

Softball Field of the Year

Texas Woman's University

BY SUZ TRUSTY

Pioneer Field of Texas Woman's University earned the 2002 Sports Turf Managers Association (STMA) Softball Field of the Year Award in the College/University division. Texas Woman's University is located in Denton, approximately 30 miles north of the Dallas/Ft. Worth metroplex. The school is a member of the Division II Lone Star Conference.

Though TWU had fielded an active softball program in the 70s, winning the national championship in 1979, the program was discontinued in 1980. It was reinstated in a big way in the mid-1990s with the University's addition of Softball Coach Diane Baker, an NCAA Hall of Famer inducted for her playing skills. The TWU softball team won their division in 2002 and advanced to the NCAA Division II playoffs.

The Pioneer Field design and construction details were developed through collaboration between Baker and the TWU Athletic Department and the Facilities Management and Construction Department. Bob Trevino, landscape supervisor with the grounds management division, who would be overseeing maintenance of the field, became a key part of the process.

The Pioneer Field softball complex was built in 1996 to meet the requirements necessary to host NCAA Regional and National tournaments as well as high school games. An outside contractor was hired for the grading and soil modifications. Subsurface drainage was installed in a herringbone pattern that drains into the sewer lines to the east of the field.

Trevino says, "The native soil at this site contained lots of red clay which we knew would cause drainage and compaction problems, so we specified the addition of sandy loam to modify the soil profile for the turfed section of the

field. We worked with the contractor on the original specs for the skinned area material. An outside contractor also installed the 419 Tiff Bermudagrass sod. Our department designed and installed the in-ground irrigation system for the turfed area of the field.

"An outside contractor constructed the built-in dugouts. Each has a restroom, water fountain, storage space for equipment, and an intercom system allowing communication to the press box. A 27-foot scoreboard is located in center field and features inning-by-inning scoring. The entire complex is outlined by a 6-foot chain link fence that connects with the 20-foot section behind home plate that extends between the two dugouts."

The initial project provided no funding for bleachers so the grounds department was charged with moving in portable bleachers from indoor venues to provide seating for games. When funding became available in 1998, bleachers to seat 500 were constructed behind home plate. A fund drive raised the money for installation of a lighting system, which happened shortly after the bleachers were completed.

Trevino says, "Since the lighting installation would require tearing up the field behind home plate, our department tackled the modification of the skinned area to correct performance deficiencies in the original material. We also reworked the areas in front of the dugouts. Coach Baker likes the effect of turf, rather than skinned area, in front of the dugouts and that feature is part of the aesthetics of our field. We had been having problems with some of the irrigation in that area since the original construction. So we used the 3-4 weeks of this project's downtime to redo the irrigation in front of the dugouts

and at home plate. We removed the existing materials, made the irrigation adjustments, replaced the materials, and resodded where we had removed turf."

More field improvements took place in the summer of 2002. The irrigation system was extended to cover the skinned area. "Though we needed to dig up the field again to install the sprinkler head behind the pitchers circle, the time and effort were well worth it," notes Trevino. "The in-ground irrigation system eliminates the need to water the skinned area manually with water hoses, except for the occasional weather-related dry spots."

"On one of the team's trips, Coach Baker saw a pathway constructed from tires cut into sections and anchored into the soil. She tracked down the source for us and we worked with the supplier to add this feature to the field. We provided the measurements for a pathway extending in front of the dugouts to home plate. The rubber material comes in small, flat pads. We removed the existing soil to a depth of approximately 4 inches, leveled the surface, sunk the rubber pads, and backfilled to anchor them. Once the pathway was installed, we painted over the black rubber in a color matching the trim on our dugouts."

"We used the same type of rubber material for our foul lines, painting it white. It only needs painting once a year and we can edge it in less than 5 minutes. Now we only need to chalk the infield and behind the catcher."

Upgrading the field in increments over the years does require extra effort from the staff but, as Trevino points out, it's the reality of the tight budget situations most facilities are facing. He says, "We are fortunate that all of our personnel are professional and dedicated to their work. While every staff member has primary assignments, all are flexible and will do whatever it takes to ensure the campus grounds are in top condition. When the softball field was constructed, none of the employees currently assigned to Pioneer Field—Assistant Landscape Supervisors Becky Chisenhall and Larry Monden, and Groundskeeper Chuck Reedy—had previously worked with sports fields. Looking at our field now you would assume these individuals had been dedicated to this type of work throughout their careers. I can't say enough about their commitment to excellence. We especially thank Diane Baker for her ability and willingness to interact with me and our staff to ensure the development and management of Pioneer Field would be all she envisioned it could be."

