



# High school Field of the Year

*Photographs courtesy of Patrick St. Clair and the STMA*

## Rush-Henrietta (NY) earns STMA distinction

BY STEVE AND SUZ TRUSTY

**A** passion for athletic field safety, quality, and playability has earned the 2001 STMA Football Field of the Year Award in the High School division for the field of Elmer Gordon Stadium. Under the direction of head groundskeeper John Gaffney, the Rush-Henrietta Central School District Grounds Department has set the goal of making this field the best that it can be—and better every year. Gaffney became a member of the grounds staff in 1982, and advanced to his current position in 1991, when his predecessor, Don Tobey, retired.

Gaffney says, “Henrietta is located in western New York, 10 miles south of Rochester. The native soil field was built in 1967 and has a heavy clay soil profile that continues to create a challenge for drainage, rooting, and compaction reduction. Don Tobey, who served as head groundskeeper from 1960-1991, had the vision of creating a top quality playing field. The district’s theory has always been, ‘As long as one of the main objectives of the game of football is to put somebody to the ground as hard as you can, we are going to provide a safe surface for them to land on.’

“The construction included establishment of a 18-inch crown for surface drainage, installation of drainage tile and a manual irrigation system. The field was seeded with a combination of Kentucky bluegrasses and perennial ryegrasses, and allowed to grow in for 2 years before it was used. Key to maintaining field quality, then and now, is limiting use.”

The stadium was originally built for varsity football and track and field events. A stone dust track surrounded the field. The grounds crew installed an automatic irrigation system in 1986 to replace the original manual system. Designed by a local irrigation supplier, the new system covers all the turf inside the track with 48 pop-up sprinkler heads, seven electric valves, a 24-zone controller and a booster pump. The system operates on municipal water. During the winter of 2001, the crew installed a larger pump and a new controller, with more programming ability.

Gaffney says, “More events have been added as the field has improved due to management and cultural practices to withstand more use without damage. Men’s lacrosse was added to the spring play schedule in the early 1970s. Women’s lacrosse expanded spring field use starting in 1995. Junior varsity football was added to the fall field program in 2000. An all-weather rubber running track was installed in 1996 to replace the stone dust track. The field is not lighted, though that has been discussed. The field now

# Elmer Gordon Stadium Field Maintenance Program

## April

- Soil tested for pH, fertility levels and organic matter content
- Apply granular fertilizer 18-24-12 at 1 lb. N per 1,000 square feet
- Apply biostimulant at 1 gallon per acre rate
- Mowing as necessary - generally three times per week at 2-inch height
- Chelated iron applied if necessary for green up
- Paint lines for men's and women's lacrosse for each game
- Broadcast overseed 50/50 bluegrass/perennial ryegrass weekly as necessary
- Aerify with shatter tines, one direction

## May

- Mow three times per week at 2-inch height
- Apply granular fertilizer 24-5-11 at 1/2 lb. N per 1,000 square feet
- Paint lines for men's and women's lacrosse for each game
- Broadcast overseed 50/50 bluegrass/perennial ryegrass weekly as necessary
- Irrigate as necessary depending on weather conditions

## June

- Mow three times per week at 2-inch height
- Paint lines for men's and women's lacrosse for each game
- Irrigate as necessary
- Analyze soil test results; adjust nutrient program as necessary

## At completion of lacrosse season

- Aerify with shatter tines in two directions
- Aerify with hollow tines four to six passes
- Topdress with organic compost approximately 40 cubic yards
- Drag mat to break up cores and mix with compost topdressing into aeration holes
- Overseed with slicer/seeder in three directions 50/50 bluegrass/perennial ryegrass at 8 lb. per 1,000 square feet
- Apply granular fertilizer 18-24-12 at 1/2 lb. N per 1,000 square feet
- Apply biostimulant 1 gallon per acre to speed germination and recovery



- Irrigate regularly until new grass is established
- Raise mowing height to 2-1/2 inches for off-season

## July

- Irrigate as necessary
- Mow three times per week at 2-1/2 inch height
- Apply granular fertilizer 18-24-12 at 1/2 lb. N per 1,000 square feet

## August

- Irrigate as necessary, deep and infrequent
- Mow three times per week at 2-1/2 inch height until third week of August, then lower to 2-1/4 inch
- Monitor for turf pests; treat with insecticide only if necessary following standard IPM practices
- Apply broadleaf herbicide if necessary following standard IPM practices
- Aerate with shatter tines in two directions

## September

- Apply biostimulant at 1 gallon per acre rate
- Mow three times per week at 2-1/4 inch height
- Irrigate as necessary, deep and infrequent
- Apply granular fertilizer 24-5-11 at 1/2 lb. N per 1,000 square feet
- Paint lines for each football game

- Repair divots immediately after games
- Aerify with shatter tine one direction
- Overseed center of field if necessary

## October

- Mow three times per week at 2-1/4 inch height
- Irrigate only if necessary
- Paint lines for each football game
- Repair divots immediately after games
- Blow out irrigation system at end of the month

## November

- Apply biostimulant at 1 gallon per acre rate
- Mow three times per week at 2-1/4 inch height until growth stops
- Paint lines for remaining football games, play usually ends second week of November

## At completion of football season

- Aerify with shatter tines in two directions
- Aerify with hollow tines two to four passes depending on condition
- Topdress with organic compost approximately 20-25 cubic yards
- Drag mat
- Apply granular fertilizer 18-24-12 at 1/2 lb. P per 1,000 square feet

“After every game the players walk the field from end to end replacing any divots.”



hosts all modified, junior varsity, and varsity track and field events, as well as invitational meets and county meets.”

