

Wesleyan School, DeWitt win Field of the Year



he Sports Turf Managers Association's 2006 Schools/Parks Baseball Field of the Year is Wesleyan School's Gaebelein Field in Norcross, GA, managed by director of grounds maintenance Jon DeWitt. DeWitt's staff includes assistant director Josh Graham, 2nd assistant Kyle Leppelmeier, and Jose Flores.

SportsTurf: What attracted you to a career in sports turf management?

DeWitt: It was by accident really; although I had lifelong exposure to the green industry through my dad's work. My first job, at age 13, was working in a greenhouse. Later my dad owned a portion of a landscape company where I got experience in the Res/Com side. In high school I found myself working on the school's fields. I began developing a serious

interest in sports field management at that time. That passion grew over the years, particularly during the period while I was caring for fields to pay for my college education. There can't be too many people who came into the sports field industry by way of a BA in English Literature.

SportsTurf: What are your specific responsibilities in this job?

DeWitt: My title is Director of Grounds Maintenance. If it is outdoors, it probably falls into my territory. We have 75 total acres, 14 of which are athletic fields. The ornamentals require an incredible amount of attention. We do small landscape enhancements, irrigation work (both maintenance and expansion), set-ups for games/events, fence/windscreen maintenance, and obviously sports field work.

I coordinate our maintenance around PE and the athletic events, as well as other user groups. Landscape projects dedicated "In Honor of" or



From nozzle back: Josh Graham, Jose Flores, Jon DeWitt, and Benedict Nwoke.

"In Memory of" are also something we handle, and we take pride in our role in these projects.

SportsTurf: What's the biggest headache in your job?

DeWitt: Easily, trying to work with user groups without it becoming confrontational, and the never-ending barrage of events people can dream up. People think that being a sports field manager means we grow grass, but sports field managers do much more than that. Managing

usage to me is the most difficult, and quite possibly the most important, part of my job.

Every user group thinks you have singled them out in a conspiracy to spoil their good time. It is rarely a single user group, but they cannot see the big picture and the combined impact of hundreds of hours of usage.

SportsTurf: How do you balance your family life with work demands?

DeWitt: Probably not as well as I could;

however, we do have dinner together as a family nearly every night. My twin daughters take karate and that is another way we are able to spend time together. We are lucky in that we have miles of bike trails just behind our house, and we make use of those quite frequently.

I did have a wake-up call the other day at my daughter's "Donuts for Dad." The children had written descriptions of their dads, and most of the dads' hobbies were golfing, tennis, woodworking, etc. My daughter, however, listed "work" as my hobby.

I am proud that my yard is not the ugliest in the neighborhood, in fact, I think it's quite good for being in the sports field industry.

SportsTurf: Do you plan any adjustments, large or small, to your maintenance plan in 2007? Did you purchase any new equipment or product for this year?

DeWitt: Something I picked up from my wife's work in retail was the motto, 'Beat Last Year.' I keep that in mind all the time. We are constantly tweaking the program in an effort to improve.

I am meticulous note taker and can refer back to these notes on about just about anything. For example: a particular combination of settings on the aerator that worked well. Another thing I make a lot of notes about is overseeding. Essentially, you only have practice at this once a year, so it is particularly important to make note of how you could improve on last year's process.

It was a great year equipment-wise. We purchased a Toro Reelmaster 5510 mower. We got the 8-inch, 11-blade unit with rear roller brushes and the hydro-leak detector. We also began a 4-year lease on a Toro MP 1250 sprayer. I also purchased a used Dakota 410 topdresser, which allowed us to go in-house with this cultural practice.

SportsTurf: How do you see the sports turf manager's job changing in the future?

DeWitt: It is my hope that the sports turf manager's job will be seen as the professionals we are rather than "lawn janitors" or simple backs of the neck. I hope that this professional view of our industry will transfer over to employers and owners seeing the resource they often have right in front of them – their own resident sports turf manager.

How many failed construction projects could be avoided if administrators would let the person they are expecting to maintain the

field have some say in its construction? The STMA is probably our greatest resource in improving the image of our profession. We have seen how the golf industry has been successful in their efforts. However, we must also project ourselves as professionals in our individual work environments.

I also hope that our industry will be seen as environmental stewards rather than enemies of the earth. If you look at the benefits of turf for erosion control, filtering run off, CO₂ absorption, oxygen production, and other benefits, it is hard to understand how we have been targeted as a detracting from the quality of the environment. ■

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