

Jon DeWitt, Wesleyan School win HS Football FOY

BY SUZ TRUSTY

Robinson Field is the sports showcase of Wesleyan School's Henderson Stadium and the recipient of the 2003 Sports Turf Managers Association (STMA) Football Field of the Year Award in the High School/Municipality division. Robinson Field was constructed in 1997; just one year after Wesleyan School moved its campus across Atlanta to a new 72-acre undeveloped site in Norcross, GA. Jon DeWitt, Director of Grounds, and his crew kept this field ready for play despite heavy use and the added challenges of 2002's hurricane-related weather conditions.

The base for all the school's athletic fields is heavy Georgia clay. At Robinson Field, this is topped by a 4-inch sand cap matrix using coarse sand similar to river sand. While there is no internal drainage within the field area, a one percent slope provides surface drainage. The field was established with Tifway 419 Bermudagrass.

Wesleyan School has a 2.1-acre lake on the property that is not only spring fed, but also draws from a 120-acre watershed. It serves as the main irrigation source for all of the athletic fields and much of the ornamental grounds.

DeWitt says, "Since the initial construction, Robinson Field has undergone one major renovation and two lesser projects as part of our overall program of continually seeking to provide the safest and most playable conditions for all of our field users."

"During the summer of 2001, both Robinson Field and Henderson Stadium were upgraded tremendously. The field was widened by removing swales that had run along each side into which surface runoff water was channeled for drainage. These swales had contained seven potentially hazardous heavy steel drains, four on the home team side and three on the guest side. The drains would be covered with artificial turf for events on the field. The swales were filled in and the steel drains replaced by an Acco channel drain that now runs along the inside perimeter of the track that encircles the field. This step was a great improvement from a safety standpoint and also increased the usable field area to 80,000 square feet, making it much more suitable for soccer."

As part of this renovation, Henderson Stadium's asphalt track was upgraded with



"I USE A HANDHELD RADIO TO ADJUST THE IRRIGATION SYSTEM, OR LOG ON FROM HOME OR THE OFFICE."

a crumb rubber system, a large picnic area was added, and guest bleachers were installed.

DeWitt says, "In 2002, a heavy laser topdressing took place in an effort to amend some severe surface undulations. Two of these were in the worst possible places, dead center field and the home sideline. Because of the undulations, water would collect in the low spots. The problem at center field was exacerbated by the regularly painted "W" logo, which further weakened the turf. When the swales where

removed, some of the grading between the home football sideline and channel drains did not come out correctly. Consequently, the water sheeting from the field itself would collect just beyond the home sideline and throughout the team box area. In wet game situations, the sideline tarps became like muddy rags. The heavy topdressing helped tremendously with the smaller surface undulations; however, in that first year we did notice more divoting after games until the turf was able to net through the sand and tighten up. The home sideline continued to be somewhat of a problem despite all our efforts and so the decision was made to pursue a more aggressive plan of action.

"During the summer of 2003, we had drainage installed on the home sideline. It worked great through the unusually wet summer. Luckily, we made it through the season without experiencing rainy conditions immediately before or during a game."

The irrigation system includes three zones down the middle that cover the bulk of the playing field. There are five Hunter I-25 heads per zone, four in a square and one in the middle. Two additional zones cover the sidelines and another two cover the "D" areas. DeWitt says, "The original system had a Rainbird ESP-LX Plus controller outfitted with both a remote and a rain sensor. In 2004, we began upgrading to Toro's Sentinel central control system. Now I can use a handheld radio while on campus to make adjustments to the irrigation system and can also log into the system from my office or home computer."

DeWitt manages the facility's 14 acres of athletic turf and oversees the 72 acres of total property which includes four private residences and 1.75 acres of cross country trails. Omni landscape group is a part of the team and handles the ornamental grounds. The rest, which can be anything from small asphalt repairs, planting flowers, working with irrigation issues, handling equipment maintenance or true sports turf management is up to DeWitt and his crew.

