

BY SUZ TRUSTY

DANNY CUNNIFF PARK FIELDS EARN FOY HONOR

The Park District of Highland Park's (IL) Danny Cuniff Park earned the STMA 2002 Soccer Field of the Year award in the Parks and Recreation division. This award is an acknowledgement 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 these renovations.

"In 1999, the Park was renamed Danny Cuniff Park in memory of a young boy who was very active in Park District programs. Through the generosity of the Cuniff 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 Cuniff 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.



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"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 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."





MAKING WHAT'S AVAILABLE BEST SERVE DIVERSE COMMUNITY NEEDS IS A CHALLENGE

son, 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

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 Cuniff 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 Cuniff Park full-time during the playing sea-

son, 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.

As anticipated, the soccer fields at Danny Cuniff Park are used by many of the community's groups, with the heaviest use in the spring and fall. The spring soccer sea-

Danny Cuniff Park Soccer Fields Maintenance Program

Mowing:

Maintain height of cut between 1-7/8-inches and 2-inches using a reel mower. Mow three times per week in the spring; two to three times per week or as needed in summer and fall.

Fertilization:

Early May, Spring and Fall Seasons: Apply biostimulant as needed based on turf appearance and performance.

May: Apply 25-5-15 slow release fertilizer at the rate of 1 lb. on N per thousand square feet.

August: Apply 25-5-15 slow release fertilizer at the rate of 1 lb. on N per thousand square feet.

September: Apply 25-5-15 slow release fertilizer at the rate of 1 lb. on N per thousand square feet.

Late October: Apply 20-5-20 fertilizer with sulfur coated urea at the rate of 1 lb. on N per thousand square feet.

Aeration:

Alternate aeration methods and depths to match turf needs.

Aerate in one direction per aeration session, alternating directions with each aeration.

April/May: Core aerate at least once. Drag cores back into turf.

Late August: Core aerate, seed and topdress with calcined clay.

September: Aerate with solid tines in season as needed to reduce compaction.

October: Core aerate if schedule, budget and conditions allow. Drag cores in turf.

Irrigation:

On irrigated fields: Supplement rainfall as needed during spring and fall. Provide sufficient irrigation to maintain turf quality throughout the summer.

On non-irrigated fields: Irrigate as necessary to preserve turf quality during periods of drought and for maintenance practices.

Seeding and Topdressing:

Perform seeding and topdressing with calcined clay in conjunction with aeration practices, with topdressing frequency based on

one-half of aeration frequency.

Spring: Overseed with a bluegrass blend for pre-season seeding.

During Season: Overseed as necessary with a bluegrass blend. Add a perennial ryegrass blend only if needed to maintain turf cover.

Painting

Line fields one to two times per week, as needed.

Paint logos on fields for special events.

Paint Park District logo on the side of the hill; repaint as needed to maintain image.

Weed Control:

Spot treat as needed following standard IPM practices.

Insect Control:

None needed to date.

Disease Control:

Spot treat as needed following standard IPM practices.

son begins as soon as the weather breaks in March and runs to June. The fall soccer season begins in August and runs into November. Camps and clinics take over most of June and early July, leaving only a short break with minimal field use from mid-July to mid-August to accomplish essential cultural practices. All of the Park District teams have used the fields and continue to do so, though the program is now being organized through the Chicago Wind, which coordinates much of the Chicago-area travel soccer club activity. The AYSO teams use the fields, as well as do the High School freshmen teams (both Boys and Girls), the Junior Varsity team and the Junior High Schools teams. The High School Varsity team will occasionally play a night game on one of the lighted fields. They also host summer sports camps, referee clinics, coaches' clinics, and the Danny Cuniff Labor Day Tournament, which brings in around 60 teams of 9-13-year olds. The combined use of these various groups adds up to approximately 250 events annually. All this takes place while the rest of the Park's facilities are undergoing similarly heavy use.

"There are two basic challenges to maintenance of the facility," says Baker. "The first is meeting expectations. Staff, coaches and players expect to have the fields in ideal condition at all times. This makes it difficult to schedule cultural practices, such as aeration, that normally cause some disruption to the appearance of the field for a short period. We strive to maintain game-ready appearance, without sacrificing field quality or performance.

"The second challenge, limiting use, is needed due to the fact that the fields are unfenced and open to the public and have become an attraction for pick-up games of all kinds. This restricts the ability to control use of the fields, which is so essential when conditions are not favorable. Wear from pick-up games during drought or very wet

The Danny Cuniff 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 Cuniff. During Danny's brief but valiant battle with acute myeloid leukemia, which he ultimately succumbed to 37 days after his diagnosis, Tim and Jill Cuniff (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 U8 travel and developmental soccer league.

The Cuniffs 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."

weather can be considerable. We don't want to seem so regulation-heavy that we detract from the user-friendly atmosphere of the Park, so we try to limit our signs to only what is actually needed. We've found education and communication are the best tools for avoiding excessive use and abuse of the fields. We concentrate on building good relationships with the teams and the public and working with our athletic recreation staff in communicating management essentials to the program staff and leaders. We feel this user-friendly policy is the best way to maintain the Danny Cuniff legacy and, observing the enjoyment of those using the fields, confirms that it's working." **ST**

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