



Daytona's turf is part of the show

By Eric Schroder

Sam Newpher's career in turf management started traditionally, as an assistant groundskeeper at Atlanta's old Fulton County Stadium back in the 1970's. He eventually was named the head guy and spent 8 years maintaining the field for the Braves and Falcons. He moved to golf for 6 years, and then took the job he's now had for 12 years, superintendent of grounds and turf at the Daytona International Speedway (DIS). NASCAR dads, eat your hearts out!

"My maintenance schedule isn't that much different here than it was for baseball," he says, "except we keep the turf a bit more firm. Safety is

still the major goal. When you have a 3,500-pound racecar sliding across your turf, you're more worried about the driver than you are the turf."

Newpher is responsible for 550 acres of turf at the world's most famous speedway and has a crew of five to assist. There's another "green team" responsible for trees and other landscaping; Newpher is strictly the grass man. Newpher says his boss, VP of Operations Dick Hahne, wants to make sure when the Daytona 500 runs in February that "the grass is bright green, the flowers look perfect, and the tropical nature of the track is complete," so that fans watching up north say to themselves, "Let's go to the race next year!"

Can you identify this sports turf problem?



Problem: Black line between field and common area

Turfgrass Area: Athletic Field

Location: Pinecrest Village, FL

Grass Variety: Bermudagrass athletic field and St. Augustine grass common area.

Answer to John Mascaro's Photo Quiz on Page 48

*John Mascaro is President
of Turf-Tec International*



IT'S AN "UNWRITTEN RULE" ACCORDING TO NEWPHER THAT ONLY THE DAYTONA 500 WINNER CAN SPIN OUT ON THE TURF LOGO IN THE TRI-OVAL.

"By the day of the Daytona 500 (the "Super Bowl" of NASCAR) only 40 acres of those 550 are not being used for something," says Newpher. "Fans take over about 10 acres, for example, and the drivers' RV park is another four acres, and it goes on and on. That one day we need to look our best and often, the turf looks its worst,

at least to the crew and me. People are all over it that week so we irrigate as little as possible."

The most famous, and visible, section of Newpher's turf is 5 acres known as the "tri-oval" that sports the huge Daytona logo. This logo is 200 feet long, with 34-foot high letters and an apex of 68 feet at the top of the flag in the middle. It's this tri-oval, so close to the track itself, that periodically gets an out of control race car skidding across it. (Newpher has an acre of replacement turf growing near the track.)

"We used to string out the logo ourselves until our 50th anniversary (in 1998)," says Newpher. "To celebrate the anniversary we changed the logo and added more logos to the tri-oval, as well to the backstretch and Turn #3, and it became a lot more work. Now Missouri Turf Paint does

all the logos because they are so complicated and time-consuming. They bring a 200-foot stencil for the main logo and work exclusively at night since it's way too dangerous to be that close to the track when it's 'hot'."

It's an "unwritten rule" according to Newpher that only the Daytona 500 winner can spin out on the turf logo in the tri-oval. He says his greatest memory of the great race was when the late Dale Earnhardt, driver of the black #3 Chevy and known as "The Intimidator," finally won Daytona after 20 tries and proceeded to spin doughnuts on top of the logo's flag. "The fans went absolutely nuts, and after the race many of them grabbed some sprigs that had chipped up from his doughnuts," says Newpher.

Another memorable moment came 3 years later, during the Pepsi 400 race in July. Earlier that year, Earnhardt had passed away after hitting the wall at Daytona. This day, his son, Dale Earnhardt, Jr., took the lead in the backstretch near the end of the race. "I was in the pit area and you could actually hear the crowd's roar over the noise from the racecars," Newpher recalls.

By the way, if you're thinking you'd be angry if a millionaire race car driver tore up your perfect turf on purpose, you need to know that immediately following the Daytona 500, Newpher every year begins tearing out the turf on the tri-oval for a motocross event the next week. ■