



Venerable Wisconsin field named best

Mary Rountree Evans Field in Baraboo, WI, hosted its first game in 1924, featuring future major leaguers Buck Weaver and Happy Felsch, who unfortunately are best known as members of the infamous Chicago Black Sox. The field is set along the Baraboo River with majestic pine and willow trees serving as a backdrop for hitters and fans alike.

Maintenance of the facility depends on a network of volunteers, who have taken the field from an all-skin infield and cinder warning track to winning the 2007 STMA Schools/Parks Baseball Field of the Year. Manager Craig Schlender, a city parks employee, specializes in setting up the mound and batter's boxes, and has learned his trade from joining

the Wisconsin and national STMA organizations. "I was fortunate enough to be a part of some great training sessions put on by the Milwaukee Brewers," Schlender says. "The late Harry Gill set up the maintenance plan."

Schlender's on-field experience includes more than 600 tournament games, five State Legion tournaments, three WIAC tournaments, and two NCAA Division III Midwest Regional tournaments.

SportsTurf: How did you get started in turf management? What was your first sports turf job?

Schlender: I got started in turf management working for the Baraboo Parks Department when I was promoted from a construction position to the operations super-

visor of Baraboo's 100-acre park system. Working on Mary Rountree was actually my first turf management job.

Having no turf management background, I needed to find out how to improve the fields. I turned to the people who do it best, the Milwaukee Brewers groundskeepers. I owe a lot to the people I met there, the late Harry Gill, Gary Vandenberg, David Mellor of the Boston Red Sox, Troy Smith of the Denver Broncos, and Rachel Volkening. They were all willing to share information with a person who had no real background in turf management. I took their advice and joined the WSTMA and STMA. Over the years I have taken advantage of all of the meetings, seminars, and trainings put on by the WSTMA and STMA. Most of my turf management

knowledge has come from these meetings, asking the right questions to the right people, and most importantly experiencing the trial and errors of working on ball diamonds.

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

Schlender: I have been able to do all of these things because I have a very understanding family, and most importantly an understanding wife. My wife has claimed to have seen more than 1,500 baseball games. She does not like to admit it, but deep down she has loved every one. My whole family has been very involved in Baraboo

Baseball, from working in the concession stand, working on the field, coaching, and even having a daughter be bat girl.

I lead a very busy life that is all connected to turf management. In the summer I find myself spread very thin, but because of my loving wife she allows me to follow my passion. I oversee the turf management on Mary Rountree, I am the head of grounds at Great Wolf Lodge (a vacation resort in Wisconsin Dells), and I own and operate a baseball diamond consulting company (Ball Diamond Fine Sports Turf LLC) and coach Legion baseball with my son.

ST: How do you see your job changing in the next 10 years?

Schlender: In the future I see myself slowing down a bit. I have been mentoring Randy Seymour, the current Baraboo parks operations supervisor. It is easy for me to mentor him because he has the same values, goals, and work ethic that are needed to maintain the sports facilities. My consulting business has been growing in the past 5 years and I see that growth trend continuing as facilities strive to have the best complexes they can have.

As I get closer to "retirement," if you want to call it that, my wife and I want to go south for the winters and maybe there will be a baseball field that I can help out with.

ST: Did you make any adjustments, large or small, to your maintenance plan in 2008? Did you purchase any new equipment or products for this year?

Schlender: Over the years we have fine tuned our maintenance plan. We are still working out the kinks on an irrigation system we installed a few years ago. As the field has improved through the years so has the equipment to maintain it. We are very lucky the city of Baraboo has been purchasing and maintaining top of the line equipment for Mary Rountree. There are plans for a warning track and we recently completed building two state-of-the-art batting cages.

ST: What's the greatest pleasure you derive from your job? What's the biggest headache?



Schlender: The most pleasurable thing for me is watching excited ballplayers playing on one of the best if not the best baseball field they have played on. Also, knowing that a town with only 10,000 people, a small budget, minimum staff, and lots of volunteers could lead to a national field of the year award!

I am very proud to be one of the leaders making the field what it is today and what it will be in the future. It would be impossible to do this without the Baraboo Legion baseball program, the Baraboo Dugout Club, and a strong city parks department. The Legion baseball program and the Dugout Club have raised more than \$250,000 in the past 15 years for field and



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FIELD OF THE YEAR



playing improvements. This money has been matched by the city and so has been a win-win for everyone.

We have been very fortunate in the past 15 years to have a solid volunteer grounds crew. With the volunteer crew we have we prep the field no different than a major league ballpark every single day. In the summer we have a full time employee who takes care of the day to day tasks. The combination of volunteers and city employees we have has made the playing surface, amenities, and atmosphere to rival any big league ballpark. The coaches, players, fans, and people from the community take pride in knowing that our park is good enough to be the national Field of the Year.

One of the biggest headaches of the manager's job is getting people to understand

that a field of this quality does not just "happen." It is the little things that make a park like this a step above the rest. If these things are not done on a day to day basis it does not take very long for a park to degrade and go the other way. With cutting of budgets and the looming economic depression this country is in, it is becoming harder and harder to secure funding for future improvements as well as continuing education for managers and staff positions.

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

Schlender: I see the sports turf manager's job having to change and be more focused in the future due to more specialized equipment, practices, and materials. This industry is dynamic and as new tech-

nology comes out managers will have to adapt and educate themselves to keep up with the industry standards.

In the parks and schools sports turf settings, there are a few fields that set the standards for the area. Many managers improve their fields trying to get to the same standards. This is great for the areas sport complexes as a friendly competition striving to make the areas fields the best they can be. In order for this to happen, managers need to keep up on continuing education and sharing of knowledge with fellow managers.

One of the greatest assets of the STMA is that all levels of sports turf managers are willing to share information. In the long run this benefits everyone. ■

The STMA Field of the Year Awards Program has been made possible through the generous support of its sponsors: Carolina Green; Covermaster; Hunter Industries; Turface Athletics/Profile Products; Scotts Turf Seed; and World Class Athletic Surfaces.