

## FIELD OF THE YEAR



# Bowers & crew

lead Hokies to College Football Field of the Year title

**W**ORSHAM FIELD AT LANE STADIUM on the campus of Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, VA was honored by the STMA with its 2008 College Football Field of the Year Award. Jason Bowers, CSFM, the Hokies' sports turf and athletic grounds manager, led the winning team, assisted by his crew of Buford Meredith, Emerson Pulliam, Andy McReynolds and Nick McKenna.

Lane Stadium's field, which hosted its first game in 1965 despite the stadium's construction not being completed, was named in 1992 for Wes and Janet Worsham, longtime Hokie supporters.

In 2001 a \$2 million renovation featuring a Green Tech ITM tray system was installed, featuring Patriot bermudagrass. Bowers overseeds with Revenge GXL perennial ryegrass after the second





football game in mid-September, at 10 pounds pure live seed per 1,000 square feet. And after every game, depending on amount of surface disruption, another 5-10 pounds/1,000 sq. ft. is applied to high wear areas, Bowers reports. Beyond Hokie football (Lane Stadium is ranked 2nd in an ESPN poll of "Ten Scariest Places to Play"), the field hosts fantasy camps, kicking camps, scrimmages, spring game and practices, band practices, hands-on training for turfgrass management majors, as well as a research field day, FFA teacher workshops, and also serves as a recruiting tool for high schoolers considering green industry majors.

Bowers reports in his award entry: "The summer of 2008 was one of the driest and coldest in Blacksburg's history, with a 6-inch rainfall deficit and average highs in May, June, July and August of 70, 81, 82 and 79 degrees, respectively, and average lows of 46, 57, 58 and 56. Bermudagrass has obvious limitations in this climate even in a warmer than average summer, and loss of color due to frost typically occurs in mid-October. However, it is the grass of choice of the Tech coaching staff due to their desire for the "fastest" playing surface possible.

"Due to the aggressive growing nature and density of Patriot, successful overseeding presents major challenges. While facilities further south can aggressively vertical mow their bermudagrass fields before overseeding with no significant decrease in field footing and playability, Blacksburg's climate is not suited for such aggressive seedbed preparation. Therefore, the plant growth regulator Primo Maxx is used to retard bermudagrass growth before overseeding, followed by multiple, light applications of sand top-dressing to achieve the necessary seed-to-soil contact for establishment in such a thick bermudagrass canopy.

"Another challenge faced with Patriot and its density is scalping potential. Simply raising the height of cut is not acceptable for this field because of the coaching staff's desire for a fast surface. After consulting with Toro's head mechanic, we decided to reduce the aggressiveness of the attitude in bedknife adjustment rather than raising the cutting height. By making a negative one degree attitude adjustment on the bedknives, we have had no further scalping issues and this information has been shared with Patriot field managers from professional to high school levels.

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"All state agencies are required to participate in the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation's nutrient management program. This program presents challenges on a sand-based field in that seasonal N application totals are restricted to no more than 4 pounds per 1,000 square feet on bermudagrass. Therefore, our approach to deal with these limitations is to achieve our turfgrass growth and color needs by using granular forms of polymer-coated and organic materials, and supplementing additional N needs with foliar applications of water soluble fertilizers. These fertility strategies have allowed Virginia Tech to make great strides in going "green."

**SportsTurf:** How has the recession affected your operations?

**Bowers:** Things are a lot tighter moneywise than I have ever seen it. We really have to try and fix things ourselves and find out what we can do without for a while until the new fiscal year. Some renovation projects have been postponed for a year or two.

**ST:** What changes to your maintenance plans are you expecting to make this year, if any?

**Bowers:** I do not plan to make many changes. Just try to take advantage of the price breaks on chemicals and supplies when companies offer them in the winter. When crunch time hits and the budget is running thin, it helps at the end to have some of the things you need for spring on hand.

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

**Bowers:** I have received a lot of advice over

the years from some great people. The one thing that has stuck with me over the years was a piece of advice I received when I was 21, working at a small golf course in Maryland. The assistant superintendent, John Easterday, told me "When you become a turf manager,

no matter where you go, respect your employees. You will know who the good ones and the bad ones are and if you listen to their opinions and let them have input while showing them respect, the good ones will stay and work with you not just for you."

I have tried to take that advice everywhere I've worked. A little motivation to keep your employees happy and wanting to work with you, not so much for you. I coordinate a flag football game at the end of football season on the game field with my guys and we've played golf together a couple times, too. I feel I have the best crew in the nation and I want them to feel appreciated. With out my crew, there is no way I could have won Field of

the Year.

**ST:** How do you balance your work and personal time?

**Bowers:** It goes back to having good employees around you. I have an assistant in charge of softball, an assistant in charge of baseball, a graduate assistant in charge of soccer and a grounds foreman who has been with Virginia Tech for 47 years who is in charge of our track fields and cross country course. I take on the task of the two football fields, but with the help of these guys, we get everything done. It's hard in the fall to have time off, but we all balance off weekends (usually when the football team is traveling) where one or two people might take off one week and then

rotate the next week. I want my guys to know family is very important, so if they need to spend some time at home, I will gladly give them the time off to do so.

**ST:** How does the pressure of having your field on national television at least several times a season affect your approach, maintenance-wise or preparation-wise, if at all?

**Bowers:** At first it was BIG!! Everything had to be perfect! But after a couple of years I have relaxed some on that. It still has to look great, but player safety is our most important goal here. I know every turf manager says it, "safety is first, aesthetics is not that important," but do they really mean that? Coach Beamer is really good about this. He wants a fast, safe playing surface and for years our field was just white lines with nothing in the endzones; very plain and not a "VT" in sight. But over the years we have been able to add things to the field. Usually if you have a good root mass and healthy turf, the field will look great. But that's the easy part. Making sure all the divots are filled in and the moisture levels are good on the field for a safe playing surface is what really means the most to me.

**ST:** How has being a Certified Sports Field Manager helped your career?

**Bowers:** Well along with my associate's degree from Virginia Tech, I am hoping my Certification helps me out when it comes to future employment. I have been told that if I had my bachelor's degree I would have more job opportunities.

Having my CSFM is something I am very proud of and I hope employers see that I took the time and have the knowledge to become a CSFM. It is a great tool for sports turf managers to take advantage of and I hope more of our STMA members try to get their CSFM. ■

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

