

McNeal ready to handle STMA reins



“Abby knows pushing our Strategic Initiatives further down the path pushes our profession and our individual members further up a rewarding hill. We’re headed in the right direction and Abby’s leadership will be exceptional.”

—Mike Andresen, CSFM, past president of STMA

ABBY MCNEAL, CSFM, turfgrass manager at the Colorado School of Mines, made history last month by becoming the first female president of the Sports Turf Managers Association (STMA). But if you know McNeal, you know she’s not interested in such things. This woman is about getting the job done, and done well.

You could ask her about being one of the first two women asked to serve on a Super Bowl crew but she’ll respond by mentioning the scores of other turf managers who have assisted Ed Mangan and George Toma many times over the years. McNeal’s passion is service to the association and the industry, not seeking the limelight. In that way, she is a perfect reflection of what it means to be a professional sports turf manager—it’s about the game, the athletes, the competition and

nothing else. What else would you expect from someone who plays goalie for her ice hockey team?

“One thing I really like about this industry is the passion turf managers have about what we do,” McNeal says. “We share information and do our jobs behind the scenes, and not too many people know what we do. I call it ‘elf magic’ as if elves appear to take care of the fields and no one knows about it.”

Takes one to know one

“Abby is exceedingly unselfish and she has never failed to give back or give more than her share at every opportunity,” says outgoing STMA president Mike Andresen, CSFM. “Her long-time leadership of chapters, her chairing our first education piece on artificial turf, her most recent work with upgrading the conference are three obvi-

ous examples of her leadership abilities and unselfishness.

"Her association work from the time she joined as a student member and received a scholarship has been exceptional. She was a prime player in developing the Strategic Plan and her commitment to fulfilling its goals will be a priority for her," says Andresen.

Like most turf managers, McNeal didn't grow up dreaming of becoming an expert on growing grass. Raised on Kent Island, MD, in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay, McNeal's childhood was all-American: pickup football and soccer games, tossing Frisbee, sailing, and mowing lawns for pocket money. In high school she played basketball and tennis as well as the trumpet in the school band. "Yes, I was a band geek," she says, "but it's actually helped in my career as I understand how bands use fields."

She did want to be a firefighter when she was young and says that in a way she has fulfilled that dream—what do sports turf managers do if not put out "fires"?

But upon graduation McNeal joined the Coast Guard, following an uncle who had put 20 years into that service, but when she blew out a knee she was sent home. "It was a tough time for me; I was on crutches for a month and not sure what path to take." She chose to move to Colorado, where her mother then lived (her mother passed away last October and Abby says, "I admired my mother very much; she used to walk barefoot on all my fields to 'bless' them."), and enrolled at Colorado State, majoring in Landscape and Horticulture. "After my first term design class, I discussed options with a professor and decided to make turf my emphasis," she laughs now.

She met Dr. Tony Koski, an extension turf specialist for CSU, who became her advisor as well as one of her professors. "I really enjoyed learning from Tony about all the various avenues my degree could take me. He was instrumental in my finding STMA and receiving an STMA scholarship as well."

McNeal interned one summer at a YMCA camp and the next summer with the Fort Collins Parks and Rec department; then, in 1993, she spent her summer interning at the Denver Broncos training facility, valuable experience that would pay off later. She graduated from CSU's 4-year program in 1994 and began her career as a seasonal worker for the City of Westminster's parks department, and followed that with a full-time gig with the City of Boulder Parks department, where she won the 1997 STMA College Soccer Field of the Year award.

In 1999 McNeal joined the University of Colorado athletic department and was instrumental in the changeover from artificial turf to natural at Folsom Stadium, as well as hiring the Buffaloes' current turf manager, Jason DePaepe, CSFM.

In the spring of 2000, McNeal joined Ross Kurcab, CSFM at INVESCO Field

at Mile High to work for the Broncos. "I learned how to manage multiple sports through the grind of an NFL season," she says. "Dealing with weather and the non-sports events taught me to make 'scenarios' not 'plans'.

"That experience helped me handle the event schedule at my next job, at Toyota Park outside Chicago, where we went from soccer to a concert in less than 24 hours three times in one year," she says.

McNeal's experience hasn't been all roses. "I've learned to be very proactive and less reactive," she says. "I had a situation in the past where a lack of communication led to a string of events that caused things to snowball. It was a big turning point. Now, if anything I am 'over-thoughtful' in being proactive and seeking feedback from everyone. Everybody on the staff that I worked with had an opportunity to voice their opinions and suggestions on all issues. This has helped me from that point on."

That situation won't be an issue in her current job; McNeal's a one-woman staff at the School of Mines in Golden, responsible for all work on the softball, baseball, and football fields, as well as the intramural fields. "It can be frustrating because you just can't get to everything, especially with a limited staff and resources," she says. And not only at work is McNeal challenged with prioritizing; as the mother of 8-month-old twins, she definitely understands how to balance work and family!

"On the plus side, the athletic department previously did not have a strong field management program but my current supervisor is determined to improve our fields."

McNeal helps the grounds staff with snow removal when necessary and in turn gets help painting the football field as well as other athletic field projects. The baseball and softball teams have a mandate to help her maintain the mound and home plate areas, putting down the tarp, etc. "The athletes are helpful; they will shovel snow off a tarp to practice, for example," she says. "And I used the

"Abby is a very hard worker and takes her position seriously. She is most deserving of this prestigious position."

—Heather Nabozny, Detroit Tigers



Abby flanked by her twins, Hayley (left) and Aidan.

“Abby has such a great way of communicating her ideas and thoughts during board and committee meetings. She’s always very calm and reflective, yet she gets to the heart of any issue very nimbly and with precision.”

—Kim Heck, STMA CEO



Abby and a fellow crew member at work on the Denver Broncos’ INVESCO Field at Mile High.

STMA video on building a mound to help educate the players. I truly believe that the athletes have more pride in their fields because they know what it takes to make it look good.

“The baseball and softball coaches, as well as the athletic director, have been very appreciative of the improvements I’ve made. I tweaked an irrigation design for the softball field with the help of Hunter’s website, which we installed ourselves,” McNeal says. “I was nervous but excited about how it would perform, and it has made a big difference in the quality of the field.”

The “crown” weighs heavily

When asked about her “vision” for the

STMA as its president, McNeal is typically self-effacing: “I don’t want to screw up!”

Seriously, she says her task is to provide the leadership and tools necessary to accomplish the association’s goals. “It’s important to continue to enhance the benefits of membership; our members need to know what resources are available and how to use them,” McNeal says.

“I also want to help grow membership while communicating to existing members the value of belonging to STMA. And it’s also important to me to give members a chance to be heard. You can’t satisfy everybody but if you listen to everyone, it’s easier to live with yourself at

the end of the day,” McNeal says.

“I do not have a large or personal agenda. We have a strategic plan in place and we’ll stick to that.”

McNeal is interested in growing the recognition of the sports turf manager’s job and its importance, at every level. “I want our successes to be recognized. Ours is a thankless industry; we get a lot done and work hard to make so many events happen. Turf managers play a crucial role but very few people know how it gets done—but it gets done,” she says.

“We take personal pride in what we accomplish and the opportunity to make a difference.” ■