

field of the year

# FIRST AMERICAN BANK BALLPARK FIRST IN PRO BASEBALL

BY SUZ TRUSTY

**T**op honors go to First American Bank Ballpark, the Sports Turf Managers Association 2003 Baseball Field of the Year in the Professional division. Located in Midland, TX, this 5,000-seat premium facility is home of the Midland RockHounds, Double A affiliate of the Oakland Athletics.

A bond issue, approved in 1999, called for development of the city-owned Scharbauer Sports Complex, including construction of its star attractions, separate baseball and football facilities. Grande Communications Stadium, the 15,000 seat, synthetic turf football facility, is just next door.

Construction of First American Bank Ballpark began in September 2001. Monty Sowell, head groundskeeper, arrived in Midland in October of 2001. He says, "The field was already in, and the irrigation and turf installed, when I came on board. The stadium was going up around it."

The soil profile is a 10-inch layer consisting of 95 percent sand and 5 percent organic peat. It tops a 4-inch layer of pea gravel over a network of drainage tile set in a herringbone pattern. The infield composition is 60 percent sand, 20 percent clay and 20 percent silt. The turf is Tifsport Bermudagrass.

Sowell is a transplanted Texan. He says, "I had 3 years of golf course experience, working for Eric Becker at the Air Force Academy & PAFB courses in Colorado Springs. He was my first turf mentor, and I peppered him with questions the entire time I was there. I then spent a year at a minor league facility with Mark Leasure of the Sky Sox, another excellent mentor. When the Midland opportunity came up it was an easy choice. I loved ballfields and had a strong desire to be a head groundskeeper."

Sowell earned his BS Degree in Health and Physical Education from Arkansas Tech University in Russellville. All his turf experience was on cool-season grasses.

"So I arrived in Texas knowing no one, with limited resources, no budget history, and no equipment and our first game was scheduled for March 27, 2002," says Sowell with a laugh. "That's a perfect example of why networking is so important in this profession. Tom McAfee of the San Antonio Missions and Dennis Klein of the Round Rock Express have been excellent resources, always willing to share information.

"I found the hardest part about being successful here was finding quality goods and services. Midland is at least 300 miles away from any major supplier. We get our fertilizer and infield clay from Dallas and our sod from San Antonio, so timing of shipments and freight costs are major issues. The only purchases we are able to make locally are for field paint, irrigation supplies, and fuel.

"Our nearest service point for equipment also is 300 miles away. Loaners and/or demo equipment are out of the question. We are able to remain successful by proper upkeep of the equipment we own, equipment on trade from a local rental company, and help from Robert Campbell, the local golf course superintendent, and his service technician, Jack Nichols. Campbell has not only loaned us equipment, he's also a great resource for information. He's been growing grass in Midland for 15-plus years."

The initial irrigation system installation covered only the turf areas. Sowell and crew fought through the first season supplementing the system daily with hand watering and homemade irrigation stands spotted as needed to combat the continual drying winds.

He says, "Our biggest challenge is with the irrigation system and the wind. The wind blows here every day, predominantly from the southwest, but the direction isn't consistent enough to count on. The wind strength is so great, it's hard to describe. Our only cancelled game in 2003 was because of a dust storm. The wind was so strong and so filled with dust it stung your skin and clouded your eyes. You couldn't stand behind the plate and see the scoreboard."

Weather conditions can be brutal. In 2003, Midland went from February 20 to May 23, a total of 92 days, with no precipitation and the area's typical extremely low humidity. In the next 3 weeks, there were 6 inches of rain, followed by 1/2 of an inch in the final two months of the season. The end of season stretch also included a record of 9 consecutive 100-plus degree days.

