

BY NATHAN ODGAARD

NEW PETCO PARK PRIMED FOR PLAY

Luke Yoder may be in a league of his own when it comes to readying a new baseball field for play. The past three years Yoder has overseen the planning and construction of two of Major League Baseball's newest fields. With the Pittsburgh Pirates from 2000 to 2003, Yoder managed construction of the team's new field at PNC Park, which opened in the spring of 2001. Today, under Yoder's direction, a perfectly groomed and pristine field at San Diego's PETCO Park awaits an April inauguration as the new home of the Padres.

PETCO's field features sod from West Coast Turf that he says contains an ideal



Luke Yoder

baseball field playing surface—Bull's Eye Bermuda overseeded with Chaparral ryegrass. The field passed its first test, as players and coaches participating in light workouts in January created a buzz about the field's condition and playability. "They seem to love it," Yoder said. "They like how the ball plays on the dirt and in the outfield."

The true measure of success, of course, will come once the season gets underway and the players have broken in the field. But immediate and long-term player satisfaction is likely, based on the field construction and maintenance know-how Yoder put to use at PETCO Park that he acquired from talking with peers, visiting other ballparks, and, most importantly, working on PNC Park's new field.

Yoder's experience in field construction at PNC Park drew the attention last year of the Padres during their search for a new director of field maintenance. "My work on the new ball field was a big reason I was brought in to open PETCO Park," he said.

His checklist of items to look for during construction of PETCO Park included:

- * Checking proper grades and slopes.
- * Testing for proper irrigation coverage, adequate pressure in irrigation lines, and positive drainage through drain lines.
- * Testing the rootzone for particle size analysis and sufficient percolation rates.
- * Checking for compaction on the entire field.
- * Assuring quick grow-in and establishment of the turf through the use of proper macro and micronutrients, cultivation practices after the sod is laid, and the application of proper chemicals and fertilizers.

As he planned for construction of both fields, he sought input from other field managers from around the league and visited numerous ballparks. Last year he traveled to Anaheim, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Arizona, and Oakland.

"My visits to other fields in preparing for the new field at PETCO Park helped reaffirm the construction plans that I had in mind," Yoder said. "I did pick up a few new ideas. For example, at Bank One Ballpark in Arizona and in Anaheim they use a new type of warning track material that is dustless. It does not require hand-watering,



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which will save us time and keep the seats and fans cleaner before the game when we drag the track."

A similarity he discovered among these ballparks that helps set them apart is the sod. Bank One, Dodger Stadium, and Edison Field were voted by the players as having some of the best-quality fields in the league, according to a Sports Illustrated survey last year. All fields feature similar grass varieties of sod from West Coast Turf.

PETCO Park's blend of Bermuda and rye will offer a dark, blue-green color,

medium texture for enhanced playability and greater shade tolerance, Yoder said. It is designed to provide a durable field that requires less maintenance. For example, Yoder noted that the Bull's Eye Bermuda's medium texture blades require less fertilization and less mowing.

West Coast Turf installed 103,000 square feet of the sod in September. The sod came directly from the company's sod farm in Palm Desert, CA.

Maintenance practices for the turf during the season will be based on appearance, soil and tissue tests, and the amount of clippings that are harvested. Yoder will topdress with sand, aerify, verti-cut, fertilize, apply pesticides, and irrigate the field as needed. He will irrigate about once a week until the season and the summer arrives, when the field will require water almost daily.

Two factors will help Yoder in his efforts to maintain an exceptional field: San Diego's year-round mild climate and the fact that the Padres will not have to share the field with the Chargers. "Not sharing the field means less maintenance. The out-field won't be in as rough a shape as it was at Qualcomm Stadium when the football team played there. No matter how hard you try, you can only do so much as a groundskeeper to adequately prepare a baseball field after a football game," Yoder said.

Yoder added that special events might take place in the future at PETCO Park. If so, he would consider having to re-sod the field as needed.

In other maintenance practices on the field, the turf's rootzone consists of a soil mix of 90 percent sand and 10 percent peat moss to help enhance drainage and nutrient-holding capacity.

The infield clay around the base path is conditioned with Turface Pro League, while the pitcher's mound and home plate includes MoundMaster Blocks. Both are incorporated in the soil to help prevent compaction and improve moisture absorption.

"We will almost always hand-water the infield skinned areas," Yoder said. "We are constantly monitoring moisture in the clay, as moisture is the key to a good playing infield skin."

The Padres home opener at PETCO Park is slated for April 8 against the Giants. However, the inaugural baseball game will be March 11, when San Diego State plays host to a collegiate tournament.

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Nathan Odgaard is an associate with Swanson Russell, a marketing communications firm in Lincoln, NE. He can be reached at nathano@sramarketing.com.



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