

# Baseball World Cup in Europe challenges US turf managers



» BEFORE the final game between Cuba and Team USA. The first man in Cuba's line is Fidel Castro's son, Antonio. Photo by Ezio Ratti.



» THE FIELD CREW from Nettuno, Italy after the final game.



» REGENSBURG, Germany hosted first round games featuring China, USA, and Venezuela.



» REGENSBURG, Germany field maintenance crew at work.

IN SEPTEMBER Europe hosted the 2009 Baseball World Cup. Twenty teams traveled to seven countries to compete in 22 stadiums and the finals were played outside of Rome. To say the tournament was a success is an understatement, but the logistics of managing the fields, teams, equipment etc., was intensely challenging.

The magnitude of this event was daunting but at the same time no athlete was injured from poor field conditions (not to mention Team USA brought home the Gold Medal!). Each field required specific improvements and upgrades before and during the events. In the summer of 2008 I made the first round of venue evaluations for this tournament that created controversy among the federations. Some initial sites were removed and new sites added. It was important to set the field of play standards high for this tournament due to the fact MLB level players would be participating.

The primary objective was to provide a safe playing field for the athlete. To ensure safety Chad Olsen and I assembled a group of US sports turf managers to assist with the renovations and game day operations. The logistics to transport the turf management team between Sweden, Germany, Croatia, Spain, Italy, Holland and Czech Republic was challenging to say the least.

To reflect on the event we asked each of the sports turf managers that had a part in the renovations a few questions related to the overall experience. We held several phone conferences and shared reports of each venue to ensure each individual had the best knowledge related to the conditions of the playing field they were headed to. Their answers provide a compelling story as it relates to sports field maintenance.

## What did you learn from your experience working in another country?

**Rick Newville, sportsturf manager for the Amateur Softball Association, Oklahoma City:** From all my experiences of working in other countries (Greece, Cuba, Italy), I have learned to appreciate the luxuries of the equipment we use here in the USA. Forget about the high dollar power equipment most of us use. Many venues I have had the pleasure to provide assistance lack the basic hand tools that we take for granted: shovels, rakes, string lines, etc. I have seen many crews who lack an edger, use garden hoes around the entire skin and warning tracks to edge the field. Once a crew in Athens actually used pocket knives to edge the field until a power edger finally arrived.

**Tom Nielsen, director of sportsturf**

Some common hand tools and products that we can [easily] purchase are not available so you have to adjust your way of doing things and even learn from the local groundskeepers.

**operations, Louisville Bats:** I learned from my experience in Rotterdam that I really have it good in Louisville. For example, when I need a piece of equipment, I can order it or rent it and have it delivered to the stadium. Also, I learned that the Rotterdam city employees face the same challenges as city employees in the US. They are not able to key on one field because they have 150 fields [to manage].

**Jeff Nancarrow, sports turf manager, Daytona Beach Cubs: I did three stops in Italy:** Parma, Reggio-Emilia and Bologna. At each venue, the people were very accommodating and helpful, but they just did not grasp the magnitude of the event. It seemed they were treating the task at hand as just another local event. From a learning standpoint, I learned to be more assertive in accomplishing what needed to be done.

**Dennis Klein, turf manager, Texas Rangers:** Working in another country is always a challenge with the language barrier. This was one of many times that I have assisted the Brickman sportsturf team, but the first time to be at a venue by myself. It was more difficult in Croatia to communicate because not as many people speak English as they do in other countries

**Eric Ogden, turf manager, Daytona Beach Cubs:** Learning to think on my feet and to adapt to the tools and techniques would have been the major lesson learned. Being able to make tools when needed or just using the tools they have to make things work. That was a lesson I will take with me throughout the duration of my career.

**Joseph Skrabak, sports turf manager, Staten Island Yankees:** Baseball in Spain/Italy is heavily influenced by local politics. Having the crews and managers focus on field safety and playability was my most difficult task.

**Kevin Moses, sports turf manager, Camden River Sharks:** We should be thankful for the industry and resources we have in the United States. Working overseas you have to think outside of the box at times to get things done. Some common hand tools and products that we can drive down the street and purchase are not available so you have to adjust your own way of doing things and even learn from the local groundskeepers.

