



# The Championship "Green"

*Photos by LeeAnn Widyn, Widyn Photography*

## City of Carrollton's McInnish Softball Complex earns the STMA 2001 Softball Field of the Year Award

BY STEVE AND SUZ TRUSTY

**T**he Championship "GREEN" Field of the McInnish Softball Complex earned the STMA 2001 Softball Field of the Year Award in the Parks and Recreation Division. This is one of the five softball fields within the City of Carrollton, TX, McInnish Complex and is an exemplary example of an outstanding athletic facility in the Dallas Metroplex.

The current population of the Carrollton is 111,000, with growing room to reach approximately 125,000. This sports-oriented community has supported the development of its sports facilities and uses them extensively.

Andy Babbitt, athletic manager for Carrollton Parks and Recreation, says, "The McInnish Sports Complex is not only home to the five softball fields, but also to six baseball fields, nine soccer fields, and an additional five soccer fields in the R. E. Good Complex contained within the McInnish site. The City's Josey Ranch Complex is home to eleven fields: five baseball, two football and four girl's softball fields."

And there's more to come. Babbitt says, "The City has approved a major bond issue that will add 12 more soccer fields to the McInnish Complex, at the cost of approximately \$2 million, and develop the new T. C. Rice Complex. The \$10 million first phase of the T. C. Rice project will include six adult softball fields, five girls softball fields, and a multi-use, lighted facility—for a combination football, soccer and track—that will have seating for 2,000. Construction will begin the last quarter of 2002, with play projected for 2004."

Assisting Babbitt in overseeing all this is athletic fields supervisor, Mason Ward. Ward is in charge of field maintenance and sports organization outreach. Babbitt says, "Mason started as a crew member on the athletic field team 13 years ago, so he's covered every aspect of field care and understands the complexities of keeping so many different fields ready for play."

# Maintenance Program

## January

- Check base pins and replace bases and pitching rubber
- Mow overseeded perennial ryegrass to 1.5 inch height, once per week
- Drag field once per week to prevent valleys, hills and grass invasion
- Add additional infield material

## February

- Mow overseeded perennial ryegrass to 1.5 inch height, twice per week
- Drag field at least once per week, and as many times as needed for each tournament
- Irrigate if weather conditions require it
- Edge around turf perimeter to keep sharp edges for games

## March & April

- Mow overseeded perennial ryegrass to 1 inch height, twice per week
- Drag and prepare infield each day for league play
- Fertilize with 15-5-10
- Topdress with sand
- Irrigate twice a week (20 minutes per outfield zone; 5 minutes per infield zone)
- Slice aerate once in April
- Adjust mowing if needed as perennial ryegrass phases out and bermudagrass takes over
- Edge around turf perimeter to keep sharp edges for games
- Apply weed control if needed following standard IPM procedures

## May, June, July, August & September

- Mow bermudagrass to 1 inch height, twice per week
- Drag and prepare infield each day for league play
- Slice aerate twice per month
- Irrigate infield daily (8 minutes per station); outfield three times weekly (30 minutes per station)



- Edge around turf perimeter to keep sharp edges games (once a month in June and July)
- Sod cut edges to keep lip down and field level in May
- Fertilize with 15-5-10 in May and August
- Topdress with sand in May and August
- Apply fire ant and other insect control if needed following standard IPM procedures

## October

- Slice aerate in two different directions
- Overseed with perennial ryegrass and topdress with sand
- Mow bermudagrass to 1.25 inch, twice a week
- Drag and prepare infield each day for league play
- Irrigate twice a week (20 minutes per outfield zone; 5 minutes per infield zone)
- Edge around turf perimeter to keep sharp edges for games

## November & December

- Mow overseeded perennial ryegrass to 1.5 inch height, twice per week
- Drag field at least once per week, and as many times as needed for tournament or league play



All the fields were renovated in 2000, including constructing totally skinned infields, during an unusually rainy period (23 in. in all). Thanks to a great crew, spring events went off as scheduled.

The McInnish Complex crew leader, Jorge Hernandez, works with a crew of six (David Conrad, Paul Wood, Gregorio Escareno, Matt Ackers, Hayward Potts, Genaro Herrera); Josey Ranch crew leader, Gregg Woods, with a crew of four (Rogelio Herrera, Jorge Felan, Mark Berry, Anacleto Marquez). Babbitt and Ward give the credit for excellent field conditions to their staff. They note, "Our staff is a special group and we're lucky to be working with them. Not one of them looks at this as just a job. They're determined to have the best fields around and willing to do whatever it takes to make that happen."

The five softball fields of the McInnish Complex were originally constructed in 1980 with a native clay/loam soil profile. The outfield and the non-skinned area of the infield were established with common Bermudagrass turf. A 1 percent slope was designed to channel surface water toward the outfield and off the playing surface.

These softball fields were renovated in 2000, because they were all grass fields. Ward says, "Over the years the skinned area material around the bases had built up, actually creating humps. We had to remove not only the existing turf, but also all that excess material, to construct totally skinned infields. To complicate matters, this project was in process during an unusually rainy period, 23 inches in all. We still completed it in time to hold our spring events as scheduled."

The material used for the infields and the warning track is a combination of red clay sand of a reddish-brown color and decomposed granite sand, both blended with soil conditioner. Ward says, "Twelve pounds of infield conditioner per ton of infield mix has been the perfect mixture for our fields. In 2001, we had fewer rainout days than the other municipal fields in the Dallas area. We had no tournament rainouts, even with storms hitting the night before the event, and that's without the use of a drying agent."

