

Developing a sound working relationship with a new coaching staff

I was approached a year or so ago by Sportsturf and asked to present a year in review of my experience with our new coaching staff here at Michigan State University. Last fall I hesitated to submit an article because I did not feel I had achieved the results I had strived for over that 10-month period. I felt that after a second season with the new football staff, I could speak with confidence on how we achieve success on and off the field together. After 18 months, we have achieved a working environment that I am proud to be a part of. The following describes some of the ways in which we achieved this environment.

A change in coaching staff brings new challenges and opportunities to create new and stronger relations. Through this experience, I reaffirmed my belief that we can't have great fields without the support of the coaching staff and support of the athletic administration. I am blessed to have three great people to work for in those regards: head football coach Mark Dantonio, director of football operations Tim Allen, and senior associate athletic director Greg Ianni. The expectation is always to have safe, playable, and aesthetically pleasing facilities whether it is the practice facilities or Spartan Stadium.

(L to R): Director of Football Operations Tim Allen, Senior Associate Athletic Director Greg Ianni, Amy Fouty, CSFM, and Coach Mark Dantonio.



That sounds simple enough but it can be a challenge.

So how have we overcome these challenges and come to the positive and successful working environment we have today?

goals and reassessing strategies to meet the needs of the program. Tim Allen and I have organized and created schedules to outline how we can incorporate maintenance needs, practice times, camp use, and conditioning, to best maximize use of the

bility to be proactive in communicating and organizing how things need to occur for the success of the operation as needed for the success of the team, i.e., so there are no surprises. I am often teased by Tim Allen that I am a “little grass coach,” who develops a yearly training program and then game plans for the success of the fields for the season. I appreciate that, as I like to think in agronomic terms; we train hard in the off season by planning best management and cultural practices, study our opponents, know diseases and pests, and then fight through adversity (basically Mother Nature) to be the best we can be each week for the team.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the importance of having a big picture-oriented administrator such as Greg Ianni in this whole process. Right from the beginning the focus was on developing a structure where we work together to create success on and off the field. At Michigan State, our Spartan Stadium field is not just a football field; it represents our history as the first land grant institution in the United States and our College of Agriculture and Natural Resources’ proud tradition. I depend on Greg for the support to manage that responsibility while meeting the needs of the football program. It is critical to our success with the facilities that our relationships are based upon trust, cooperation, and organization.

If I want to be considered an expert in my field, and a part of the team, I have to conduct myself as such to gain respect for our work and our profession. That means proactive communication to develop, trust and understanding, and to deliver the best fields possible for the team in that schedule. I accept the challenge with a positive attitude and look forward to the challenge of each season. That is what has helped to create a successful, sound, and a positive work environment here at Michigan State. ■

Amy Fouty, CSFM, is athletic turf manager for Michigan State, and represents Higher Education on the Sports Turf Managers Association Board of Directors.



Spartan Stadium, pride of Michigan State University.

I think back to my first meeting with Coach Dantonio and how I immediately felt that I was dealing with a person who cared about how important the details are to true success. I watched his interviews and studied him before our first meeting so I could better understand his perspective. He complimented my work from the film he had seen and conversations he had with others and I guaranteed him that my operation would do whatever we could to support the success of the program. I imparted to him I could not promise that things would be perfect all the time, but we would strive for that kind of consistency and he was very accepting of our best efforts. Throughout that first year, it was sometimes hard to understand exactly what they needed and it was hard to stay a step ahead of their requests. There were times that we all were frustrated, but we chalked it up to a learning curve year and moved forward. There is no “us versus them”—we are all a part of the program.

From the start of the second season we focused on a better structure, developing

facilities and efficiently maintain the facilities with our small staff size. I typically get the upcoming year’s schedule in January and I insert times for maintenance activities to occur on the master schedule and have them approved by the football staff so that we are all on the same page. Planning together out of season reduces the likelihood of problems throughout the year.

Another new thing we discussed in the off season for this year to manage wear areas more effectively was to map areas of use for summer camps and team periods to more evenly distribute wear patterns on our two outdoor practice fields. This is something the coaching staff schedules each week and has managed very successfully by moving their drills off the playing surface and rotating team periods around the fields on a specific schedule.

Proactive planning and conversation will lead to a more positive and understanding working relationship. I try to keep in mind my operation is a small cog in a large machine, and it is my responsi-



Maintaining turf at small schools

Q. What's the ultimate complement given to the grounds keeper?

A. If the opposing team offers to hire you or if their players dance on your mid-field logo—Hey, they noticed your field!

