A man wearing a dark baseball cap with a yellow 'M' logo and a dark jacket is spraying water from a hose onto a baseball field. In the background, there are bleachers and a green building.

George Mason University's Raymond H. "Hap" Spuhler Field earns Field of the Year

BY SUZ TRUSTY

The Raymond H. "Hap" Spuhler Field of George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, earned the 2002 Sports Turf Managers Association (STMA) Baseball Field of the Year Award in the College/University division. Michael W. Sullenberger, sports turf manager, and his crew keep the field in top condition despite a season-long marathon of field use and the weather extremes of the transition zone.

The baseball field, named in honor of the first head baseball coach at George Mason, is 16 years old. In that time the Patriots baseball team has had 15 winning seasons.

Field dimensions are 320 feet down each line, 375 feet to the power alleys, and 400 feet to center field. The grandstand seats 900 spectators and has an enclosed press box. The field is wired with a public address system and an electronic scoreboard. The field is not lighted. A full-size practice field is located just behind the first base dugout of Spuhler Field, providing an option to spread the wear and provide an outdoor practice site during poor weather worst conditions.

During the original construction of Spuhler Field, though soil specifications had been established, dirt from area landfills was used to convert the swamp-

Field of the Year

land site to a more workable base for the native soil field. Over the years, some of the landfill debris has gradually worked toward the surface. Sullenberger says, "The field is irrigated by a 9 zone, in-ground system with 631 I-25 Hunter heads and Buckner valves, powered by an Aquaflow pump. When pulling irrigation lines we also have pulled up boulders of concrete from that landfill dirt. We've established a 2 percent grade to speed surface drainage and offset some of the drainage problems we've encountered due to the landfill situation.

"The field was established with bluegrass turf, and we'll continue with bluegrass through the 2003 spring season. We reworked the infield turf area in 2002. We stripped off the sod, aerated, hand raked, and mat dragged. We used visual sighting and ball roll tests for the leveling and then replaced the sod we had removed. This summer we are going to reconstruct the outfield, removing the debris, reworking the soil, and laser grading to a 1 percent grade."

Spuhler Field is the last athletic field on campus with bluegrass turf, and this will be replaced with bermudagrass during this reconstruction. Sullenberger says, "Bluegrass has a tough time standing up to the heat and



humidity of our summers combined with all the scheduled on-field activity. We used one of our intramural fields as a test for bermudagrass in 1998. We installed an irrigation system and sprigged the field with Turfcote bermudagrass. Once the turf was established, it held up to hot weather use much better than the bluegrass fields. We've now converted the eight other athletic fields to bermudagrass and some of the root systems extend 12-18 inches into the ground.

"The winter survival rate has been excellent. We always hope for a blanket of snow protection, though that blanket got way too heavy this past February. The first winter season, we cleared out a foot of snow to reveal green shoots

and virtually no winterkill. One season, plumbers working in the boiler rooms accidentally repressurized some irrigation lines on our Club Football field. Temperatures dropped and a valve broke, first flooding the end zone and then freezing over. Though we anticipated resodding, the turf came through just fine."

Always researching the options, Sullenberger will use TifSport bermudagrass on the baseball field to extend the active growing season a little later into the fall. The outfield will be sprigged; the infield and foul lines sodded. Any additional sprigs will be placed behind the left field fence to provide an on-site source of sod.

He says, "Dan Douglas, now with the Reading Phillies, started upgrading the athletic fields here. Jimmy Rodgers, CSFM, now with the University of Virginia, became sports turf manager in February 1996. I came in as his assistant that March. Up until then the turf an outside contractor had maintained areas and the baseball coaches did the daily infield preparation. We took over the athletic field maintenance, continuing with the contractor for the other areas of the campus. I had a good turf background when I came to GMU, but no baseball experience. Jimmy was my mentor on the dirt work."

Before joining George Mason University, Sullenberger worked for The Athletes Foot shoe stores. During the same period, he gained his experience with bluegrass turf through a part-time position with Chantilly Turf Farms, Inc. He graduated from James Madison University in 1986 with a Bachelors degree in Business Management and a minor in Sports Management. As a linebacker on the football team, he lettered all four years. That sports background gives him an athlete's feel for field conditions.