The Pioneer Field complex is located on the northeast corner of campus on the site once occupied by a track facility and is surrounded by lush, rolling hills that had previously served as the viewing sites for track events. A wide, paved walkway separates Pioneer Field from the adjoining tennis court complex. An area of rolling hills, shrubbery, and a creek divide the Pioneer Field and Tennis complexes from the University's golf course. The golf course is due south of the softball field, located behind the field's scoreboard.

Hedges accent the long sidewalk that leads to the Pioneer Field complex and the letters TWU etched into a flowerbed filled with dark red and white dianthus, representing the school's colors, maroon and white. This beautiful setting, the first thing players and fans see when approaching the complex, is reinforced by the pristine field conditions and the overall excellence in the maintenance of all 270 acres of campus grounds. The Grounds Department earned a national award for campus maintenance from The National Institute of Parks and Grounds Management in 1999. All this is achieved with a total of 25 Grounds Department employees: 10 focusing on the golf course, three primarily dedicated to the athletic facilities, and the remaining 12 concentrating on the



overall campus.

Trevino's staff provides greenery for campus functions with tropicals, ferns and ficus, and cut flower centerpieces. The Grounds Department maintains two greenhouses that have supplied as many as 100,000 annuals to fill 25 campus flowerbeds with color changeouts in spring, summer, and fall. The greenhouses still produce annuals in addition to other plant materials, but Trevino is gradually reducing the number of flowerbeds and introducing more native plants and perennials to cut maintenance time. The Grounds Department also handles cleanup duties, tree and shrub trimming, and snow and ice

removal—basically anything related to the campus grounds.

Trevino says, "We constructed our soccer field 2 years ago. Our staff did the site preparation, designed and installed the irrigation, seeded the field, and installed the goals and scoreboard. Fall of 2002 was the first season of play. The only available space for the soccer field was on the other side of campus from the Pioneer Field complex. So in addition to the added regular maintenance of the new field, our athletic field maintenance staff must transport the necessary

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Field of the Year

equipment to and from the soccer site."

At TWU, campus events are held year-round.

Softball practice starts on the field during the third week of January, the first day students are back from Christmas break. The first softball game takes place in the first week of February, with the spring season running until the end of April.

Trevino says, "Our softball team averages 60 spring games with approximately half of those home games played on Pioneer Field. Most Conference games are held on Friday and Saturday, generally with a 5 PM game on Friday night and a 1 PM game on Saturday. Non-conference games are held during the week, usually beginning at 5 or 6 PM. Many of the smaller high schools west of Fort Worth and east of Dallas hold their regional playoffs on Pioneer Field. The 60-70 playoff games are held on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday during April and early May, worked in between the TWU scheduled games. The soccer team holds spring scrimmages during



this period.

"TWU also has Homecoming in the spring, rather than the fall like most Universities. And, in the spring of 2003, we hosted the national Division II gymnastics finals," says Trevino.

Activity continues into the summer. One softball camp comes to campus the first week of June, followed by a second camp in July. During the short downtime in July and August, temperatures regularly reach 105 degrees or higher, so irrigation must be constantly monitored.

Softball practice kicks in again during the middle of August. Fall softball tournaments start in September and run for four or five

weekends. Each fall tournament brings in 4 to 6 teams for a round of games beginning at 8 AM and running to 6 PM. The soccer season also begins in mid-August and runs throughout the fall.

Trevino says, "We strive to maintain excellent playing conditions on our athletic fields throughout the year so we oversee the Bermudagrass fields with perennial ryegrass to provide continual turf cover. We also overseed all of the other campus turf areas to improve the aesthetics and overall appeal of the campus. While this means our crews are mowing actively growing grass nearly year round, we consider the extra effort well worth it.

"Because our University is constantly holding activities that bring others to our campus, including alumni, potential students and their parents, we know that curb appeal is extremely important. If you don't maintain an inviting campus, you don't attract students. Even during the economic downturn, TWU enrollment has been increasing."

Trevino is originally from south Texas. When his future wife, Cori, moved north to attend the University of North Texas about 22 years ago, he moved north to be closer to her rather than completing his studies at the University of Texas Pan-American. He'd always enjoyed working on the family's yard with his Dad and applied that background to positions with landscape companies in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. He joined the TWU staff 16 years ago, moving quickly to the Landscape Supervisor position, which he's held for 10 years.

