

BY SUZ TRUSTY

BASEBALL HONORS MINOR LEAGUE TURF MANAGERS

Tom Nielsen, Ed Attalla, Tommy Walston, and Joe Skrabak earned top honors as the 2003 recipients of the Sports Turf Manager of the Year Awards for Minor League Baseball, sponsored by the Sports Turf Managers Association (STMA). The Awards were presented by STMA President Bob Campbell, CSFM, presented the awards at the Baseball Winter Meetings in New Orleans last December.

Each of the 16 leagues has selected a winner in recent years for recognition, presented by Major League and Minor League Baseball. The four classifications of Sports Turf Manager of the Year Award recipients were selected from the 2003 league winners.

In 2001, STMA entered a 3-year agreement with Minor League Baseball to honor the Sports Turf Manager of the Year for each of the four classifications. In his letter to STMA in support of the International League's nominee for that year, President Randy A. Mobley wrote about the joint relationship, "The increase in the level of sophistication within your industry that has taken place in the past decade is quite remarkable. The recognition to be given the best of these professionals working in Minor League Baseball as a result of this new relationship is certainly well deserved."

To qualify for award consideration, individuals must have been named Sports Turf Manager of the Year for their respective league. (See the list below of individuals so honored.)

These individuals were asked to submit the following information for review by the STMA judging team: Photos documenting the events and staff on the field; a narrative outlining the staff; budget; number of events and/or games per season; cultural practices; a brief history of the facility; and a narrative on the game day routine outlining the type of equipment used, how it is used, and staff management details.

Also required: a letter from the League President outlining why the individual was selected as Sports Turf Manager of the Year for that league; a letter from the team's General Manager outlining why the individual should be named the League's Sports Turf Manager of the Year; and an explanation, in 100 words or less, by the individual as to why he or she chose this as a career and the individual's goals for the sports turf industry.

Class AAA

The Class AAA Sports Turf Manager of the Year is Tom Nielsen of Louisville Slugger Field, Louisville, KY, home of the Louisville Bats, affiliate of the Cincinnati Reds. The 13,300-seat Louisville Slugger Field opened in April 2000. Underneath the 100 percent Kentucky bluegrass turf is an 8-inch sand based root zone, topping a 6-inch layer of washed gravel with 4-inch and 6-inch drain tiles on 20-foot centers throughout the field.

The irrigation system consists of 89 heads in 13 zones, with full field coverage, including the infield clay area. The irrigation system can be controlled by a control panel or by remote control. Nielsen manually adjusts the irrigation run times based upon the daily use of a hand-held soil moisture sensor. In between irrigation cycles, he

waters by hand to keep moisture at ideal levels. With eight quick couplers positioned around the field, the entire field can be watered by hand with a 130-foot hose.

Nielsen's staff consists of a full-time assistant sports turf manager, three full-time seasonal employees, and two game day employees. There is also a crew of two part-time employees who take care of the extensive landscaping that enhances the outside of the stadium. Nielsen takes an encouraging, mentoring approach to personnel management, which allows his staff to make the most of their abilities and produces a dedicated, highly skilled team. In fact, his former assistant, Peter Lockwood, in his first year

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in the head position with the Eugene Emeralds, tied for the Northwest League Sports Turf Manager of the Year honors.

In 2003, Louisville Slugger Field played host to over 100 events including: 72 Bats Games, eight college and

high school games, Bats team workouts, 7 days of clinics/try-out camps, four privately sponsored batting practices, a 2-day cheerleading competition, three kids camp outs on field with tents, on-field television commercial production, and 3 pre-game baseball clinics. All these events took place between March 30 and September 30.

To accomplish all this, a precisely planned and closely coordinated field mainte-

nance program is essential. To add to the challenges, Louisville is in the transition zone on the Ohio River, where the climate runs to extremes. The winters are very cold and the summers are hot and humid. Nielsen's attention to detail, well-planned and precisely implemented maintenance program, and innovative solutions to problem solving have taken his field management program to the highest levels.

In support of Nielsen's nomination, International League President, Randy A. Mobley, wrote, "Tom Nielsen is the epitome of a sports turf professional in the new millennium. With a degree in horticulture and 13 years of varied experiences, Tom has clearly established himself as an expert within his field and is second to none within the Minor League Baseball Industry. After working in the upper Midwest on both the Brewers and Packers fields in Milwaukee, multiple spring training sites in Florida, a Class A baseball facility in Eugene, OR, and a Double A field in the near-south (Chattanooga), Tom had quite the complete resume when hired to care for the turf in beautiful Louisville

Slugger Field in the fall of 1999. Tom brought with him experience in virtually all climates of the country while having worked with numerous varieties of grasses.

"As evidenced by his field receiving the 2002 Sports Turf Managers Association Baseball Field of the Year Award for professional fields, Tom was and is the right man for the job in Louisville."