Modifications to the irrigation system during the 2002 and 2003 seasons have resulted in a total of 22 sideline sprinklers, four heads on the infield, and 54 heads in the outfield area. "An efficient, ever-changing irrigation program is essential here due to our lack of rainfall and that wind. We've added some 360-degree rotation heads on the back of the infield and have been playing with watering the dirt with those," says Sowell. "It has helped us maintain our moisture content, but we still need to water the infield dirt 4-6 times a day. And we still need to do the hand



watering and use the irrigation stands for 'hot spots,' but not as frequently. We get the hottest temperatures of the day between 4-6 PM so the key is to get enough deep level moisture down for batting practice without getting sloppy and to top it off with a light surface irrigation between batting practice and the game."

Sowell takes great pride in his "small, but effective" staff. His first assistant, Isaac Ramirez, was a former prison guard with no prior turf experience. They pulled in part-time help for game days from an alternating pool of six. Through hard work and dedication they survived the first season. Before the start of the second season, Sowell added an intern from Penn State, Eric Ferland. His contributions during that period earned him his current assistant groundskeeper position. Chad Smith, a local college student and Cody Rogers, a local high school student, make up the game day staff. They arrive at 5:30 pm and work until 11:30 pm joining with Ferland and Sowell in the post-game ritual of clean up and prep.

Sowell says, "It's incredible how much we have all learned and improved over the past 2 seasons, and how we've meshed as a team. The first season, Chad and Cody worked in the bullpens and policed areas for pickup. By last year, they were helping with sod and even doing some of the hand watering. The 2004 season will be even better. I'd be willing to put our four-man crew up against any crew of any size."

They've made some modifications that have helped maintenance. Originally, the turf in the bullpens extended to the wall and the fencing, leaving little room to maneuver the mower. The bench area of the visitor's bullpen was positioned on the grass. In the home team bullpen, a 3-foot section of the turf was in constant heavy shade. Removal of a 3-foot strip of sod on both sides in both bullpens resolved those problem areas.

"The stadium was built without a sod farm," says Sowell. "The sod we bring in is thin cut, to reduce layering issues and to save freight costs. We have a walkway that goes all the way around the stadium, so there are no hiding spots on the field. We use the bullpens as our sod farm, taking thick cut sections so we have a matching soil profile and matching turf conditions to place on the field. We replace the sections removed with the thin cut sod and baby it there. We also keep a close eye on the turf at the edges of the field. Our water is high in sodium content, which puts added stress on the edges. We'll run additional hollow tine aeration just in those areas with a walk behind unit, then process the cores and drag them back in."

The TifSport bermudagrass is overseeded with a blend of perennial and intermediate ryegrasses. Sowell has been adjusting the timing each season, seeking good turf coverage for the early season games, with transition back beginning in May and total bermudagrass for the June 21 Texas League All Star Game. Timing has gone from mid-October, to mid-September, to early October in 2003, all dependent on the heat pattern. For 2004, verticutting was scheduled to begin in

mid-February with some additional overseeding in spots as needed for the February to April games.

First American Bank Ballpark is in use 9 months of the year. In 2003, the schedule started in early March and included 70 RockHounds games, 24 high school games, and 20 junior college games. One stretch from April to May put 40 games on the field in 39 days.

Action started even earlier in 2004, with the junior college season opening on February 20-21, with another game on the 28th. The high school season opener is March 2. Both the high school and junior college seasons will be in full swing when Texas Tech University and the University of Houston face each other March 23. On April 1, the Oakland A's will take the field against the RockHounds, part of the every other year kick off with either a Double A or Triple A affiliate. In 2005, an NCAA Division I, six-team tournament will be added to the schedule. The



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Midland RockHounds start their season on April 8, with 70 home games on the schedule between then and August 21. A baseball camp for 6-14 year olds takes place for a week in June. The camp lasts all morning, leaving the crew from noon to 4 pm for game day prep.

Special events are also part of the field use schedule. There's an Easter Sunday church service in stadium at 10 AM. This is followed by a gathering in the picnic area and playground for food and fellowship and an afternoon ballgame, starting at 1 p.m. In between the service and the game, the crew needs to remove the infield stage set up for the praise team and the "sermon from the mound" and handle the field prep.