I am the maintenance supervisor for Capitan Municipal Schools. Capitan is a small farming and ranching community located in southern New Mexico between the Sacramento and Capitan Mountains. Our approximate population is 1,500. The school district has about 490 students enrolled in K-12.

Among my many duties is preparing the football field for our teams home games. This is truly my favorite chore. Our field is used daily for varsity and junior high practices, youth league, band practice, and P.E. classes. For our tiny village to have a "pro football" look for the field on Friday night requires many factors. First is that our superintendent and school board support me with time and a budget. Secondly, our groundskeeper, Mike Pumphrey, who helps with the basics, and third a field manager, me, with time, desire, vision, knowledge of turf, artistic talent, and a bit of EGO!

Weather watching is important in preparing the football field. We have dry windy springs, and wet summers, with August and September being very unpredictable. I need to plan in advance to have the playing field ready for the football season.

The preparation begins in the spring and means dethatch, aerify, reseed, fertilize, irrigate and much more. The field must be tough enough to endure an entire football season as there is very little window of opportunity for preparation. The field includes 10 percent creeping red fescue, 25 percent perennial rye grass, and 65 percent triathlon tall fescue. I usually fertilize with slow release pellets to extend the feed for 6 weeks because of time issues. Frequent mowing allows easier turf management and I use a John Deere Z Trac because it is fast.

This is what is required to prepare the field on game week:

- Mow to 2 inches on Tuesday
- Paint perimeter lines (twice) on Wednesday
- Paint yard lines on coach boxes on Thursday
- Paint hash marks and numbers on Friday

When all of the required markings are done, the artistic preparation

Left: I incorporate school colors on the numbers, sidelines, and a small portion of the endzone using aerosol cans with a cart and pistol.

comes into play! Meanwhile, varsity, junior high, and the youth league continue to use the field for practice. Most of the time, when I am prepping the football field, I am frequently called away to take care of other important issues that distracts and interrupts my already busy schedule.

As I discovered early in my career, much of what I do on the field cannot be seen from our bleachers. I use the 50-yard line as my main attraction. I incorporate our school colors on the numbers, sidelines, and a small portion of the end zone by using aerosol cans with a cart and pistol, which is easy to clean up. I do not like using stencils, so my “tiger head” team logo basically is done free hand.

» **“As I discovered early in my career, much of what I do on the field cannot be seen from our bleachers.”**

As the season wears on, I can only irrigate and mow. I usually fertilize in late September and by then the grass begins to show its wear. An old groundkeeper saying is “Grass grows by the inch and is killed by the foot.” As it begins to lose color, especially after cold nights, I am required to add more color to the field for it to look right.

So why do all this? In a small community such as Capitan, Friday night football is an important source of entertainment. I enjoy doing the art work and I like to make it special for the students as well as the community. Our football players love it and it inspires them to play better.

Even though preparing the football field is part of my job, I thoroughly enjoy painting the football field. Maybe someday I will be doing field art work for my grandkids.

It is almost kick off time so I have to put up the flags and get the P.A. system and scoreboard ready for game time.

Thanks to Mrs. Woods’ Multimedia Basics class for making time to take pictures and edit this article. The class includes Jared Black, Brooke Ceballos, Sara Rush, Adrienne Ramirez, Lacy Walker and Julian Washington. ■

Nick R. Pacheco is maintenance supervisor for the Capitan (NM) Municipal Schools.



Nick Pacheco poses on his pride and joy with Capitan players Andrew Chavez, left, and Lawrence Whipple.



In a small community such as Capitan, Friday night football is an important source of entertainment.



Pacheco paints this logo by hand.



Flood damage this summer in Iowa.

Plan ahead for successful crisis communications

JOHN F. KENNEDY once said that the time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining.

It's a good motto for the subject of crisis communications.

When roaring fires swept down the San Diego hillsides, Qualcomm Stadium field and operations manager Steve Wightman had to quickly marshal his troops.

Instead of preparing the field for planned San Diego State Aztecs and San Diego Chargers football games, they had to turn on a dime to help prepare and staff the stadium to house up to 11,000 fire evacuees and their animals.

"Having a plan is the key component," Wightman said. "We're a city-owned facility, and fortunately, the city had a plan in place. We knew what our roles would be. Since we're

here with the keys to everything in the building, we're an integral part of the process."