**Budgie Clark, former sportsturf manager, Washington Nationals:** Get a lot of sleep. You are a one-man show when it comes to field maintenance. Communication is a factor as well. The concept of field maintenance is very limited.

**Brandon Putman, sports turf manager, York (PA) Revolution:** I learned that it would benefit most to search for available tools and equipment before engaging in difficult projects because what is available will determine what can be accomplished. Determining resources before the event would also be helpful.

### **What was the most challenging thing(s) you had to deal with? How did you overcome them?**

**Newville:** I think the most challenging thing is the language barrier. It always helps to have a good interpreter, but many times there isn't one available. Sometimes you have to be a pretty good mime to get your point across.

**Skrabak:** Moving tons of material from off the field to the areas

where they were needed. I made quick friends with the construction supervisor to bring needed material with a loader when it was possible. Working without good hand tools. Just make do with what you have.

**Nielsen:** The most challenging thing I had to deal with was adapting to the equipment. They did not have the same tools that I am used to using. Also, the equipment is not as accessible as it is here in the US.

**Klein:** The most challenging thing was the lack of clay in the infield skin mix. It was a sandy soil that was very difficult to keep wet and together. The field condition was very good. All the teams were shocked that Croatia had such a place.

**Ogden:** The most challenging thing by far that would stand out mostly for me would have to be the language barrier. Being able to establish main words to get the task at hand accomplished made the job easier as each day passed. With time overcoming that makes such an event as this, become as successful as it was.

**Nancarrow:** Language barriers. Translators were available at each place, but not on a consistent basis. Each place was operating on volunteers, so English speaking people came and went depending on their own schedules. Luckily, the Italian language is somewhat similar to the Spanish language. I have a good "work" vocabulary in Spanish. I was just able to get my points across using a combination of Spanish, English and Italian.

**Moses:** The biggest obstacle, which relates to all of the fields, was the infield skin. The red infield material that is used did not compact very well and needed to be completely hydrated in order to hold together. If it dried out the skin became way too loose which resulted in large divots. Most irrigation systems I encountered had a 360 rotor behind the mound that covered the infield grass and skin and that was their usual means of watering the skin. It was a challenge to get across the importance of watering the infield and to get the local groundskeepers to get the hose out and spend the time watering the skin multiple times a day, even in the pre-game routine. The language barrier was also a big obstacle as a lot of the times the interpreter was not around very much and I had to communicate with the local groundskeeper with neither of us speaking the same language. Using the little bit of English and Italian we had both learned or picked up and by pointing and making hand gestures we managed to get the job done.

**Clark:** Not having the proper equipment and supplies to work on the field. No way to overcome the problem. Use what is available.

**Putman:** The most challenging aspect was the volunteer staff. A lot of the Italian staff had normal work schedules that were priority for them, which is understandable. I was able to figure out the times they could be at the field and planned tasks accordingly. However, there were times when I was by myself working on the field.

### **What was your opinion of the field condition at the venue you worked on? Before and after?**

**Newville:** The overall field condition before my arrival was very poor. It was still in poor condition when I left the venue. I am sure it was in much better condition by the time a game was played at that venue. I only spent 2 days at each venue, and really only had time to address the mound, plate, and bullpen areas. These areas were drastical-



ly better upon my departure. During my stay, I also addressed other safety issues at each venue with the grounds personnel. They assured me the issues would be resolved by the time a game was played.

**Skrabak:** Give field c minus. Not much difference before and after. The natural turf would not take many games.

**Nielsen:** When I arrived in Rotterdam, I was surprised at how good of shape the field was in. When I left, I felt like I had made some good changes on the field. I think that the people maintaining the field learned some useful tips from me that will be implemented in maintaining the field and should raise the quality of the playing surface.

**Klein:** I do feel that all of the countries I have been to over the years could use training on field maintenance. The people are very eager and take great pride in their complexes.

