

# STMA Founder Awards recognize best of the best

By Eric Schroder

## **B**ob Christofferson, Seattle Mariners

Bob Christofferson still occasionally does what his wife of 25 years, Cyndy, has always said, that he couldn't get in the car in Tacoma without "driving by the field." Of course for many years that field was Cheney Stadium in Tacoma, WA. These days the drive between home and "the field" (Safeco Park in Seattle) is longer yet Bob sometimes still makes it. "That field is my baby," he says. "Now I live an hour away, but I still sometimes drive by the ballpark, just as I did many, many times in Tacoma years ago."

Christofferson received the Harry C. Gill Memorial Award from STMA last winter, the highest honor the 25-year-old organization bestows. Harry C. Gill was a leader and founder of STMA, and for many years the groundskeeper at old County Stadium in Milwaukee. It is his spirit of sharing information with peers that still rings true for STMA members today.

"My first job in turf was at the AAA level in Tacoma. My dad was on the game-day crew at Cheney Stadium since 1950, so I hung around there a lot as a youngster. When I got older I helped out, I can remember there was no rain tarp so we'd dry the field by loading sand into wheelbarrows over and over," says Christofferson.

But he went to college to be a teacher, all the while working in different capacities at the

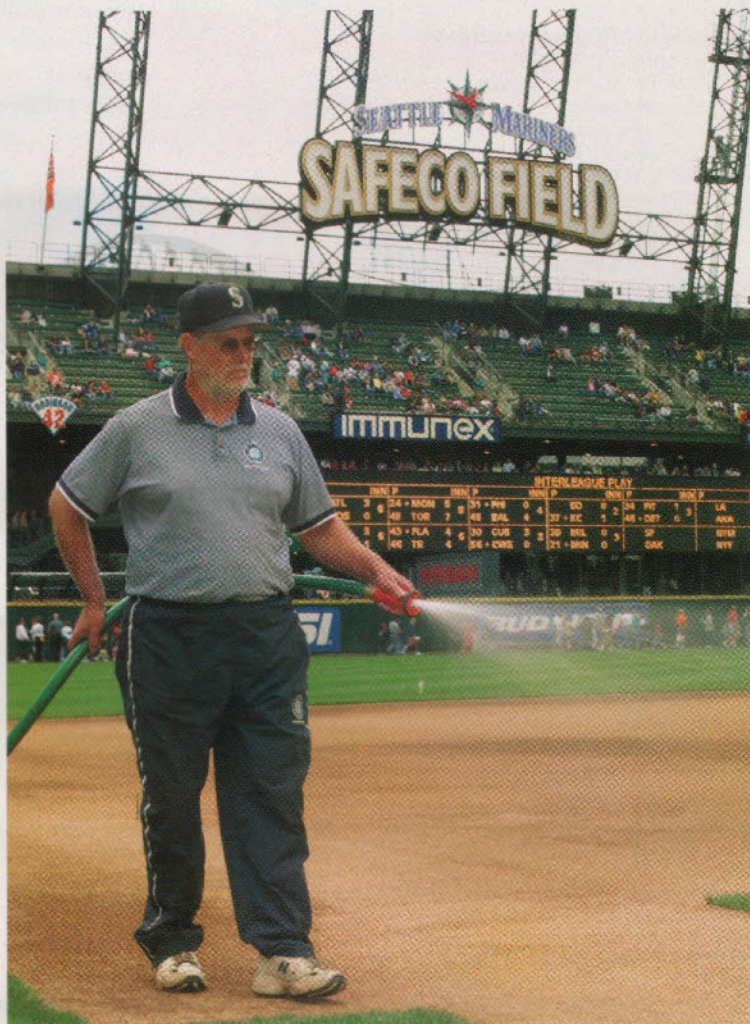


Photo credit: Ben Van Houten, Seattle Mariners

Bob Christofferson, Harry C. Gill Memorial Award

Tacoma stadium-ticket seller, usher, grounds crew, all around the park. He was teaching, coaching baseball, and was always on the game-day crew at Cheney Stadium.

