baseball community.

Butter went on to notch 2 years of groundskeeping experience in professional baseball with the Harrisburg Senators, the AA Eastern League affiliate of the Montreal Expos. He returned to Greensboro and is now on the vendor side of the business, working as an athletic field specialist with Nivek, Inc., a turf supply company.

"It's more important today to educate managers and coaches about what's new in materials, equipment, and techniques, than to approach them as a salesman," he says.

As testimony to his dedication to baseball, Butter built 18 professional pitchers





mounds last year in his market area—all at no cost. The work was done to help build relationships and educate end users about new materials, equipment, and techniques. As the groundskeeping profession evolves, it is knowledgeable pros like Butter, with their solid baseball backgrounds, who lead the way.

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*Chris "Butter" Ball, 25, is a graduate of the University of North Carolina, Greensboro and a member of the Eastern North Carolina Turfgrass Association. He is currently involved in forming a new STMA chapter, known as the Piedmont Chapter, in Central and Western North Carolina.*

*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](http://www.diamondpro.com) or call 800-228-2987.*



Mel Lanford and Joey Simmons at mound building at Elm St. Park.



Father and son volunteer at Elm St. Park.

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