He says, "I'd always been a sports fan and an admirer of athletic fields, so I was eager to take on the challenge of the new TWU fields. Every year has been a learning experience. In 2002 our precipitation patterns flip-flopped. We received limited spring rains but had heavy rains in September and October. Spring of 2003 has been colder than usual, with temperatures lingering in the 40 to 50 degree range, which is holding back our Bermudagrass. Then, in mid-April, we had a hard freeze with a record-breaking 28 degrees. We set irrigation system timers across campus to come on between 4 or 5 AM to save the spring plantings.

"Because funding is limited, we're always seeking ways to stretch resources to accomplish what we want to achieve. This past year we've instituted a more aggressive cross-training program to integrate back up personnel into our athletic field program. The interaction between the Athletic Department and our Grounds Department and the cooperation and commitment to excellence throughout the University system allows us to work out funding and personnel issues to maintain our campus and athletic fields at top levels. **Maintenance program detailed on page 13**

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

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TWU Athletic Field Maintenance program

November - December:

Maintain infield skin as needed
and weather allows
Mow daily or as needed

January:

Prepare field for practice and play

February - May:

Aerate once as field use schedules
and weather conditions allow
Fertilize once as budget and field
use schedules and weather condi-
tions allow (mid-March preferred)

Mow daily

Perennial ryegrass transitions out naturally as temperatures reach 90-
degree levels

Edge and trim turf as needed

Irrigate skin area to maintain game-ready moisture levels

Drag infield skin daily

Chalk lines for all games

Clean dugouts and bleacher area

Irrigate turf as needed

June - early July:

Fertilize once as budget and field use schedules and weather con-
ditions allow

Mow daily

Edge and trim turf as needed

Irrigate skin area to maintain game-ready moisture levels

Drag infield skin daily

Chalk lines for camp events

Clean dugouts and bleacher area for camp events

Irrigate turf as needed

Mid-July - Mid-August:

Mow daily or every other day (as staff levels allow)

Edge and trim turf as needed

Drag infield skin daily or every other day (as staff levels allow)

Monitor irrigation closely to reduce turf stress during extreme
heat

Work on field/facility improvements as needed

Prepare field for fall season

Mid-August -September:

Overseed Bermudagrass with perennial ryegrass (The first week of
September if possible with field use scheduling. No later than
the third week of September.)

Mow daily

Edge and trim turf as needed

Irrigate skin area to maintain game-ready moisture levels

Drag infield skin daily



Chalk lines for all games

Clean dugouts and bleacher area

Irrigate turf as needed

October:

Aerate once as schedules and
weather conditions allow

Fertilize once as budget, schedules
and weather conditions allow

Mow daily or every other day (as
staff levels allow)

Edge and trim turf as needed

Drag infield skin daily or every

other day (as staff levels allow)

Irrigate turf as needed

Work on field/facility improvements as needed

Prepare field for winter season

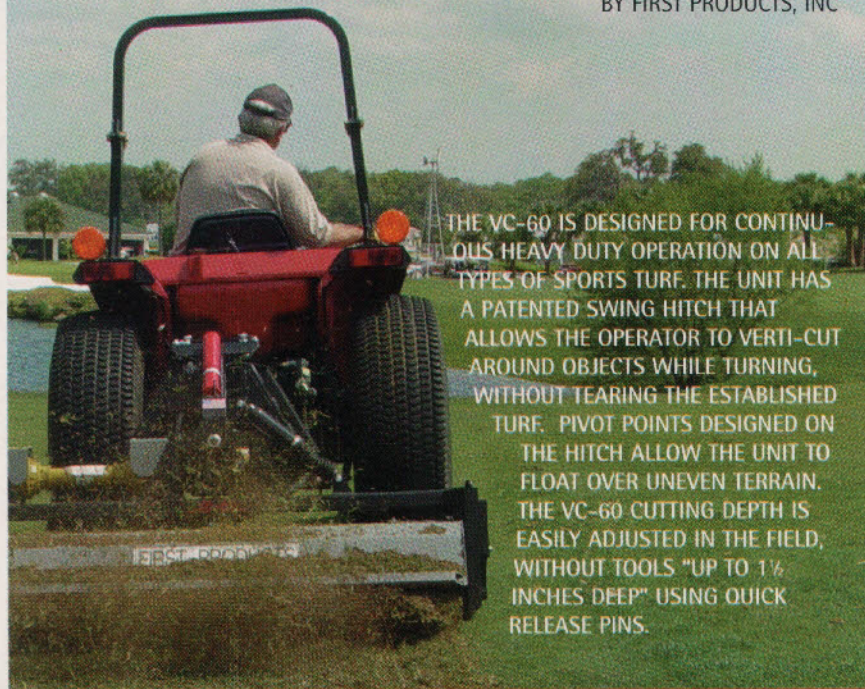
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