That plan, in the fall of 2007, meant reassigning his ground crew to temporary jobs, including driving forklifts to offload tents, cots, food, and clothing donations and transport medical supplies. It even included turning storage bins into horse stables and spreading straw so that livestock could lie down in a makeshift corral on the Chargers' old practice field.

"As of late, about every other year we've been an emergency evacuation center," Wightman said. "Each time, we revisit what happened before and try to think about things that are needed to accommodate people—and then get back in shape for the next game."

That kind of before- and after-event communication is essential to manage activities and people well in out-of-the-ordinary times, counsels Dan Wilinsky, a senior partner at the public relations firm of Fleishman-Hillard in Kansas City.

Wilinsky, who has spent 25 years in crisis communications, advising the likes of Sprint, Hallmark Cards and H&R Block, said it doesn't matter whether there's an abrupt need to communicate with the public or one's staff. The key is having a plan "that is a living, breathing document, not something that's stuck on a shelf and never read," he said.

The "living, breathing document," for turf managers or parks department heads that might need to quickly contact staff members, should include multiple ways to contact each staff member.

And, in addition to multiple contact methods to reach employees, it's vital for employees to know how and when to call their employers, advises Barbara Paynter, partner in Hennes Communications in Cleveland.

"Your crisis communications plan needs very clear instructions for two-way communication," Paynter said. "Lots of companies don't have ways for employees to initiate communication, such as an 800 number or a web site, if they're prevented by disaster from reporting to work. A good plan gives them specific instructions about who to report to and when."



The old Chargers practice field became an animal shelter.

When Hurricane Ike bore down on Houston, Dan Bergstrom, director of major league field operations at Minute Maid Park, had about 10 days to prepare his staff and his stadium for the possibility of a direct hit.

"We had a home stand scheduled for September 12, 13, 14, and we worked as normal starting on the 8th to prepare for baseball, but we started holding staff meetings twice a day to update our people on the hurricane and our emergency plan."

On September 11, when forecasters told Houston to prepare for a direct hit from Ike, the Astros' games were canceled, and Bergstrom and his staff moved all equipment from their below-street level shop to an upper concourse to protect it from possible flooding.

"Everyone was on site, working, so the prep work was easy," Bergstrom said. "But after the hurricane, cell phone towers were down. So, for two days, I wasn't sure where all my people were. With our retractable roof on and tied down and our prep work done, we had no field problem, no flooding. The problem was getting back in touch with all our staff."

Wilinsky, the crisis communications expert, said a lot of companies got a quick baptism in crisis communication waters after 9-11, when, as in Houston after the hurricane, cell phone contact was lost.

"That's why it helps to have multiple contact points, not just cell phones," Wilinsky said. "Do you also have land line numbers? E-mails? Other sources of communication? It gets down to someone sitting down and understanding the process: Who are the main players? Who needs to know what? Who needs to be involved? And once you know that, it must be written down. It must be an accessible, updated document that everyone knows about."

Crisis communications specialists, Wilinsky said, follow the RACE acronym: Research, take Action, Communicate, and Evaluate.

"If you have a plan, you don't just act off the cuff," he said. "You do what you've planned, and then you evaluate it. Write it down so you can do things better next time."

And, before troubles strike, it's important for both smooth operations and employee morale, to make sure that staff members know how their roles and duties might change. A time of disaster is no time to argue with someone about what's in a job description or what hours a job entails.

Making disaster duty reminders a small part of regular employee performance reviews or other manager/worker conversations can help things run more smoothly in a crisis situation.

Wightman and Bergstrom also agreed that even when disasters become usual, or at least repetitive, there will always be something new or someone new involved when disruption occurs again. That's why a written plan, periodically revised, is wise. It provides the institutional memory plus the newer, better solutions that have emerged. ■

Diane Stafford is the workplace and careers columnist at The Kansas City Star. Her columns appear on Thursday and Sunday. Read her "Your Job" blog at <http://economy.kansascity.com/?q=yourjob>. She can be reached at stafford@kcstar.com.

This is the fourth in a series of six articles in the new Ewing Professional Development Series. STMA and Ewing have partnered in this series to bring sports turf industry professional development and career issues to the forefront.



Todd Jeansonne poses in front of Louisiana State's new baseball field.