**Ogden:** The venue itself showed great potential upon arrival. Major details were taken care of but it was the absences of the “little things” that groundskeepers at our level take pride in. Teaching the local grounds

onsite, so for the first game with USA the turf was 3 inches long. The next day we were able to get it cut with a contracted service.

## **Would you do it again if asked and if so what would you do to make it a better experience for you and the field you worked on?**

**Newville:** I would definitely do it again as it was a very valuable experience for me. I not only enjoyed working with each field crew in preparing their fields, but educating them on proper maintenance. Each crew was very appreciative of us being there to assist them.

**Skrabak:** Undecided, but probably yes. I'm 61 next year. Bring or ship hand tools and have all transportation issues worked out beforehand. Turf always taken care of by municipality or contract, have no control over mowing. Took 8 hours to mow field in Chieti.

**Nielsen:** Yes, I would absolutely do it again. Next time, I would try to bring more of my own hand tools. It would have been nice to have one day, maybe the day before returning to the US to have time to do a little sightseeing. A standardized groundskeeping manual with photos of fields, mowing patterns, equipment and instruction in the language of each particular country would be enormously helpful. I brought my own manual that I have created and made copies for the field workers in Rotterdam.

**Klein:** I always enjoy working with Murray and Chad. The projects are always well thought out and organized. It truly makes me thankful for what I have at my stadium after I go on these types of jobs.

**Ogden:** I would return in a heartbeat to work internationally. The one thing that would make the renovation of these fields easier would be implementing the tools we use here in the states to the fields we work on abroad. A simple gift package of the necessities would turn those fields into venues people ache to play on.

**Nancarrow:** I would absolutely do it again. For a better experience, I would ensure that materials and products were on hand prior to my arrival. At all 3 venues, we lost at least a day due to lack of product. The first two didn't have clay on hand. The last one had clay, but no pitching rubbers or home plates.

**Moses:** Yes, I would do it again and I would try to incorporate more of a teaching aspect into the experience. With the limited time we had on the fields and with the communication barrier it was sometimes difficult to get the reasons behind what I was doing across to the local crews. I would also bring some tools with me such as a square 8x8 tamp and a 3 foot steel rake to make the job a lot easier.

**Clark:** Yes, I would love to be more involved with international baseball and to be able to take their field maintenance to a higher level with the proper equipment and supplies to work on the field.

**Putman:** Of course, I love the international work. I feel that a document in the local language that outlined procedures and necessary equipment, tools and materials would lessen confusion. It would also give us a basis on how to identify items in the native language, i.e. how to say rake in Italian. If the document were sent ahead of arrival, it would give the administrators of that facility time to acquire the necessary items for the tournament. ■



» CHINA TAIPEI and USA line up in Torino, Italy.

crews those aspects of a field is what really brought such great response to those who saw the field before.

**Nancarrow:** I will choose Bologna, as I was there the longest. Turf was terribly poor, 95% crabgrass. I actually like the infield material they use. It can take a lot of weather and be playable with a little effort. Mounds and plate obviously lacked the clay we use in the states. The “Reggio” clay provided a better surface, but it was terribly difficult to work with. Almost like concrete in a dry form. Very sticky when moistened.

**Moses:** In Regensburg, Germany, at Armin-Wolf Arena the playing field was in very good condition. They had done a lot of renovation work before hosting the World Cup and it really showed. The main work was in rebuilding the bullpens and adjusting the slope on the game mound. With a proper turf maintenance program the field can really improve (topdressing to help smooth the outfield and stop the infield from bowing out, weed control, overseeding, etc). Hosting the World Cup definitely improved the playing surface and hopefully they will continue to build on the knowledge and experience they learned to continually improve the facility.

**Clark:** The fields would not have been playable if we were not able to be part of the World Cup Tournament.

**Putman:** In Florence, the biggest issue was the clay areas and turf. Even though the rain held off while I was there, the mounds were left uncovered during the rain before my arrival. All the clay areas had to be rebuilt. The mound clay used had high silt content, which makes it tacky and difficult to work with. The turf was unlevel with some deep low spots that I had to fill with infield material. They did not have a mower