

Wiggins' showcase

wins Schools/Parks Softball Award

Jim Wiggins is a fine example of what it means to be a sports turf manager today. Committed, communicative, community-minded, Wiggins and his full-time assistant Matt Freese won the 2007 STMA Softball Field of the Year in the Schools/Parks category.

The athletic grounds manager for the Tomball, TX school district, Wiggins previously was honored by the STMA with its 2005 George Toma Golden Rake Award, which is given to a member who demonstrates superior performance on the job and in community service.

Highlights from his award entry and a short interview with the winner follow:

"We lost our Sand Pro last spring and to improvise infield preparations. We chose to use a Deere 255 utility mower with power steering and custom-built a rack to hold all our homemade brush and nail drags. This worked nicely. The new mower has proven efficient for us.

"Daily maintenance and a new tarp helped immensely during our 2007 season, mostly by reducing the number of rainouts. We work closely with

the coaching staff and team and by using combined efforts; we can get the tarp on or off the field in minutes. The team members help and take pride in our field."

ST: What's most important piece of equipment or product in your program?

Wiggins: I have two pieces of equipment that are of the most importance. One is our Hunter sprinkler system with an ICR remote control unit. The remote is a super time saver during my daily tasks, audits, aerification, and water schedules and to isolate problems out on the field.

The second is my Graco FieldLazer. In combination with Pioneer paint, we do all of the field painting and graphics work with this machine on all of the complex fields. It is a very versatile and lightweight machine that does not exhaust you after a day's use.

ST: What are your biggest challenges and how do you approach them?

Wiggins: Water prices keep escalating but we [must maintain] field playability and safety as our biggest concerns. Budget cuts and money issues in a school district are big hurdles. I have tried to become a better manag-





er of the irrigation cycles, water only when needed, lengthen the time between programs as far as possible. I try to stay up to date with all of the new products and new technology.

Gas and diesel prices are increasing as well. I am trying to be more efficient in our mowing practices and Gator usage (and I ride my Deere bicycle around the 26-acre complex whenever possible).

ST: How do you communicate with management and field users?

Wiggins: Face to face communication is 95% of the time. Phone calls and email account for the other 5%. I am on the field daily communicating with the coaches and athletes. The softball coach and I have worked together for the past 15 years. In my 18 years of service for TISD, I have developed an ongoing relationship

with my boss, the assistant superintendent, the athletic director and coaching staffs which are reflected by a single high school district.

ST: What's the best piece of turf management advice you've ever received?

Wiggins: Craig Potts from Texas A&M said, "Make the program yours!" Use tools, materials that you are familiar with and associate yourself with your vendors and associates in STMA and Texas Turfgrass Association. They have invaluable advice, ideas and are a phone call away.

A defining moment for me was when an opposing team arrived at our field, kicked off their flip flops and proceeded to "feel" the grass. They proclaimed that this was the nicest field they had ever played on." A compliment like this proved our "and then some" work ethic.

ST: How do you keep your "engine" charged to do your best every day?

Wiggins: My love of high school athletics and the athletes keep me charged. Preparing the field for the softball team who has been state finalist for two of the last five years keeps me excited. Getting to work on all sports keeps the fire burning. Designing, creating and painting new logos on the field is an area I love. Working around students and athletes makes my job worthwhile as they appreciate what I do.

ST: How do you balance work and personal life?

Wiggins: My wife and family support me 100%. My daughter wrote the Golden Rake nomination letter unbeknownst to me. My receiving the award at Disneyworld and getting to read the letter were very humbling. Seeing my work habits on paper being expressed by my daughter and family brought tears to my eyes. They have supported of my career, my dreams and my many hours away from them at my second home. My wife and I have set up a date night to get away regularly and spend time together away from school and work issues. ■

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