Gary Ulmer, Louisville Bats President, wrote, "Bringing Tom Nielsen to Louisville was one of the best decisions I have ever made. As we knew nothing about turf fields, we have relied entirely on Tom's judgment and expertise. We have been right to do so as managers and players have, on countless times, expressed that our field is far and away the best in Minor League baseball. Tom has a tremendous work ethic and is extremely trustworthy and dedicated."

Class AA

The Class AA Sports Turf Manager of the Year is Ed Attalla of The Baseball Grounds of Jacksonville, Jacksonville, FL, home to the Suns, affiliate of the Los Angeles Dodgers.

The Baseball Grounds of Jacksonville opened on April 11 of 2003. The ballpark combines state-of-the-art convenience with a classic design, giving the fans a feeling of



baseball history and nostalgia. The field itself was installed during construction, but the Suns and Attalla were not able to begin working on it until mid-March. It is a credit to the efforts of the Suns and the expertise and commitment of Attalla and his staff that they were able to get the field into condition and ready for play in such a tight timeframe. With a first year facility, the field management and maintenance program is a constant work in process, always subject to fine-tuning as weather patterns and field microclimates produce their impacts on the precise pre-season planning. As well as constantly monitoring conditions, Attalla integrated interactive communication with the team manager and players to discern their percep-

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tions of field conditions to insure the highest levels of safety and playability were achieved.

Attalla's staff consists of one full-time assistant who works during the day in-season and five part-time personnel who assist Attalla and his assistant during the Suns' home games.

The field at The Baseball Grounds hosted 70 Suns home games between April and September, along with six softball games, one high school game, one community baseball game and a number of concerts and corporate events. Attalla anticipates the event schedule to become even more intense after this inaugural year, as there will be more time to schedule and work on larger events.

In support of Attalla's nomination, Don Mincher, Southern League President, wrote, "Ed Attalla began his career with the AA Bowie Baysox. After 2 seasons in Bowie, Ed spent one season at Jack Kent Cooke Stadium, (then) home of the NFL's Washington Redskins. Following his time in Washington, Ed worked one season for the Delmarva Shorebirds of the South Atlantic League where he received the 'Best Playing Field' award in 1998. He made the move to Jacksonville in 1999 to work for Spectacor Management Group (SMG), the operator of sports facilities in Jacksonville, including Alltel Stadium and the former home of the Suns, Wolfson Park.

"Having won this award in his first year with the Suns speaks volumes for the incredible talent and work Ed Attalla devoted to making the Jacksonville Suns' home one of the finest playing surfaces in all of Minor League Baseball. His skills as a sports turf

manager are unparalleled and he has earned the respect of the entire Southern League."

Peter D. Bragan, Jr., Vice President/General Manager of the Jacksonville Suns, wrote, "We were fortunate to move into the new Baseball Grounds of Jacksonville for the 2003 season. I hired Ed this past January (2003) to head up the field operations. Due to the stadium construction, he was unable to get control of the field until mid-March, with an April 11 Opening Day to get ready for.

"The job Ed did with our field, especially considering the short time frame he had to work with, make it a clear cut decision in my mind that he should be honored with this award. During the 2003 Southern League All-Star Game that we hosted this summer, many of the general managers and staff from other teams in our league commented on how professional the field looked and I have received many compliments from the umpiring crews and visiting teams on the field condition and also Ed's approach to them and making the playing field as safe and attractive as he and his staff could."



Class A

The Class A Sports Turf Manager of the Year is Tommy Walston of Grainger Stadium, Kinston, NC, home of the Kinston Indians, affiliate of the Cleveland Indians. Grainger Stadium was built in 1949. The playing surface was a native soil without any drainage

or irrigation. The infield was resodded in the 1980s. No additional renovation had taken place before Walston's arrival in 1996. Kinston, a town of 25,000, is the smallest full season market in professional baseball. While the team has earned the full support of the community, understandably the budget is limited. Walston needs to be meticulous about every purchase for the field, while striving for the very best playing surface.

Walston says, "My desire was to conduct a complete renovation. My dream came true in the fall of 1998 when I designed and installed a sand-based field. The total cost of the project was \$135,000. I was able to complete this project by obtaining community donations. A private contractor donated the excavation of the old surface. Free trucking of materials was provided by the City of Kinston Public Works. The new surface has 10 inches of pure sand, an automated irrigation system, drainage on 20-foot centers, new infield clay, a warning track, and 96,000 square feet of Tifway 419 bermudagrass." This was obviously a great accomplishment for Walston, the City of Kinston and the Kinston Indians.

Walston's staff consists of one full-time seasonal assistant who works a maximum of 40 hours per week from March through August and four part-time employees who work game nights. Walston works with these part-timers to set the home stand schedules, so that work hours are balanced between the four and he has a crew of two to assist him with each home game. The field of Grainger Stadium hosted 72 Indians' regular season home games and two preseason exhibition games against college teams, along with the eight games of the AAU 13 and under National Championship, and seven Division I college baseball games. All this took place between March 12 and August 28.

During his eight seasons at Grainger Stadium, Walston has developed an extensive system of planning and executing the maintenance program, incorporating innovative methods of doing more with less. Currently, baseball is the only event held at the stadium. While everyone would like to conduct more events on the field, there is no funding available for covers to protect the field or for any necessary post-event repairs.

