DANNY CUNNIFF PARK FIELDS EARN FOY HONORS

he Park District of Highland Park's (IL) Danny Cunniff Park earned the STMA 2002 Soccer Field of the Year award in the Parks and Recreation division. This award is an acknowledgment of district-wide dedication to establishing and maintaining an outstanding soccer complex to truly enrich the community.

The 95-acre facility was originally dedicated as Centennial Park in 1969. Superintendent of Parks Ted Baker, CSFM, says, "The park originally consisted primarily of open space areas along with a tot lot playground, tennis courts, frisbee golf, one skinned softball field, two playfields used for football/soccer and the Park District's indoor ice arena.

"It existed as a low maintenance facility with district-led recreation and camp programs as the main users. In the 1970s, the recreational focus was mainly on softball, until baseball fields were added in 1990. Our in-house staff conducted those renovations.

"In 1999, the park was renamed Danny Cunniff Park in memory of a young boy who was very active in Park District programs. Through the generosity of the Cunniff family, and a matching state grant, the two original play fields were completely renovated for soccer use and an additional two soccer fields were added to the site as was field lighting and an athletic field house." (See sidebar)

The Park District has a high ratio of park space to population with 45 parks, four beaches, a recreation center, indoor ice arena, indoor tennis courts, a 100-acre nature preserve, 18-hole golf course, driving range and miniature golf. As with many older residential communities, a majority of park space is devoted to small (1-4 acre) neighborhood parks. The community is limited where large open space is needed for a sports complex.

Within the 600 acres of Park District property, there are two other larger community parks of approximately 70 acres and 50 acres. The District also maintains eight public school sites. There are approximately 45 acres of sports turf consisting of 14 soccer fields and 14 baseball/softball fields. A continuing challenge for the District is to make the most of what is available to best serve the diverse needs of the community.

Danny Cunniff Park is a linear section of floodplain property adjacent to the Skokie River. Because most of the park serves as a water retention area, flooding is always an issue. The soccer field project was designed to adapt to the configuration of the property and the potential for flooding.

Baker says, "The two renovated soccer fields had been low maintenance, basically a step-up from open, passive area. They are located in the south section of the park, adjacent to the two baseball fields. The new field house, constructed as part of the renovation project, consists of team rooms, restrooms, and storage. To alleviate flooding potential, it was designed with an open swale running beneath the building. A fishing pond exists in the middle of the park near 12 tennis courts, a day camp area and open, passive space. The two new soccer fields were developed in the north section of the park, near the indoor ice arena. The winter sledding hill lies on the north-west corner of the park.

Communication with the architects and engineers was an integral part of the project. Baker met with District staff and developed a "wish list" of items they felt the community needed, doing a great deal of the research and legwork in the process. Some wish list elements were quickly eliminated due to costs, such as the desire for sand-based fields, or space, such as the original desire to have a single slope grade from one side to the other. The District compromised on crowning the fields in the middle with a 1-1/2-percent grade to the sides. Costs also prohibited incorporating calcined clay throughout the fields, so this element was concentrated in the goal box areas.
"The architects and engineers were very open to our ideas, as we were to theirs, so it was an excellent cooperative process," says Baker. "This was especially important because there was such a very short timeframe from the initial decision to scheduled completion of the project. The District solicited for architects in the early summer of 1999. Plans were formulated in July and August. We broke ground in September and sodding was completed in October. We opened for the dedication the following May.

"Our native soil has a good nutrient content, but the structure is a very heavy clay. "Because of this, drainage became a critical consideration. The original proposal called for the typical drainage system with 50-foot piping on center underground. We directed a change to vertical, slit-type drains on 15-foot centers with the trenches coming to the surface. These are about 2 inches in width and extend down to the subsurface drainage, with a multi-flow system stacked on top of each other and the trenches backfilled with calcined clay. The slit drains run the length of the fields to three collectors, one at each end and one at the center, that channel the water to the storm drains."

During renovation, the topsoil was stripped to its base and the subsoil re-graded. After the underground drainage was installed and existing topsoil replaced, the slit drainage system was installed. Calcined clay was incorporated into the penalty box areas at a rate of 250 pounds per 1,000 square feet and roto-tilled in to a depth of 4 inches. Lighting and in-ground irrigation systems were added to the two renovated fields in the south section of the park. The irrigation systems consist of four zones running the length of the fields. Because of Highland Park's proximity to Lake Michigan, water pressure is sufficient to combine zones for irrigation.

"We'd determined a bluegrass blend of sod would best serve our needs, and had specified varieties to provide the desired characteristics of color, low growth habit and disease resistance," says Baker. "After visiting a number of sod farms, we selected a six-variety blend from a local sod producer and set an October installation date.