DeWitt says, "Though the two acre stadium complex is nearly enough to keep us occupied, we strive to maintain the other 12 acres of athletic turf to a level nearly equal to that of Robinson. Adjacent to Henderson Stadium is an acre sized multi-use field that primarily serves physical education and the track throw events. We have a

two-acre baseball field and a one-acre softball field. We have two large practice fields, adjacent to each other, of 3 1/2 acres each. We lay these out as four, nearly full size, football fields in the fall. In the winter and spring, the space is allocated as two soccer fields, one lacrosse field and one auxiliary practice area. We also have a playground field that serves the elementary students and we're responsible for the wood chips in their playground area. We tackle 4 1/2 miles of athletic field painting in the fall and similar in the spring.

"My crew is outstanding. They're totally committed to achieving the highest possible standards and willingly put out the extra effort needed to make that happen. Leroy Little is the supervisor, with Jose Flores and Oswaldo Bono full-time crew members. Zachry Young has joined the crew part-time during the last two summers, handling much of the string trimmer work and assisting with irrigation and mowing."

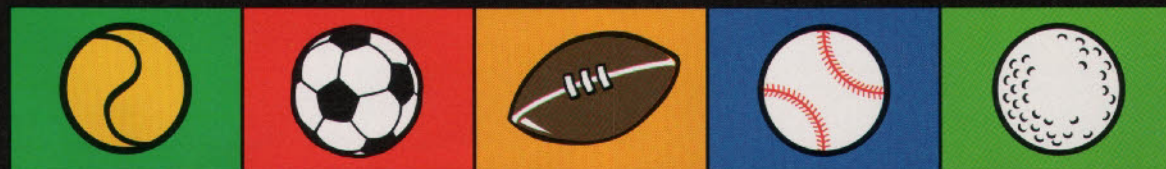
Robinson Field's greatest challenge is the sheer number of events that it must host. The football program has four teams - varsity, junior varsity and 7th and 8th grade. Their home schedule amounts to 15 games during the regular season, which runs from mid-August through the end of October, and could extend past Thanksgiving, depending on playoff games. All teams, except occasionally the 7th and 8th grade squads, will do a walk-through practice the day before a game.

DeWitt says, "A typical week during the football season may put a JV game on the field on Thursday night. The varsity team always does a walk through practice on Thursday whether home or away, and we try to do a final pre-game mow with baskets after the walk through on Thursday afternoon to push any divots back in place and collect any grass that was kicked up. The varsity team plays on Friday night. Since softball is a fall sport in Georgia, we also could be hosting a game on the softball field on Friday. We'll often have a 7th and 8th team football game at Robinson Field on Saturday morning. If so, we'll leave the field set up. If there's no Saturday game, we'll remove the tarps, benches and pylons Friday night and do the divots and other repairs on our Saturday walk through. However, in August and early September, if it's still light after the game, we'll do the divot repair and mow on

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Friday nights. We also could be hosting a cross country meet on Saturday at the lake fields while the middle school game is underway at the stadium.

"We have a relatively small band and they only perform for the varsity games, so their impact on Robinson Field is minimal. They practice on our central quadrant, one of our ornamental turf areas. We paint it for them, but with green paint rather than white, so we don't detract from the overall aesthetics."

All the spring sports, except baseball, wrap up before the end of the school year. June is camp month, with two soccer camps and one each for football and baseball, but none are held on Robinson Field. July is the slowest month at Wesleyan as far as scheduled events, but that means it is also one of the busiest months for the grounds crew. "The weather is starting to be peak for Bermudagrass which is often just recovering from the stresses of winter use and overseeding," comments DeWitt. Due to the lull in scheduled events in July, he and his staff can tackle all the field maintenance procedures major or minor, as well as renovation projects necessary to bring conditions into top shape to start the cycle again in August.