"In 1980 the job security of teaching became an issue for me, and when the head groundskeeper in Tacoma was promoted, I became the groundskeeper there, and did it for 19 years as an employee of City of Tacoma," Christofferson says. "I had real on the job training.

"My dad worked on my crew for a few years, and I learned a lot from him as well as Scottie Ryan, my mentor. It was hard work but

fan comfort but with Pacific Northwest weather it can be tricky; we can get a short shower and then sunshine," says Christofferson. "Once we close the roof, we won't reopen it. It's a stressful decision on whether or not to close the roof; no one wants to get wet! But I have as much impact on roof closing decisions as any turf manager in major league baseball."

The toughest thing about his job is managing the extra events that are scheduled around MLB games, he says. "I've learned never to criticize other guys' fields because you never know what kind of extra event he or she might have just had to deal with," he says.

**"MY FIRST GAME WAS AN INTERLEAGUE CONTEST WITH THE DODGERS. I CAME OUT OF MY OFFICE, WHICH IS BEHIND HOME PLATE, JUST BEFORE GAME TIME AND THOUGHT, 'MY GOD, THEY ARE PAYING ME TO DO THIS!'"**

**- BOB CHRISTOFFERSON**

I was dedicated and had a lot of pride in my work."

He was one of two finalists for the first job at Safeco Field, which opened in July 1999, but didn't get the job. Less than a year later, Seattle came back to him and his knowledge of Pacific Northwest weather and conditions. He had been groundskeeper of the year the previous 2 years in the Pacific Coast League. Branch Rickey III, president of the PCL, joked he was glad Bob was leaving so someone else could win the award. His last year he led the PCL in fewest games rained out, in Tacoma no less, in the league with teams from Vegas, Phoenix, and Fresno at the time.

"I made my rep in Seattle early . . . during my second homestand, with a national TV audience, power to the roof was knocked out. We'd never rehearsed putting on the tarp but we got it on, the roof was eventually closed, and we were able to start playing again in the time frame that I had promised manager Lou Piniella," Christofferson says. "After that, they trusted me."

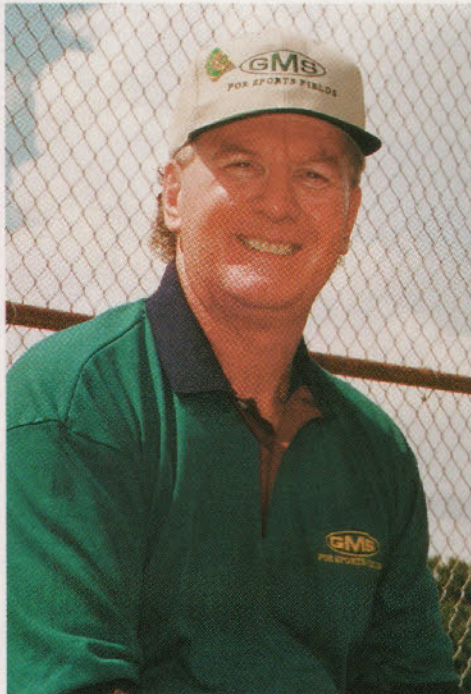
He and the president of the club make the decision to close the roof. "Number one goal is

"I have a veto over any event that might be scheduled for Safeco. I realize that these revenues are needed in today's world, so I rarely say 'no' because I like this job. But anyone contracting to use the field must come to me early in the process so we can talk about expectations," says Christofferson. "One year we had a professional wrestling event about one week before Opening Day and that was a great learning experience. I found out we could rig things to the roof and keep them off the grass."

Christofferson says his job is all fun. "I love being in the park, whether it's virtually by myself or with 48,000 screaming fans. My first game was an interleague contest with the Dodgers. I came out of my office, which is behind home plate, just before game time and thought, 'My god, they are paying me to do this!'"

"I have a good crew, these guys would run through a brick wall for me; we try to enjoy what we do each day, and we've got the best field we've ever had heading into the 2nd homestand of the season," he says.

"This is a great job; in fact it is not a job, it's a way of life."