"Weather was warm and dry throughout the September construction period, which allowed us to keep on schedule, with only one day of rain to slow the process. But instead of turning cool, which is typical of our October weather, temperatures rose to the upper 80-degree range the week we installed the 32,000 yards of big roll sod, and there was no rainfall. The new field house, where the irrigation controllers were to be located, was still under construction. We called in the irrigation contractors to provide a temporary connection so we could water the sod on the irrigated fields. We used water reels, even borrowing some from a neighboring Park District, to keep the sod in shape on the non-irrigated fields."

Baker notes that virtually every member of the staff of 23 full-time personnel played a role in completing the project. "From the Director of Parks throughout the entire crew, there was total dedication to making this happen," Baker commented. "The goal of the Cunniff family and the Park District Commissioners was to establish a long-needed soccer complex for District and community programs. Even though the renovation itself resulted in just four soccer fields, it made it possible for us to provide quality playing fields for the community."
Baker understands this commitment to excellence at all levels. He has been with the Park District of Highland Park since earning his Bachelor's Degree in Parks and Recreation at Southern Illinois University in 1982, even completing his college internship there. Starting as a maintenance crew member, he steadily advanced to the position of Horticulturist for the Park District and then to Parks Foreman, before his appointment as Superintendent of Parks in 1998.

"This was our first major sports field project and our first step into high quality sports turf management," said Baker. "Our staff dedicated itself to establishing and successfully meeting the high maintenance standards of the athletic fields at this facility. Our goal is to provide safe fields of unequalled quality for all participants. Our staff members are committed to doing whatever it takes to achieve that. This effort was recognized in 2001, when the Midwest Chapter STMA presented the "Field & Facility" award to Danny Cunniff Park and again with this STMA Field of the Year Award for 2002.

"As with most maintenance programs, the first two objectives to achieve are safety and playability. Once these are satisfied, it's the third component of fun that makes the fields great. Our staff takes great pride and pleasure in creating a fun environment for the participants. They really get excited about trying a new mowing pattern, painting logos or stencils, setting out flags and banners, and whatever else will make it a more enjoyable playing experience."

Baker reports good results from the combination of the slit drain system and surface drainage, with only one incident of cancelled games since the completion of the project 4 years ago. He also has adopted an aggressive aeration program, planning for four aeration sessions each year, using standard core, solid tine or slicing to match field needs, and budget allotments. Topdressing with calcined clay is carried out twice each season, following core aeration. The cores are dragged back into the soil profile, with any tufts of turf remaining blown off the fields and collected. In 2002, the fields were aerated once with the drill and fill method, using calcined clay for the fill. Two staff members are assigned to Danny Cunniff Park full-time during the playing season, with one focusing primarily on the athletic fields. Additional staff members are assigned to assist with special maintenance procedures, such as aeration and topdressing, and with preparations for major events. The irrigation, fertilization, and mowing programs are all adjusted from season to season, working for the right mix of maintenance practices to produce the best results.

"During 2001, we kept the turf at a 2-inch height during the spring and fall heavy-use seasons, raising the cut to 2.25 to 2.5-inches during the summer to encourage deeper rooting and knitting of the sod," says Baker. "Now we cut at 1-7/8 to 2 inches year round to increase turf density. We overseed with a bluegrass blend following aeration and at the start of the spring and fall seasons. We try to stick with the bluegrass only, limiting the addition of perennial ryegrass as much as possible. We've had limited success with overseeding in the goalmouths and have had better results replacing worn turf there with thick cut sod. Our staff has become very proficient with this procedure, fitting the new sod in so seamlessly it's ready for immediate play."

As anticipated, the soccer fields at Danny Cunniff Park are used by many of the community's groups, with the heaviest use in the spring and fall. The spring soccer season starts with set-up and establishment of the fields, followed by mowing, aeration, and topdressing, ensuring the fields are ready for play. The summer months bring increased use, with the fields being kept in top shape for the fall season. With the winter months, the focus shifts to maintenance and preparation for the next season. TheDanny Cunniff Park Soccer Fields Maintenance Program is designed to provide a high-quality playing surface throughout the year, ensuring the best experience for all users.
The Danny Cunniff Legacy

As noted in the Park District’s 1999 Spring/Summer Brochure, “The Park District recently received the largest private donation ever from the family of Danny Cunniff. During Danny’s brief but valiant battle with acute myeloid leukemia, which he ultimately succumbed to 37 days after his diagnosis, Tim and Jill Cunniff (his parents) were deeply touched by the outpouring of love and support they received from the community of Highland Park. Danny’s home away from home was the Park District of Highland Park. From mom and tot classes when he was an infant, to travel sports teams, Danny embodied what the Park District is all about. He loved Jammers basketball and all of the soccer and hockey programs as well as Mad Science and Big Pioneers. His enthusiasm for Park District activities was contagious. He recruited many of his buddies to participate on the UB travel and developmental soccer league.

The Cunniffs felt that, in light of the tax cap and Danny’s involvement with the Park District, this donation was an excellent and logical choice for the gift to perpetuate Danny’s legacy. With the new improvements, children in the District’s ever growing travel soccer programs will now have the chance to play on fields that are second to none.”

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