Spring 2002 was one of the wettest ever in western New York. Field use began in mid-April and continued into early June. The men's and women's lacrosse teams played all their home games on the field, which is two to four games a week. Track and field events took over the facility on the non-game days.

Gaffney notes, “2002 also was one of the busiest ever for the field with 30 lacrosse

games played here. We wrapped up that season with good field conditions. Then, on June 1, we hosted the New York State track and field championships that brought 10,000 people here for a 2 days. Events took over the facility. We added a couple high jump and pole vault areas behind the grandstands. We also added a steeplechase event—for the student athletes—complete with water hazards and hurdles around the track. It was a popular event and showcased the facility. The field was used for warm ups and for all the judging. Again, it held up well.”

Spring field renovation began at the completion of all these events to repair worn areas and improve the turf for football season. Steps included: shatter tine aeration in two directions, hollow tine aeration with from four to six passes, topdressing, drag matting, overseeding a combination of bluegrass and perennial ryegrass in three directions with a slice seeder, fertilization, irrigation, and mowing height manipulation.

New, single pole goal posts were installed to replace the old “H” style posts. Permanent, handicap accessible, bleachers were added on the visitors side of the field, upping seating there from 150 to 500 for an overall capacity of 3,350.

Gaffney heads a staff of six: John DaGama, Don Wheeler, Kent Porter, Ron Tirabassi, Bill Ladd, and Jeff Brown. He says, “They're an incredible team. Each brings his own unique talents, yet all are cross-trained to share all duties and responsibilities. They're willing to do whatever it takes to create and maintain top quality conditions.”

And it takes a lot. The grounds department is responsible for maintenance at six elementary schools, two middle schools, the 9th grade academy, the senior high school, and the administration building, bus garage and building, and grounds facility. Duties include the mowing of 265 acres of turf spread over nine locations around the district, landscape installation and maintenance, lawn maintenance, playground construction and maintenance, irrigation installations and maintenance, repair of all grounds equipment and vehicles, snow removal in the winter, as well as athletic field



Gaffney's crew is responsible for 265 acres of turf.

maintenance district-wide.

There are 25 athletic fields in the system with competition fields located at the two middle schools and the 9th grade academy, as well as the high school. The 9th grade academy has a freshman football field, one baseball, one softball, and two soccer fields, all used for practices and games. Besides Elmer Gordon Stadium, the high school has two practice football fields used by varsity and junior varsity, two practice soccer fields, two baseball fields, two softball fields, and two soccer game fields. The soccer fields are shared by varsity and junior varsity men's and women's soccer.

Gaffney says, "Stanley Polmateer, director of school facilities, understands what we want to accomplish and has been very receptive and supportive in providing us with additional materials to improve field safety and playability, and make the district look good. Tom Stewart, our athletic director, is new to the district but immediately became another big supporter of our program."

All game fields and some of the practice fields at the high school level, a total of six fields, are equipped with automatic irrigation systems. "Irrigation became a major issue," says Gaffney. "We were 6-8 inches above normal rainfall at the first of June. Then it quit raining and we went from too wet to too dry in about 3 weeks, with no measurable precipitation for 2 months. By late August we were 4-6 inches below normal for the season.

"We really saw the results of our aggressive maintenance program during this period. We've been using both shatter tine and core aeration for more than 10 years to open up our heavy clay soil. We combine that with topdressing with organic compost. Over time, we've raised our low organic content of 1 1/2 percent to 10 percent, which greatly improved field performance. For the past 3 years, we've been broadcasting approximately 50 pounds of bluegrass/perennial ryegrass seed once a week just before games during lacrosse season. The players cleat it in. The last 2 years, we've incorporated biostimulants into the program, making the first application in April and continuing at 8-week intervals throughout the growing season. And we've adjusted our irrigation to promote deeper rooting. The turf held up well this past spring to the very aggressive game of lacrosse, even in front of goals. We anticipate the same results for fall football."

Football begins the first week of September and continues through the second week of November, with one to two games per week played on the field. Gaffney says, "Soccer is not played on the stadium game field. We feel that in order to keep the fields in top playing condition, two different sports should not be played on the same field dur-



The grounds department is responsible for landscape installation, playground construction, irrigation installations, equipment repair, and snow removal as well as athletic field maintenance district-wide.

ing the same season. So, in response to this policy, soccer has a separate game field that receives identical maintenance and renovation practices to that of the stadium field."

The staff applies a few tricks of the trade during football games. A rubber mat in the players' area protects the turf. They also spread a section of indoor-outdoor carpeting across the track area where the cheerleaders perform to eliminate extra wear to the track surface.

The respect and pride the coaches and student athletes have for the field is reflected in a unique practice that was begun at the first field use and continues as a tradition today. After every game the players walk the field from end to end replacing any divots that may have occurred. It was an extremely important step in field quality shortly after construction. While there are far fewer divots now, that 15-minute walk still makes an impact. By getting the divots back in place so quickly most will already be rooting back in by the first of the week. The psychological impact of this ritual is even greater.

Gaffney says, "It shows not only our staff, but all observers that our team appreciates the field and the work we do to provide for their safety and enjoyment. I usually walk the field with them and thank them for doing it. The coaches often do, too, and some of our coaching staff took that same walk a few years earlier when they were players here."

Gaffney adds, "The quality of the Elmer Gordon Stadium field, as well as the other fields throughout the district, wouldn't be possible without the support and cooperation of the athletic department, administration, student athletes, coaches, parents of the rush-Henrietta Central School district—and our passion."

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