High-profile fields get new turf

LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY is serious about sports. Their football team has won three national titles, including the 2007 BCS National Championship. Their baseball team has won the College World Series five times. So when it came time to replace the Tiger Stadium football field and build the new Alex Box Stadium baseball field this year, they had to make sure they found a turf worthy of the Fighting Tigers.

The football field was first on the agenda. Todd Jeansonne, assistant director of athletic facilities, was familiar with Bull's-Eye bermudagrass (aka MSB-30/Mississippi Choice), and insisted on it for the new field.

"Mississippi State had Bull's-Eye on their field and that right there is a great referral. I tried it on some practice fields after I saw it," Jeansonne said. "I am always looking for 'cutting edge' technology with turf in the industry."



Top: Washed sod at West Coast Turf's Scottsdale, AZ farm.

Bottom: Bulls-Eye bermudagrass close up.

Bull's-Eye was actually developed at Mississippi State by Drs. Jeff Krans and Wayne Philly. According to Krans, the plant's broad leaves and tightly closed canopy create a dense biomass, resulting in a "cushion of grass" so football players are running on top of the grass rather than through it. "It gives better traction for the players and less wear on the field," said Krans. "Also, the color is a deep, dark green, which is most desirable on athletic fields."

The turf density is what made Jeansonne a fan. "One of the best elements I found with this variety is that you play the game 'on' the grass and not 'in' the grass. Its vigorous growth pattern and plentiful stolons provides great footing for the athletes and they are always happy about that," he said.

The grass variety was chosen, but now they had to find it. When selecting turfgrass, purity is extremely important. Jeansonne decided to check out West Coast Turf's Arizona facility for himself. "I liked what I saw. The entire farm was well maintained with lots of attention to detail. It was the quality of the grass out there that sealed the deal."

Because they had plenty of time for grow-in, Jeansonne chose to sprig the field. In mid-May last year, 1,300 US standard bushels of Bull's-Eye were shipped from Scottsdale, AZ, farm to Baton Rouge and mechanically planted at double the normal rate.

How did the new field hold up in its first season? "It's only 4-5 months old, and I have to keep reminding myself of that. It showed some wear from use near the end, but a young field is going to show the wear more than a mature field," Jeansonne said. "It's going to only be better next year."


New baseball stadium

Alex Box Stadium was the next order of business. A new ballpark was needed to accommodate the growing crowds and facilitate the state-of-the-art amenities necessary to continue the baseball program's winning tradition. They built the new stadium just south of the old one, and it will debut with the '09 season.

The San Diego Padres have had Bull's-Eye since the 2004 inauguration of PETCO Park, and the Arizona Diamondbacks played their 9th consecutive year on Bull's-Eye at Chase Field. The Rose Bowl and Kauffman Stadium in Kansas City have had success with the grass as well.

Grant Trenbeath, head groundskeeper for the D-backs, has a unique circumstance at Chase Field, as the ballpark is covered by a retractable dome resulting in a great deal of shade. "Bull's-Eye has been the backbone of our field all of these years mostly because it performs better in shade," said Trenbeath. "We

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tried other grasses, but this one is by far the best for our low light situation."

Jeansonne has sunlight issues as well. "We have an enormous roof over the stands which can sometimes make it tough to grow grass. One of the reasons I put in Bull's-Eye at the ballpark is because of the good shade tolerance."

After a 6-week delay caused by two hurricanes, the baseball field was finally put down in early October. The decision was made to use sod instead of sprigs due to the timing, so 103,000 square feet of washed sod was shipped from Scottsdale to Baton Rouge, and rolls were cut 3.5 feet wide and 30 feet long. Because the sod was soil free, each refrigerated truckload contained up to 16,000 square feet, making the nearly 1,500 mile drive an economically feasible option. The temperature was kept at 44 degrees F.

"I saw the turf when the trucks rolled in," said West Coast Turf spokesperson John Marman. "It arrived with minimal shocking and had excellent sod strength when it was installed. It was rooting in just 2 days."

The playing field contractor, Munie Green Care, applied "VermaPlex" (an all-natural microbial soil amendment) to the sod as each truckload was delivered, and daily at a rate of 2



Aerial view of "Death Valley," LSU's Tiger Stadium

oz./1000 sq. ft. Root growth within seven days of installation reached 3 inches.

"By the end of October I had roots up to 7 inches out there," Jeansonne said. ■

This article was supplied by West Coast Turf, Scottsdale, AZ, www.westcoastturf.com.

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