There's also an annual Fourth of July concert and celebration. A home plate stage was the forum for a professional wrestling event in 2003. The field also hosts the opening ceremony for a national girls' softball tournament. Sowell says, "That event gave us quite a surprise the first year. We didn't know the teams threw candy to the fans. By the time the ceremony was completed and the field and stands

were empty, we had clean up detail for about 4,000 pieces of hard candy that had been baking in 95-degree heat on our ramp. We've added some quick clean-up techniques now that we know what to expect. It's a great event and we love having them here.

"Our first on-field concert was another learning experience. They had generators for backup power and we'd allowed them to park them on the turf in right field. Their technician changed the fuel filters without telling us he was going to and spilled diesel fuel on the turf. We ended up digging down to the pea gravel to replace the soil. And we established a rule—no more generators on the turf!"

As the hub of so much community activity, Sowell and his crew have developed a special relationship with the fans. Sowell's black lab, Ruby, is the most recognizable member of the staff and their ambassador of good will. Ruby is the highlight of youth tours and the first thing kids look for when they come to the ballpark. So when Sowell took to one knee and Ruby on her hind legs begging, Sowell proposed marriage to Sandy Edwards at the bottom of the 7th inning on the first base line, there were 5,000 fans encouraging her to say yes! Which, of course, she did.

In 2003, Sowell and Ferland went to Arizona for spring training at the facilities of the Papago Park Complex and picked up tips from Chad Huss. They're going again in 2004 and taking Smith and Rogers with them. Sowell says, "Every experi-

## First American Bank Ballpark Maintenance Program

### Fertilization - granular:

Based on twice a year soil test results and adjusted at each application depending on turf needs and performance.

2004 program:

14-0-14 with Pendulum - April  
5-10-31 - March and November  
24-2-12 - Three applications, May through August  
16-25-12 - September with overseeding  
21-0-0 - April  
Gypsum - every two months

### Fertilization (Spray):

Caltrisal, Micel Total, Calcium Chelate - Bi-weekly applications  
Iron Chelate - Monthly (March-August)

### Wetting Agent:

Bi-monthly applications to increase efficiency of irrigation - April through August

### Mowing:

Triplex for outfield - 3/4 inch HOC in season, up to 1 inch HOC off season with ryegrass  
Walk behind reel for infield and bullpens - 5/8 inch HOC in season, up to 3/4 inch in off-season with ryegrass

### Verticutting:

1 or 2 times monthly to cut runners of Bermudagrass and promote thicker turf  
1 time in the fall to prepare seedbed for ryegrass blend overseeding

### Aerification:

Solid tine - spring and summer  
Hollow tine - fall, when field use is reduced  
Hollow tine walk behind - as needed on high compaction and/or stress areas

### Topdressing:

Sand applications with aerification and overseeding

### Edging:

Every one to two weeks as needed



### Insecticide\*:

Fire Ant Control - one-year effectiveness - October

### Weed Control\*:

As needed to remove non-mow-able grasses

### Fungicide\*:

None needed to date

*\*All control products applied only as needed following best IPM methods*

ence like that at a top level field gives us more ideas to take home and incorporate into our program. We also talk with the managers, the coaches, the players, and the umpires to get their perspective on our field and how it plays. We strive daily to have a high quality and constantly improving field of play, whether it's the turf, mounds, dirt, or the performance of our staff. I can honestly say that our field has improved, and will continue to improve daily.

"There are so many people that have helped me out I can't possibly cover them all. Special thanks go to: Sandy, Shea, Mom & Dad, Scott, Kristi, Eric F., Chad, Cody, Rockhounds staff, Dave, Monty H., Miles, Bob, Eric B., Isaac, Denis, Brad, Tony, Mark, Ted, Will, Fuzz, Ron, Larry, Thomas, Barrett, Jeff, Rick, Robert, Dennis, Tom M., Edwin, Tom B., STMA, Mike, Donna, Jack, Frank, Shorty, Permian Basin fans, and the community of Midland."

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*Suz Trusty is director of communications at the STMA and a member of our Editorial Advisory Board. She can be reached at 800-323-3875.*