DeWitt says, "72 acres sounds like a lot of property, but we've found there's nearly always someone out and about on it. It's a real juggling match, which intensifies in the spring. We have until 3 in the afternoon to prepare for practices and games, working around all the other activities. The perennial ryegrass is growing and we're trying to keep up with the painting. Even one day of rain impacts our schedule."

Imagine then what record-breaking precipitation can do. DeWitt says, "This past year was particularly challenging as the weather was unforgiving. Everyone in the Southeast had to deal with the generally wet cycle we entered in the fall of 2002 and did not really exit until mid August 2003. May 2003 was one the wettest in Georgia history. However, it was the remnants of two hurricanes that happened to come through my property during home stands that created the worst situations. Although I would not want to live it again, last fall created an opportunity for me to learn aspects of turf management that I had never had to contend with before and stretched me as a person."

"After the two hurricane-spawned rain events, I had to rent a 5 ton double drum roller and roll the field back into shape. In conjunction with the first rolling, I aerated with half inch solid tines to relieve compaction, and hopefully enhance drainage in case the rains continued, which they did. We utilized a scheduling break on October 15 to overseed with Pennington's Applaud and it created a beautiful stand. By Homecoming, on November 7, the disastrous conditions from earlier in the season were hardly noticeable. We had pulled the field through another football season."

DeWitt is continually exploring new options, testing new techniques, and adjusting his management program to produce optimum results. And he loves doing it, though it took a trip down another path for him to discover this. His Dad worked in campus management. His first job, at 13, was managing a greenhouse. From there



Robinson Field Maintenance Program

January

Mow as needed at 3/4 inch height of cut (once per week or once every 2 weeks)

Fertilize with 21-0-0 Ammonium Sulphate at the rate of 1 lb of N per thousand square feet

Paint at the end of the month for soccer (continue painting weekly through season)

February

Mow as needed at 3/4 inch height of cut (once per week)

Fertilize with 21-0-0 Ammonium Sulphate at the rate of 1 lb of N per thousand square feet

March

Mow 2 to 3 times per week at 3/4 inch height of cut. Mow in 2 directions and use baskets to catch clippings as needed. Coordinate stripping with games.

Seed wear areas with perennial ryegrass

Apply Solu-Cal (at the rate of 500 lbs per acre) or other pH-adjusting source per soil test

Fertilize with 28-5-12 at the rate of 1 lb of N per thousand square feet

Aerate with 1/2 inch top eject tines (2.5 x 4 x 4"). Harvest cores.

April

Mow 2 to 3 times per week at 3/4 inch height of cut. Mow in 2 directions and use baskets to catch clippings as needed. Coordinate stripping with games.

Fertilize with 11-5-16 with Ronstar at the rate of 2 lbs of active ingredient per acre

Fertilize with 21-0-0 Ammonium Sulphate at the rate of 1 lb of N per thousand square feet

Spray to remove overseeded perennial ryegrass. Alternate products

he started working in lawn maintenance on both residential and commercial properties in the Pensacola area. His family moved to Birmingham where he began to expand into sports turf while working weekends and after school at Briarwood, a private school that he also attended. After graduating from high school, he began to pursue a degree at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and continued maintaining the athletic fields at Briarwood. "I was lucky to have an employer like Briarwood that gave me the room to learn on my own," says DeWitt. DeWitt also credits local turf seminars and turf industry publications with not only increasing his interest in the field of turf management but also by providing the resources for him to further his knowledge about sports surfaces. Despite working in turf, he focused his college work in quite a different area and graduated cum laude from UAB with a degree in English.

His primary interest in coming to Wesleyan after graduation was getting back to that area of Georgia and exploring teaching as a possible career choice. DeWitt explains that, "My wife is an Atlanta native, and her family all lives in the area. We thought that that would be a great environment to share with our twin girls." Wesleyan did not have an opening in the English department, but did need someone to head up the grounds department. "Wesleyan hired me as Director of Grounds and basically created a student teaching position for me to get my feet wet - it was a win-win situation for me. I could see if teaching was going to work out, and if not, I had a blank slate from which to develop a grounds department," DeWitt recalls. The athletic field work was being outsourced at that time. By the end of that year he knew the fields, rather than the classroom, was where he wanted



to be and had already set lofty goals for the athletic field program. He became the school's full time Director of Grounds at the end of the 2000-2001 school year.

