

# Baseball in *China:* Preparing for 2008

By Murray Cook

**O**ver the years I've had the unique privilege of traveling around the globe to help in the design, construction and maintenance of a wide variety of athletic fields that have hosted major events. My team was an integral part of the design and construction of the baseball and softball fields for the Summer Olympics in Sydney, Australia in 2000 and again in Athens, Greece in 2004. Today, we are involved with the development of athletic fields in Beijing, China for the preparation of the 2008 Summer Olympics.

Beyond the rich cultural experiences that these projects have delivered, each has also provided valuable insight about the nature of how people work together to accomplish a common goal. Whether these achievements are the result of Olympic spirit, or a desire to meet the aggressive construction deadlines required of a host city, the speed of execution and quality of work consistently amazes me.

## **Olympic baseball creates excitement**

The first Olympic baseball game in Athens







2004 attracted more than 10,000 fans brimming with anticipation. After the wind up and delivery of the first pitch, the umpire called a strike. The fans erupted. Then came the second pitch. After a similar wind up and delivery, the umpire called a ball. Again, the crowd erupted. For many of the fans in attendance that day, the game was their first exposure to the sport of baseball. Although they were not yet familiar with the rules, the energy at the ballpark highlighted the sheer excitement the game creates.

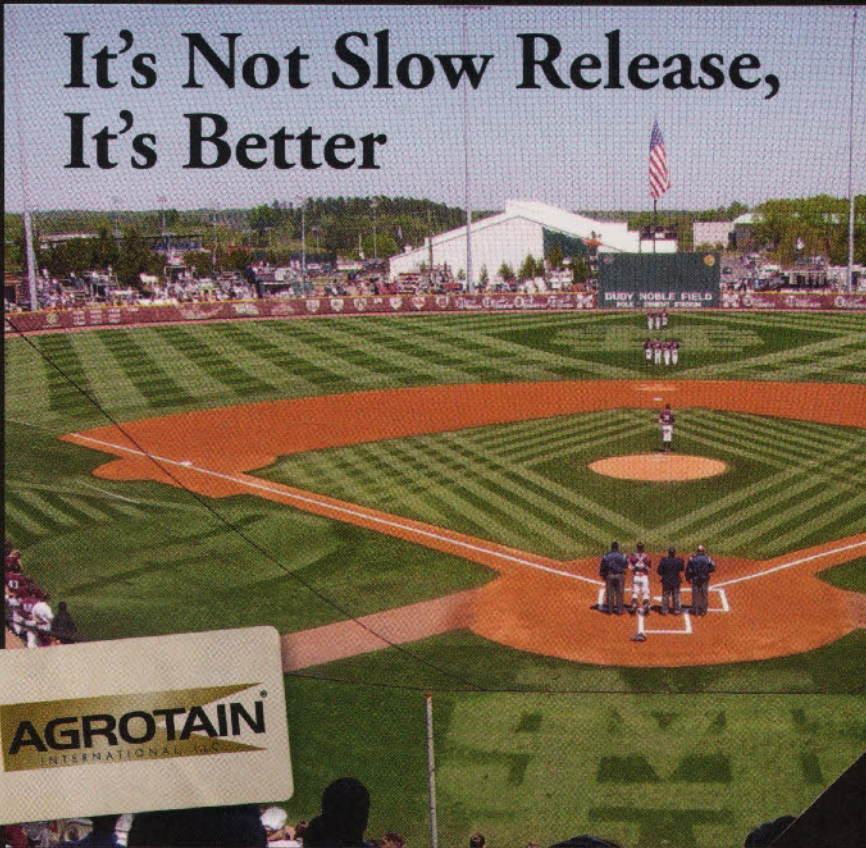
Although the 2008 Beijing Olympics are still many months away, the excitement is palpable. During my last trip to Beijing, I enjoyed speaking with Olympic organizers and members of the field construction crew who became visibly animated when describing the positive impact the Olympics will have on the community. It is fun to be involved with the Olympics and to play a role in sharing the game of baseball with new fans and people that are excited about the sports turf industry.

As I've observed from my experiences with other sports turf design projects, team



China is able to overcome equipment shortages through the sheer scale of its labor force.

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collaboration is a critical element to success. Athletic turf construction projects involve a wide range of constituents beyond those directly performing the work. At the international Olympic level, constituents may include state and local policy-makers, competition committees, sponsors, and a host of others who are connected in some way. My work in Beijing and at previous Summer Games has made me realize that the Olympics influence people to become better international communicators by creating dialogue opportunities across cultural lines.

Working with the people in China involves more than just the agreement we have regarding the fields, but it is also about developing friendships. Building these new friendships require a better understanding of the language and in my spare time I am enjoying my second class to learn Mandarin Chinese. Beyond the fact that I think it is a beautiful language, especially in the written form, I am looking forward to meaningful dialogues with the construction team and international stakeholders with whom I am working in preparation of the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

With the abundance of specialized field equipment available to

sports turf professionals today, I was surprised to learn that the field construction teams in Beijing didn't have access to specialized turf equipment used in the West. Some equipment was obtained through American distributors operating in China; however, other types of equipment needed to help expedite the construction of the fields simply weren't available.

When I spoke with officials about the equipment limitations, I learned that much of the construction was going to be completed by manual labor. As explained to me, China is able to overcome equipment shortages through the sheer scale of its labor force. The individual labor going into the production of the Olympic fields in Beijing is astounding. From this perspective, it is easy to understand the attractiveness of the Chinese labor market for international companies with heavy manufacturing requirements.

### **Turf and clay selections**

Beijing's weather patterns are a lot like New York City's. Given the similarities, we discussed a variety of grassing options for the fields that would simulate the high performance of New York's professional





ball fields. After our initial meeting, it was determined that we would need to seed the fields rather than sod them, since China does not have the appropriate equipment for harvesting sod and the type of sod they have is not conducive to baseball.