Floyd Perry, Dick Ericson Award

**"THE MOST FUN PART IS ACCOMPLISHING A MAJOR TASK IN LESS TIME THAN ANTICIPATED BY USING MORE EFFICIENT EQUIPMENT."**

**- FLOYD PERRY**

Not that Bob wants his kids, Tyler, 22, who's in engineering school, and Lauren, 20, in college in Washington, DC, to follow in his footsteps, though both have served on his crews through the years. "I have a photo of my then-5-year-old daughter with a rake in Tacoma, and then one of her as teenager with a rake at Safeco, in my office."

Now you need an agronomy degree to get his job. "I speak to turf students now. I don't talk about needing a degree, I talk about how different my job is, how it consumes your life, and how if you're going to do this job, you have to do it right, and that means putting the time in. Your field is your baby, you need desire and love for it. You need to be ready to go to work 40 days in a row."

On the plus side, there are not too many jobs where you would get so many compliments. "Players, managers, fans, TV guys, I hear it all the time. It's great. If my wife doesn't say anything when she sees at a game, I ask 'What's wrong with the field?'" says Christofferson.

"My wife has bought into my having this job and that means a lot. I want to stay here for at least another 10 years. I want to win the World Series. My first three years in Seattle we were in the AL Championship series twice, and hosted the All-Star Game as well. I thought that was the way it was always supposed to be," he says.

Advice for younger turf managers? "Careful about wanting that 'dream job'. It will mean working very very hard, and every day remembering that what you are doing at any moment is the most important job. 'Labor of love' is so true. Listen, watch and learn-don't assume it'll be the same tomorrow as it was today. Instinct and feel are very important because it seems sometimes that everything changes every day, just like the weather. Be ready to constantly be learning," says Christofferson.

"Your mission is to be ready for each game by game time; how you get there is not as important."

### **Floyd Perry, Grounds Maintenance Services**

Floyd Perry, who has seen more ballfields than Satchel Paige, was awarded the Dick Ericson

Founders Award last winter in his hometown of Orlando. The honor goes annually to a member who positively impacts the sports turf industry through effective leadership.

Floyd, author of books on turf care such as "Turf Grows by the Inch and is Killed by the Foot," is the nationally known proponent of the principle, "Work smarter, not harder." His company manages multiple properties in Florida.

**ST:** What are the three most common problems you see when visiting your clients?

**Perry:** Many clients don't want a detailed explanation of their turf problems; they just want the job done as inexpensively as possible. Don't trouble them with the details, just do it! When it's done, it isn't what they wanted. Communication is key.

In Florida, pests such as mole crickets and ants are pressing concerns, as are weeds and goosegrass. Since Florida doesn't deal with frost or freezes, our Bermuda turf is plagued by ongoing pest concerns. Mole crickets and nematodes can destroy turf structure in no time at all.

**ST:** You are a successful businessman and author. Do you ever wish you simply had just a few fields to maintain? Why or why not?

**Perry:** Being 63 years old, I would love to maintain only one school. Possibly hire a hands-on, experienced supervisor to lessen the burden allowing me to handle the tougher jobs. Sometimes less isn't better.

**ST:** What's the most fun thing about your job? What's the worst thing about it?

**Perry:** The most fun and gratifying part is accomplishing a major task in less time than anticipated by using more efficient equipment. The manufacturers are the precious gems of the turf industry today. More work is being done with less manpower thanks to innovative iron manufacturers.

The most difficult part of the job is personnel. Universities and tech schools are turning out super young people but their goal is often to walk out of the classroom and create the television fields they're accustomed to seeing rather than grass roots and recreational fields. That's where real learning and imagination begins as well as personal rewards.



Jim Wiggins, George Toma Golden Rake Award

**ST:** How has membership in the STMA enhanced your career?

**Perry:** Floyd Perry is STMA, inside and out. Without our national organization sharing ideas and providing motivation, the industry would be nothing more than people mowing turf.

