

Remembering Coach Ed Thomas

THIS IS A SAD STORY FOR ME TO TELL but it helps to ease my mind here in Iowa and to remind us of the many good friends we have in the sports turf industry.

I had run to my car seeking cover from a cloudburst one morning in late June when I took a call from Joe Wagner. The news that Coach Ed Thomas had died from an act of violence that morning left me dripping in many ways.

Several of the patrons at the STMA Regional event that was to begin that day in Ames had come to know Coach Thomas over the past year and it was comforting to be with so many friends during that troubling time. There has been plenty of national coverage and you can just search the web for Coach Ed Thomas to find several well written articles about Ed's relationship with many different people on and off the football field. Sports Illustrated's cover story in the July 6, 2009 issue is the best one I've read.

I want to tell you more about Coach Thomas as a sports turf manager. Actually if you rolled the athletic director, head football coach, and sports turf manager all into one that was Ed Thomas. Two years ago Pat Brown from Tender Lawn Care asked me to meet on the football field at Parkersburg before the tornado because "the coach" wanted to have someone look over the field. I have met with many coaches and grounds managers in this capacity before but this one would change every-

thing. The big man lumbered across the field and as we spoke it was clear that he loved football and the community of people it connected him with. He beamed with pride as I told him the field was already in pretty good shape compared to what I normally am called out to visit; it was clear that he was a self taught groundskeeper that took a great deal of pride in the appearance and safety of the field. Then he asked "How do we get to the next level?"

That's all I needed to hear; we set out a plan for fall renovation that would make this the best high school surface in the state. But after May 25, 2008 the same question was before us—"How to get from where we are to where we want to be?"

That day an F5 tornado leveled most of the Parkersburg community and the high school. A day after the tornado Coach Thomas crawled into the rubble to retrieve the desk blotter that had all his contacts scribbled on it; the authorities threatened to arrest him if he tried it again. I was blessed

to hear his encouraging words about rebuilding his community, starting with the football field and facility. The field suddenly took on a whole new meaning as it was a rallying point during a time of such despair. The Iowa STMA Chapter, along with the generous donations of time, labor, and supplies from several commercial distributors, was proud to help repair the field and more importantly, be coached by one of the greatest.

It has been just over a year since the tornado and only a month since Coach departed and we are still trying to find a way to keep marching, because that is what he would have wanted.

Coach loved divot mix because it was something that he and his players could do with limited resources and it really made a difference; three buckets he mixed are still in the

shed and no one has the heart to move them. He faithfully mowed and watered the field and could not walk by a weed without hand pulling it. He must have gotten tired of pulling weeds because he spot sprayed the field and ended up making about 15 burned areas on the field. Coach was beside himself for such a blunder and we couldn't wait to rib him a little about it. That never happened and when Joe and I were on the field at the funeral all the spots had already been filled. It was the first time that I experienced damaged turf on a foot-

ball field that I didn't want to repair... somehow we didn't want his marks to go away.

Tony Senio, Iowa Chapter Board of Directors, is organizing a divot mix and turf plugging day to repair all but one of Coach's spots. Usually hand plugging is designated for someone on the crew that is in the doghouse but this time it will be an honor to redistribute a few parcels on the sacred acre.

Now that coach has left the "sacred acre" for the Promised Land we find ourselves asking "how do we get to the next level not only on the field but in life?" He would tell us to hold onto our vision and let others become part of our determination. Coach's son Aaron and I had stood together on Parkersburg's field when his father addressed the crowd a year after the tornado and Aaron told me that football and this field was part of making the community feel normal again. I can't wait to stand on the field again with a man named Thomas. ■



» COACH ED THOMAS, center, working with Iowa STMA members to renovate his football field following the May 2008 tornado.

Q&A



BY DR. DAVID MINNER

Professor, Iowa State University

Questions?

Send them to
David Minner at
Iowa State University, 106
Horticulture Hall,
Ames, IA 50011
or email
dminner@iastate.edu.

Or, send your
question to
Grady Miller at
North Carolina State University,
Box 7620, Raleigh, NC
27695-7620, or email
grady_miller@ncsu.edu.