That college background serves him well in his current position. Requests are supported by written reports outlining what is needed, why it is needed and what will result if the request is granted. He works closely with all the coaches and the athletic director, communicating via email as well as in person. He articulates his passion for sports turf management so that others catch - and buy into - his message: that each sport is special and every player deserves to have the best possible field conditions so they can excel and fulfill their potential. **ST**

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from year to year - Manor, Monument, Revolver etc. Playoff scenarios dictate timing.

May

Mow as needed at 3/4 inch height of cut while transitioning in Bermudagrass.

Aerate with 3/4 inch top eject tines (2.5 x 4 x 4 in.). Harvest cores.

Spray wetting agent - Duplex (at the rate of 2 qts per acre every 2 weeks through late October)

Fertilize with 34-0-0 Ammonium Nitrate at the rate of 1 lb of N per thousand square feet at approximately 7 to 10 day intervals - or alternate with Ammonium Sulfate

21-0-0.

Aerate - Deep tine 1/2 inch hollow (3 x 5 x 6+)

Verticut in 2 directions. Blow and collect debris.

June

Mow daily or every other day at 3/4 inch height of cut

Aerate (try for every 3 weeks) with 3/4 inch top eject tines (2.5 x 4 x 4") Harvest cores.

Fertilize with 34-0-0 Ammonium Nitrate at the rate of 1 lb of N per thousand square feet

Use 10-in. cup cutters to harvest sod to replace wear areas that are not filling in properly

Verticut in 2 directions. Blow and collect debris.

July

Mow 2 to 3 times per week at 3/4 inch height of cut.

Topdress with 1/8 inch of sand

Fertilize with 41-0-0 Polyon micro-prill. 100% slow release urea at the rate of 2 lbs of N per thousand square feet

Aerate 3/4 inch top eject tines (2.5 x 4 x 4 in.) Harvest cores.

Fertilize with 34-0-0 Ammonium Nitrate at the rate of 1 lb of N per thousand square feet

August

Mow daily or every other day at 3/4 inch height of cut. Begin etching in

stripping pattern for football.

Fertilize with 19-19-19 at the rate of 1 lb of N per thousand square feet
Specialty Application of Iron to boost color: Vig-Iron at the rate of 5 lbs of Fe per thousand square feet, or Ferromec etc.

Paint for football (Continue weekly through season.)

Mow after games with fairway unit mower

September

Mow 3 or more times per week at 3/4 inch height of cut. Mow in patterns for games, alternate cutting directions otherwise.

Fertilize with 19-19-19 at the rate of 1 lb of N per thousand square feet

Spray Primo+Ferromec (if turf is in suitable condition)

Seed at the rate of 12 lbs per thousand square feet using a perennial ryegrass ranked well in NTEP trials. (Timing may be in early October depending on weather and football schedule.) Fertilize with 18-24-12 (time with seeding)

October

Mow 2 to 3 times per week at 3/4 inch height of cut.

Fertilize with 18-24-12 (time with seeding)

Aerate if needed and conditions allow with 1/2 inch solid tines (2.5 x 5.5 x 3 in.)

Seed wear areas with perennial ryegrass

November

Mow as needed at 3/4 inch height of cut (once per week or once every 2 weeks)

Fertilize with 21-0-0 Ammonium Sulphate at the rate of 1 lb of N per thousand square feet

December

Mow as needed at 3/4 inch height of cut (once per week or once every 2 weeks)

Fertilize with 21-0-0 Ammonium Sulphate at the rate of 1 lb of N per thousand square feet (impregnated w/ Barricade)

Take soil samples