**ST:** What are the most important issues facing turf managers today and how should the profession handle them?

**Perry:** The most important issue today is not new field designs, new tools or uniforms, but education and appreciation of turf and clay athletic field playing surfaces. Without a new breed of young groundskeepers who are willing to spend a few extra hours in the classroom, lab or an internship, our industry may regress. Start at the ground level; prove your worth through hard work and skill at accomplishing tasks.

The most important issue today is young people who will one day create their cornerstone in the athletic field industry. Through education, intuition, and with two hard-working hands, they can and will accomplish anything they desire.

### Jim Wiggins, Tomball (TX) School District

Dedication to his work paid off big time when athletic fields coordinator Jim Wiggins was recognized last winter at the STMA Conference with the prestigious George Toma Golden Rake Founders Award. This award acknowledges an individual's strong work ethic and job performance.

Here's an excerpt from Wiggins' award nomination: "A typical week requires long days, weekends, and an extraordinary amount of effort to maintain his fields. Some would say he puts too much effort into his work. They tell him it's just grass. But he never hears that. What he hears are the varsity football players asking him what graphic he's going to paint on the field this week. He hears the softball players asking for their prepared bag of mound dirt, so that when they are away, they still have a little piece of home. [Wiggins] goes above and beyond the requirements of his job for two reasons: he loves what he does and he loves seeing the athletes benefit from the work that he does."

Wiggins' hard work hasn't gone unnoticed. He has received Field of the Year for both baseball and softball fields from the Texas Turfgrass Association. His softball field was also honored as the National Fastpitch Coaches Association's High School Field of the Year. Wiggins also manages to find time to support many community functions, such as preparing local Little League fields, serving as public address announcer at some events, and involvement with the local Special Olympics.


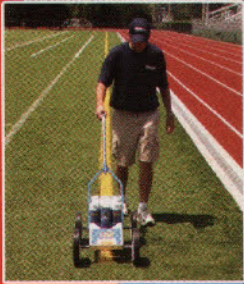
Wiggins recently responded to some questions from *SportsTurf*.

**ST:** What advice do you have for turf managers who want to be more successful in their professional interactions with supervisors and user groups?

**Wiggins:** Go beyond what is expected, strive to be the best, and use George Toma's "and then some" attitude. Keep communication lines open; keep bosses and board members informed and aware of problems and/or achievements reached. User groups need to know what is expected of them, what you will do, what they should do, cost to use the fields, and your expectations of how the field will be left for your staff.

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**ST:** What are the three most important tools you have in your daily tasks?

**Wiggins:** A, my irrigation tools, the Hunter and RainBird sprinklers and Hunter controllers. The Hunter ICR remote is a super timesaver and helps in my daily tasks, audits, aeration, water schedules, and to isolate problems out on the field.

B, the Titan Paint striper and Graco Fieldlazer. We do all of the field painting and graphics work ourselves so these machines are instrumental in our daily tasks for football, baseball, softball and soccer game fields, along with our multiple practice fields.

C, the equipment used daily; Deere and

**ST:** How has membership in the STMA enhanced your career?

**Wiggins:** My association with both the state chapter and the national STMA organization has helped me tremendously in my career. On the local level, I have developed many new friendships that have helped me advance my career. Leo and Craig at Texas A&M have been a major influence and help with any and all problems. They are always just a phone call away and are ready and willing to offer advice and suggestions. The Texas Turfgrass Association and all its members are also always available for questions, ideas and concerns. This magazine is filed and stored for

**"I ENJOY WATCHING THE JAWS OF VISITING TEAMS DROP WHEN THEY PLAY AT OUR COMPLEX. I STRIVE TO MAKE MY FIELDS THE BEST HIGH SCHOOL FIELDS THESE YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN EVER PLAY ON."**

**- JIM WIGGINS**

Toro mowers, tractors, bunker rakes, and the Gator with a hydraulic dump bed.

**ST:** What's the most fun thing about your job? What's the worst thing about it?

**Wiggins:** I really enjoy preparing all the game fields for games, the fancy mowing cuts, the extra dirt work, and the painting of extra graphics. Creating new ideas and stencils is a big pleasure. Doing a little bit extra and going beyond what is called for is a driving force for me.