First we considered bluegrass but were advised by the local turf professionals that it was not suitable for a baseball field due to the extremely hot summers in China and because bluegrass varieties tend to succumb to fungus problems. Next, we considered using native zoysiagrasses but, after a lengthy discussion, determined that due to the turf's variety its ability to respond quickly from game play damage would be low.

Next we considered Bermudagrass, but after talking it over with the local turf professionals, we decided against it after learning Bermudagrass doesn't stand up well to China's winter months. At that point I described some of the more winter hardy Bermudas that are being developed in the states, which led to the agreement that I would research more Bermudagrass options and propose a plan.

Upon returning to the states I spent some time with local sod farms in the Washington D.C./Virginia area and was impressed with the Riviera Bermuda. After giving Gene McVey, CEO of Johnston Seed a call, Riviera Bermuda seed was on its way to the Olympics.

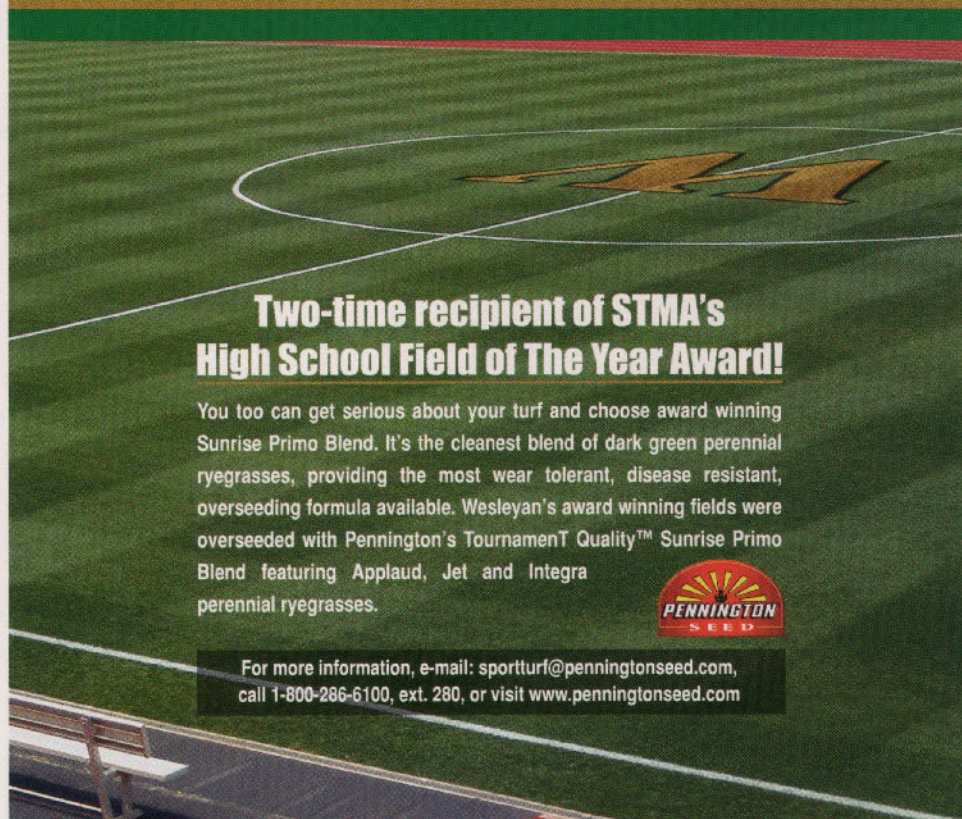
For the infield clays, we wanted to use similar blends used at top U.S. ballparks; consisting of approximately 10% silt, 60% sand and 30% clay. The search for distributors was not easy; as with many other international field construction projects, we started by asking local golf courses and brick manufacturers for possible sources. After asking around, we were fortunate to connect with local pottery manufacturing companies who had many of the materials we needed to create the right composition. Testing of the materials is ongoing but we are close. As for the mound and plate clays they may have to come from the States.

#### Continuous learning

Trends in sports turf construction and maintenance are constantly changing. Today, I am particularly amazed by the wide variety of materials that are being used to construct high

*Continued on page 30*

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We will need to seed the fields rather than sod them, since China does not have the appropriate equipment for harvesting sod.

*Continued from page 27*

quality athletic fields. From the development of new types of polymer based clays to synthetic topdressings, the technological innovation that is happening in the sports turf construction and maintenance industry is astounding! Even equipment is becoming better specialized to help serve specific sports.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has done an outstanding job of recognizing these types of innovations and incorporating these ideas into a "playbook" that is passed from one host city to the next with instructions and timelines for when construction should begin on different types of projects. By sharing examples of what has and hasn't worked, each new project can be executed with greater effi-

ciency and make better use of new technologies. The Beijing team has embraced the best practices and is on track to develop outstanding new fields for the 2008 Summer Games.

Beijing is a wonderful city that will undoubtedly host a vibrant and memorable Olympic Games in 2008. It is exciting to be involved with the construction of fields that will expose a new segment of fans to the game of baseball and I cannot say enough about the hospitality and character of those involved with the planning and construction process.

That being said, I want to express how lucky I feel to be able to live in the U.S. Our country has vast resources, modernized equipment, and limitless possibilities. A baseball game on a warm summer evening enjoyed by

friends and family provides an opportunity to relax and reflect on the simple pleasures of friendly competition against the backdrop of a well-manicured field.

I strongly believe that my friends in China will embrace this game if not for the sport, but for the same reasons we as Americans do. Those in the sports turf industry make a valuable contribution to the quality of life we enjoy in the U.S. and I am proud to count myself among the professionals who have dedicated a career to this pursuit. ■

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