From January through November, Spuhler Field endures the play of baseball players of every age and ability. Sullenberger says, "The Patriots take the field for 28 regular season games and 100-plus practices. Weather permitting, January 14 is the first day of regular season practice, with games starting in February and continuing at least into mid-May.

"Patriot coaches host instructional camps at Spuhler Field, which begin around June 11 and run for 7 weeks in the grueling 90 degree heat of the summer months. The camps draw players from 5 to 18 and feature batting practice, infield and outfield drills and dozens of full-length games for the players who attend.

"In the summer of 2002, the Atlanta Braves, the Pittsburgh Pirates, the Colorado Rockies, and the Baltimore Orioles held free agent tryouts at the field," adds Sullenberger. "Players who participate in the tryouts are tested in all areas including pitching, hitting and fielding. And, because Georgetown University has no field for practice, they've used Spuhler Field as their practice site for eight Sundays during both 2001 and 2002."

The baseball coaches also use Spuhler field to host two high school recruiting "showcase" events per year for college and pro scouts. Ten all-star high school teams are invited to play their best athletes in 25-30 games. The first is a 4-day showcase held over the Labor Day weekend. The Patriots fall season starts that next week. The second showcase takes place in November. Both of these events draw hundreds of spectators as well. Weather generally shuts down out-

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"Every member of the crew knows the drill: If no one is on the field, grab a rake and hit the edges."



door action some time in late November. Christmas break runs through December into early January, and the cycle begins again.

The GMU turf crew works at the baseball field for a minimum of 5 hours every day the field is in use. Sullenberger says, "We use the same attention to detail for practice preparation as we do in our game day prep. We water the dirt as needed to keep the consistency just right. We use our tractor for the infield dragging, doing each step separately, pulling first the spike, then the nail and finally the mat drag. We do the mound and home plate work immediately after games, tarp them overnight, and do our final prep early in the morning. We'll also do this touchup work on practice days. By 9:30 am the turf is generally dry enough for cutting. We stripe at every mowing. We gradually adjust the height of cut from 1-1/2-inches early in the season up to 3-inches in the hottest part of the summer, back down to 2 inches for fall and winter. We paint lines every other day. We also drag the infield and work the mound and home plate on the practice infield each day. All this is wrapped up by 11:00 am on practice days."

Sullenberger has put together his own infield mix to deliver the performance factors he's after. So, after using calcined or vitrified clay products to get the field game ready in wet conditions, the crew may shovel out those areas the next day and rework the dirt to retain the desired consistency. Several times a season the crew will till up the infield skin, box blade it, and rework it. They'll also dig out the mound and rebuild it several times during the season to insure the best possible playing conditions.

"During the season, the infield dirt kicked into the grass creates a lip. The

turf crew and baseball team rake the infield dirt from the grass every day to reduce the chances of bad hops and injuries," says Sullenberger. "Every member of the crew and the team know the drill: If no one is out on the field, grab a rake and hit the edges. We'll also hose out the edges periodically and occasionally roll them.

"From February through May, an inch of grass per week is edged out of the entire infield to reduce the lip and to make the transition from infield to grass smoother and more even. At the end of the season, we sod around home plate and the baselines. This reduces the diameter of the home plate circle and the width of each baseline, setting up the field for the season-long edging out process."

Residential areas and woodlands border the campus. The neighborhood and GMU have developed an almost family type relationship. People take walks around the campus; deer, birds and other wildlife take shelter among the trees. Twice each year, a neighborhood picnic is held on the softball field. In return, the neighboring families walk the campus on pickup detail four times a year. GMU has initiated an outreach program for the children of families in nearby public housing facilities, providing them with free access to the GMU sports camps.

Sullenberger says, "I can't say enough about the administration here, they're terrific. Their outreach programs are just one example of that. They stand behind our program 100 percent and have put their trust in us. Their support is what has enabled us to grow and move forward."

Perhaps the most unique feature of the baseball field is the sports turf crew that maintains it. The pitching coach for the Patriots Baseball team works on the crew. So do several former GMU players now playing in the minor leagues who have a love for the game and now a unique respect for and pride in the park. Each player on the team arrives early on rainy days to pull the tarp, squeegee, drag, rake, carry sand bags, and bags of calcined clay whenever necessary.