I enjoy watching the jaws of visiting teams drop when they play at our complex. I strive to make each game of each sport the best field these young men and women ever play on at the high school level. Painting new and colorful graphics, however, is probably my number one joy.

Worst part is probably dealing with low budget numbers. We have to maximize all our materials. We build and construct a lot of our own tools and getting the most bang for the buck is an everyday ordeal.

ongoing information use. It always contain something new, have good reviews and news I can use. The state STMA chapter is very informative and a good tool for idea exchanges. I have had the luxury of attending the past two national conferences and cannot begin to explain how instrumental they have been to me. The educational seminars, the trade show products and meeting vendors, and meeting other turf managers face to face is a definite plus. My budgets now include money just to attend this conference. It is the highlight of my year. Without the members and vendors help, I don't believe I could have received the awards and distinctions I have attained to date.

**ST:** What are the most important issues facing turf managers today, and how should the profession handle them?

**Wiggins:** The most important issue for me has to be water. Water pricing seems to keep going up, yet field playability and safety are my biggest concerns. Budget cuts and money issues in a school district are big hurdles. I have

## Can you identify this sports turf problem?



**Problem:** Depression on Turf  
**Turfgrass Area:** Baseball Field  
**Location:** Florida  
**Grass Variety:** 419 Bermudagrass

### Answer to John Mascaro's Photo Quiz on Page 41

*John Mascaro is President  
of Turf-Tec International*

## 25TH ANNIVERSARY

tried to become a better manager of the irrigation cycles, water only when needed, try to stretch programs as far as possible and tried to stay up to date with all the new products and technology such as moisture sensors.

Qualified manpower is a major issue for us as well. We have a unique program that combines an outside contractor, Larry Rider of Turfgrass Professionals of Texas, and in-house personnel. This system has worked well for us over the past 4 years. With Larry's help, we were the first in Texas to use nematodes for mole cricket control.

Time management and work scheduling are my biggest daily concerns with 25 acres of athletic fields and two staff members and the outside contractor. We have to meet a lot of challenges but that's what keeps me coming to work everyday. The happiest of people don't necessarily have the best of everything; they just make the most of everything that comes along the way.

### **Jeff Fowler, Penn State extension agent**

A third-generation extension agent, Jeff Fowler from Penn State received the Dr. William Daniel Award last winter. This award is presented to a university-connected STMA member being recognized for his or her long-term support of the association. Fowler's educational programs and research are focused primarily in turfgrass management and athletic field safety in his northwest Pennsylvania region. He also

edits a quarterly newsletter, "Between the Lines," for the Keystone Athletic Field Managers Organization (KAFMO), the STMA's state chapter, for which he also is a Board member. Fowler also serves on the STMA's Editorial and Information Outreach committees and, most famously, is co-founder along with Steve LeGros of GrassStains Productions, which produces inspirational videos for turf professionals that help raise STMA scholarship funds.

Fowler is also on the boards of his local Red Cross and United Way-Funds Distribution organizations, and volunteers each summer for the Little League World Series grounds crew, which is directed by his father, Don.

Fowler recently responded to some questions from *SportsTurf*.

**ST:** What's the role of the contemporary extension agent? How has it changed since your grandfather's and father's day, and how do you think it will change in the next decade?

**Fowler:** The new and modern Extension Educator plays the same role as an Extension agent 85 years ago, education. Cooperative Extension extends research from the University to the citizens. When the County Agent arrived 85 years ago farmers would look to them for information about the latest and greatest research available for them. In the 21st century people look to us for the same type of information.

The biggest change is that when my dad and grandfather were extension agents, many of the agents were generalists. They knew a little



Jeff Fowler, Dr. William H. Daniel Award

about everything and worked in one county. In today's era extension educators are specialized in one program area and cover larger geographic areas. When I was explaining this to some people one day they said, "Sure I understand, if I had a heart attack I would not go to my audiologist."