The Championship "GREEN" Field is surrounded by a black vinyl covered eight-gauge chain link fence. It is 25 feet high around the backstop, 15 feet high past the dugouts, and 8 feet high around the rest of the field. The crew constructed a 12-foot wood wall in left field that attaches into the fencing along the 300-foot deep outfield fence. Behind the right-center field fence is a 'state of the art' LED scoreboard. Down the lines and around the outfield fence is a 110-foot, "three step," warning track that notifies the players of the approaching fence. The seating has capacity for 1,000 spectators. The grass areas around the field can be set with additional temporary seating or the fans can set up their own picnics during the game.

Babbitt says, "We knew the conversion to skinned infields would require extra field preparation time, but improved field quality. To help reduce both the daily and the between-game prep time, we installed separate irrigation systems for the infields of all the softball fields. There are four zones on the infield system, all using rotary heads. One head is located

approximately 5 feet behind the pitching rubber. There are two heads on the left side of the infield and two on the right side and one in each corner about where the batter up would stand. Winds are big here in the Metroplex, often 20 to 25 miles per hour, and they can come at the field from different directions. This head placement allows us to adjust for the wind and still get good coverage. After watering and dragging, the heads virtually disappear."

Ward explains the impact of this system. "Before our games, instead of carrying out a large hose, we run each station on the infield for 5 minutes to moisten the infield material before we drag it with a groomer attached to our field rake. We save approximately 30 minutes for each field, by just turning on the irrigation system rather than unrolling the hose, watering the entire skinned surface by hand, rolling up the hose and removing the hose from the field. During tournament play in hot, dry, windy conditions, we can hit most of the infield with a couple passes of the central head in between games. It's just enough water to keep the dust down and slightly soften the playing surface.

"At night, during the summer, we set the infield system to come on at 2:00 AM for 5 to 10 minutes a

session. Generally, the field will then be ready to drag when the crew arrives in the morning. During the hottest part of the season, we also may set the system to run toward the end of the day. The outfield irrigation system consists of four zones. We set this system to run overnight with the frequency and timing per zone adjusted for weather conditions."

Staffing assignments at the McInnish Complex have been fine-tuned for efficiency and top results. Two crew members tackle the daily infield preparation for all 11 fields. The pitching rubbers are established. They set the magnetic bases and the umpires pull them out and put them in storage after the last game at night. The outfield foul lines are painted once or twice a week, depending on turf growth. Chalking the lines is the last task of the day. If conditions are wet or extra attention is required, these two crewmembers can call on any or all of the other crewmembers from McInnish or Josey Ranch for assistance.

The other four crewmembers at McInnish handle the other maintenance tasks, such as mowing,





**“Turf damage prevention efforts turned to repair after an armadillo was spotted climbing over the fence.”**

edging, and trash pick up. The ballfields are mowed twice a week, to a one-inch height, with a five-reel ride-on mower. The complexes' non-field turf is mowed once a week. The crew leader focuses on the irrigation systems, the security and field lighting systems, and the field condition and safety inspections, including the bleachers and fencing, as well as the playing surfaces. Both crews combined work on a rotating 6-day schedule so weekend maintenance is covered. Three people cover the weekend detail, and get the following Monday off. They arrive at 4:00 or 5:00 AM and do all the tournament preparation.

The field hosts play for everything from recreational sports to company league teams to slow pitch major softball and girl's fast pitch competitive tournaments. The staff puts up the 200-foot temporary sports fence and moves the bases for fast pitch games. The majority of play uses the standard field configuration.

Babbitt and Ward both laugh as they note that staff vacations must typically be packed into the only extended period of downtime, December. Spring field preparations start in January with play in full swing by February. They've made adjustments to the overall maintenance program to compensate for the high level of field use. For example, they've opted to avoid the surface disruption of core aeration, and compensate with an aggressive slice aeration schedule.

Weather-related issues, such as a day or two of rain, mean the staff must push even harder to catch up. The nature center within the complex adds a few challenges as well. The staff is vigilant in eliminating weed and insect invasions and takes an aggressive, pro-active approach to fire ant control. Because the complex is close to a river, the City's environmental services generally apply mosquito controls once in the spring and once in the summer.

The most unusual nature center invaders have been the armadillos. Babbitt says, "During drought conditions a few years ago, the only green turf remaining was on the irrigated turf of our athletic fields. Armadillos were seeking out this green turf at night

and tearing up the fields in their search for grubs. It looked like a bunch of golfers had been chipping shots. The crew closed off everything they could and even put trash cans in front of the dugouts to stop the attacks. Then, early one morning, one of our crew members watched in amazement as a crafty armadillo climbed up one side of our chain link fence and down the other. So we shifted our focus from prevention to repair."

Ward names the lighting at the championship field as the biggest challenge. It was installed in 1980, during the original construction. He says, "Because the system is outdated, we are constantly having ballast and bulbs burn out. We've also spent considerable time redirecting the light, but have been able to keep the lights at 31 candlepower. With all the other projects in development, it will be a while longer before we can consider replacement of the system."

With so many public athletic fields to maintain, and with a limited municipal budget, field quality depends on staff commitment and dedication to providing the best possible playing surfaces. Babbitt says, "Because of the incredible job our staff does, no one could tell how much softball is played on this field just by looking at it.

"League softball starts in February and ends in November. It's scheduled six nights a week, Sunday through Friday. Beginning in March, and ending in October, we have tournaments almost every weekend. These run all day Saturday and sometimes continue into Sunday morning. This field is used 235 days a year, with a minimum of three games and as many as twelve games a day.

"There are 154 teams in our league. A typical night will put four games on the field between 6:30 and 10:30 PM. The first tournament of 2002 drew 64 teams; the second 40 teams. Each put 12 games on the field on Saturday and 8 games on Sunday. We estimate that overall, 890 games per year are played on this field. Thanks to our staff, it looks like each game is the first of the season."

ST