A former centerfielder for Mount Olive College, Walston realized he wouldn't reach pro levels as a player, so he initially applied his BS degree in business management to a position in technical sales. Determining that wasn't the career route for him, he earned an AA in turf management at Wayne Community College in Goldsboro. In 1996, he moved to his current position, combining his educational background with his love for baseball.

In support of Walston's nomination, John Hopkins, President of the Carolina League, wrote, "We are very proud of the playing surface in Kinston. The field always looks magnificent and plays true. Tommy works closely with his own club's field staff to understand their needs and desires. He also makes it a point to get to know and give the same consideration to the visiting clubs in the league.



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"Especially this year, we got a lot of rain in Kinston, and I have found Tommy to be thoroughly professional and most cooperative in getting games played even in difficult conditions."

North Johnson, President/General Manager of Kinston Indians Baseball, wrote, "My working relationship with Tommy through all the trials of this season was super. He is always very professional in handling matters at the stadium and does an excellent job of verbally communicating his plans. I never feel uninformed when it comes to the playing surface. Tommy always explains to me in detail what he is doing and why he is doing it. In his eyes he never settles for less and he expects the field to be perfectly manicured."

"He is well respected not only in our immediate area, but through the state of North Carolina. Tommy founded and is very involved with the Eastern North Carolina Sports Turf Association. I can recall him organizing free, all-day seminars here at Grainger Stadium on Saturdays for high school coaches and anyone involved with athletic fields. He is committed to helping other coaches improve their fields. He truly has a passion for his work."

Short Season A

The Short Season A Sports Turf Manager of the Year is Joe Skrabak of Joseph L. Bruno



Stadium, the home field of the Tri-City ValleyCats Baseball, Troy, NY, an affiliate of the Houston Astros and members of the New York-Penn League. The stadium is also home field for Hudson Valley Community College (HVCC). Skrabak is responsible for the full maintenance of all the Community College athletic fields, which includes the softball field, football field, and football practice field, as well as the baseball field. The ValleyCats and (HVCC) broke ground for the 4,500-seat baseball stadium in 2001. Bruno Stadium offers fans close proximity to the

field and many amenities, including a spacious group picnic area, extensive concessions menu, and a major-league quality video/scoreboard. It features such player perks as large dugouts, spacious clubhouses, and an indoor batting cage on the third base side. The playing field was completed in the first phase of construction and includes a native sand soil profile topped with Kentucky bluegrass turf.

Skrabak's season-long staff consists of one full-time assistant and one part-time staff members. Three part-time individuals are added during the spring and summer to assist with HVCC and the ValleyCats baseball seasons.

The field hosted 38 regular season home games for the Tri-City ValleyCats; 20 Hudson Valley Community College baseball games and team practices; two high school games; a 6-team Division III NCAA regional tournament; a 4-team NCJAA regional tournament; six classes of high school baseball finals; a Connie Mack tournament; a charity softball game; and a company-sponsored fantasy baseball day.

In support of Skrabak's nomination, Ben J. Hayes, President of the New York-Penn League, wrote, "Throughout the 2003 season, Joe Skrabak maintained the playing field in optimal, if not immaculate, condition. Even in the most adverse conditions, his experience, management skills and, most importantly, tireless efforts, permitted the Tri-City club to play, and complete, virtually all of its home games."

Rick Murphy, General Manager for the ValleyCats, wrote, "Joe Skrabak is the consummate sports turf manager. His dedication to the turf maintenance has been exemplary. With a limited staff, Joe has been able to keep the field at a level that is comparable to many Triple A facilities. Joe's ability to meet the demands of the field manager, while understanding the fiscal responsibilities of the general manager, has made it a pleasure to work with him. Although the Tri-City ValleyCats play in a short season league, Joe's work continues throughout the year on the various athletic fields on the campus of Hudson Valley Community College."

2003 Minor League Baseball League Sports Turf Managers of the Year:

International - Tom Nielsen, Louisville Bats
Pacific Coast - Monte McCoy, Oklahoma RedHawks
Eastern - Pat Coakley, Altoona Curve
Southern - Ed Attalla, Jacksonville Suns
Texas - Dennis Klein, Round Rock Express
California - Clark Neuvert, Stockton Ports
Carolina - Tommy Walston, Kinston Indians
Florida - Keith Blasingim, Fort Myers Miracle
Midwest - Ryan Kaspitzke, Dayton Dragons
South Atlantic - Greg Elliott, Lake County Captains
New York - Penn - Joe Skrabak, Tri-City Valley Cats
Northwest - (tie) Peter Lockwood, Eugene Emeralds, and Bret Whiteman, Spokane Indians
Appalachian - Mike Thompson, Burlington Indians
Pioneer - Ken Kopinski, Ogden Raptors
Gulf Coast - Chris Connell, Gulf Coast Yankees
Mexican - Florencio Vidal Miranda, Pericos d Puebla & Tigres de la Angelopolis **ST**

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