**ST:** What are the three most common problems you see? What advice do you find yourself repeating most often?

**Fowler:** A typical call for me goes something like, "Mr. Fowler, I was talking to so and so and they told me to give you a call. I was hoping that you might be able to take a look at my fields, I can't seem to . . .". This has been the start of many calls.

When I arrive to visit, typically the problem is overuse and under care. I have written a publication and done hundreds of talks on "8 Steps to an Easy Field Facelift." I found that aeration, topdressing, overseeding, mowing, soil

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**"I LOVE TO TALK ABOUT HOW WE CAN ATTACK EACH CHALLENGE, AND HOW WE CAN OVERCOME A SITUATION AND MAKE A FIELD SAFER."**

**- JEFF FOWLER**

testing, lime and fertilizer applications, transition areas and the infield skin areas, are items that we many times need to talk about.

Sure this is second nature to many of us, but many times we forget about the basic agronomic practices that we need to follow to keep our fields safe and healthy.

**ST:** What's the most fun thing about your job?

**Fowler:** Many times I speak to young kids at career days or job fairs, and I stress to them to find a career that you enjoy, that you love to get up in the morning and get ready for. I tell them that if they can find a career where they are as happy as I am in mine, they will have a very rewarding career in whatever field they choose.

I love to teach and educate, I love walking a field with the manager and listening to his

story, his challenges. I love to talk about how we can attack each challenge, and how we can overcome a situation and make a field safer.

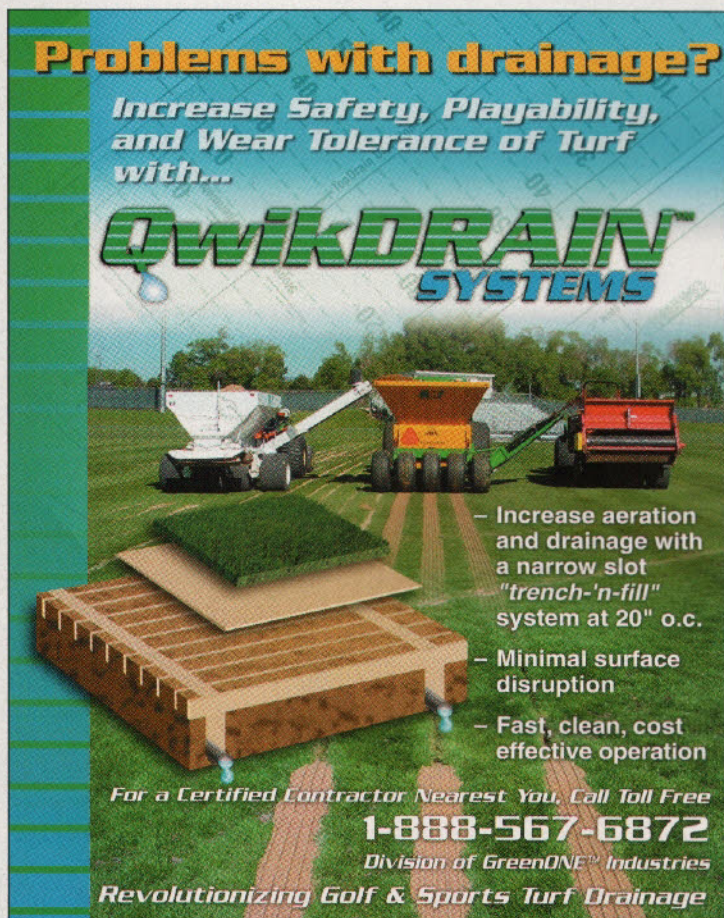
**ST:** How has membership in the STMA enhanced your career?

**Fowler:** STMA has opened countless doors for me. It has been a real pleasure and honor to be a part of an association like this one. People have pride in what they do and share information like no other group I have ever been a part of. The association is a tremendous organization, it has networked me with some of the greatest people I know.

Members always want to know more information, and are always challenging what we know. As an educator, I've found the members are willing to let you do just about anything in the name of research, and then they want to know what you learned. Members of STMA are some of the best friends anyone could have. ■

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