Sullenberger's enthusiasm and commitment are so contagious, the crew can't help but be motivated. In fact, that attitude radiates to all those around

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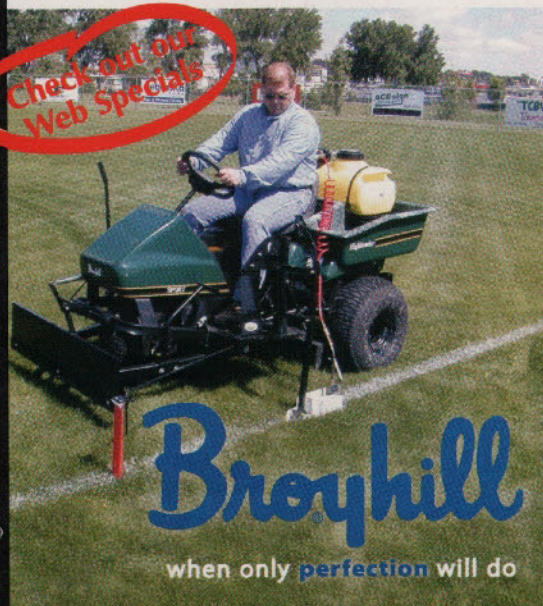
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him. The sports turf crew will cheerfully move mats for the cheerleaders or provide help for a stalled car in the parking lot. The administration will surge onto the field to pull tarp at his call for help. And, as he's quick to point out, his wife Heather is not only his top supporter, she's also caught his enthusiasm for the field and will set aside her law books to pull tarp or even set bases.

Just as the constant attention to detail builds field endurance, Sullenberger insists on the same performance level among the crew. He says, "All the players

on my crew have to work out four times a week, either hit the gym or run. We're just like an athletic team. Our performance counts, so we treat each day like the fourth quarter of a football game. I really believe that failing to prepare is preparing to fail."

ST

Suz Trusty is communications director for the STMA. She can be reached at 800-323-3875.

Spuhler Field maintenance program

March

Early season maintenance as needed and weather permits.
Deep tine aeration using 1-inch hollow tines with penetration 7-8 inches in depth
Mat drag to break up and work in plugs
Mow three times per week at 1-1/2 inch height of cut*
Fertilize with 20-4-10, 15 50-pound bags
Overseed with perennial ryegrass-bluegrass mix at 7 pounds per thousand squared feet
Control products applied only as needed following standard IPM practices (March - October)

April

Fertilize with 0-0-50 sulfate of potash
Mow three times per week at 1-1/2 inch height of cut*
Core aerate, deep tine aerate with needle tines, or slice turf (As often as needed - and possible with field use schedules. April - October)

May

Fertilize with 14-0-25, 92 % MESA, 1.8% Fe, SOP, at the rate of 1.15 pounds of N per thousand square feet
Mow three times per week at 1-1/2 inch height of cut*

June

Fertilize with 15-2-5, 40 % MESA with .2 % Merit, at the rate of 1.15 pounds of N per thousand square feet
Mow three times per week at 2 inch height of cut*

July

Fertilize with 14-1-14, 50% Milorganite, 50 % MESOP, at the rate of 1.15 pounds of N per thousand square feet
Mow three times per week at 2-1/2 inch height of cut*

August

Fertilize with 14-1-14, at the rate of 1.15 pounds of N per thousand square feet
Mow three times per week at 3 inch height of cut*

September

Fertilize with 14-1-14, at the rate of 1.15 pounds of N per thousand square feet
Mow three times per week at 2 inch height of cut*

October

Fertilize with 19-0-19, 62% MESA, at the rate of 1.15 pounds of N per thousand square feet
Mow three times per week at 3 inch height of cut*

November

Fertilize with 19-0-19, at the rate of 1.15 pounds of N per thousand square feet
Mow three times per week at 2 inch height of cut, weather permitting*
Late November, blow out irrigation lines and winterize pump house

December

Hope for insulating blanket of snow

January 14th -

First day of practice season

Daily field maintenance begins - including spike drag, nail drag, mat drag, raking, watering and tamping

February

Daily field maintenance continues - including spike drag, nail drag, mat drag, raking, watering and tamping

*The turf always is mowed on game days, and is double cut if conditions and time allow it.

