

F.O.Y.

Field of the Year



Sowell & Crew win one for The Natural State

TURF AND GROUNDS MANAGER MONTY SOWELL, who also serves as manager of ballpark operations, led his team to a win of the 2010 STMA Professional Baseball Field of the Year Award. Arvest Park in Springdale, AR is home to the Northwest Arkansas Naturals, Double A affiliate of the Kansas City Royals. The park was built in 2008 and hosts the usual variety of events beyond baseball, more than 200 hours worth in 2010.

Featuring Patriot bermudagrass on a soil composition of 90% sand, 10% Dakota peat, the field has a GraviTURF drainage system, which is perforated pipe system developed by Dan Almond of Millennium Sports Technologies. Sowell overseeds in the fall with Champion GQ ryegrass at 18 lbs./1,000 sq. ft., and supplements that in the spring if necessary.

Sowell reports in his award entry:

“Our facility was built on the outskirts of Springdale in a yet-to-be developed area so we are surrounded by cow pastures and hay fields. With nothing to block the wind, and the way it swirls around the stadium, we are in constant battle against weeds, though with careful herbicide applications and my assistants’ identifying and eradicating, we maintain surprisingly weed-free surface.

“Another challenge is our ‘million dollar’ surface, which relates to one of the greatest pre-construction debates of our time. The field was spec’d for Patriot bermudagrass grown in 90% sand; the problem was at that time, the only Patriot being grown in 90% sand was in Maryland! After much debate and exploring of options, we ended up with refrigerated trucks hauling our turf from Maryland.

“Obviously without means to haul half pallets of sod from Maryland over time, and having no sod farm at our park, we now buy grass grown on sand loam in Oklahoma and maintain it in our bullpens at the same time we service the fields. This allows us the opportunity to transition the new sod to our conditions. We designed the bullpens

during construction to meet this need.

“Like everyone else in America except the Yankees, we found ourselves up against budget cuts this season. Off the top, all game-day staff took a \$.50 an hour pay cut. Because they are awesome and love what they do, all who were eligible chose to return. Also facilitating operational change for us this season was the elimination of a day crew at the stadium. In addition to the field, we also have landscape duties throughout the facility; we don't have huge plots but labor hours-intensive none the less. We worked hard and developed an effective rotation allowing us to be much more efficient with our time in this area.

“The last of our challenges, which we overcame as a staff, was to provide a quality product. Kaleb Reynolds, my full time man, started at the stadium on the day crew and then came to work for me halfway through our first season 3 years ago. I have a bachelor's degree in an unrelated field and Kaleb has a high school diploma and some JuCo courses completed. I have been learning how to manager turf on the fly with the help of more seasoned professionals in our field, and Kaleb has been learning from and with me. Sometimes I wish we possessed more technical and book knowledge, but we have found what works best for us though we continue on our quest for knowledge.”

“Our biggest challenge this year became apparent in the off season. I went for a surgical procedure in February and ended up with e coli in my knee, and spent 60 days bed-ridden with no movement in my right knee, and of course unable to get to the ballpark. At that point, Kaleb, with the assistance of our new operations manager, George Sis-

son (whose turf management credentials include being a Class A general manager and growing up on a farm), along with spot duty by our crew, proceeded to finish pre-season preparations, host high school



baseball, and open the season while I was on the physically unable to perform list. Kaleb and the crew did an awesome job, the field looked great, played well, and their on-field dance became a fan favorite. No matter what situation they faced, they met it head on and excelled.

“While sitting in the dugout waiting for batting practice to end, I heard this exchange: ‘That's groundskeeping there; all the other stuff we do is just maintenance.’

“A young staff member chimes in, ‘I never thought we'd make it.’”

“And with that batting practice ended; as bodies scattered to begin field prep, the longest-tenured member of the crew said, ‘We always do, we always do.’”

SportsTurf: What changes are you planning to make to your maintenance plan for 2011, if any?

Sowell: Our current maintenance plan is one we have developed in the first 3 years of our field. It is a combination of what we have

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found works best in extremely wet conditions, which we had our first two seasons, followed by last season's record high temperatures and little rainfall. So basically, the only changes I would anticipate our making will be dictated by weather challenges presented by the "Head Groundskeeper Upstairs."

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

Sowell: Two things come immediately to mind; my father always saying, "There's never time to do it right, but always time to do it over," and an old coaching companion preaching, "Work smarter not harder." These are the principals that we use daily. We always work tirelessly and analytically to come up with an action plan, and attempt to execute it by finding the logical order of sequence which helps us be more productive, efficient and ultimately, successful turf managers.

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

Sowell: I have two factors working in my favor in this area. First, I am so fortunate to have a job that I love so that I rarely consider anything we do at the ballpark as work. Secondly, I am single and every day for me is Bring Your Child to Work Day as my most constant companion is a 10-year-old black lab named Ruby, who accompanies me to the park every day, as she has done for the past 9 years.

So, basically we manage our work and personal time just like we do our ballpark by running wide open during the season, catching an occasional weekend break when we can, and making it a priority to find time to kick back and catch our breath in the off season.



ST: What's your most valued piece of equipment and why?

Sowell: My most valued piece of equipment is not equipment at all, but rather the people that I am professionally associated with, most notably my assistant, Kaleb Reynolds, and my crew the "Drag Diggities." Equipment is expendable in that if a mower goes down and you

Arvest Ballpark maintenance facts

Fertilization (granular)

20-0-0	March
13-13-13	April (smaller biweekly apps)
46-0-0	May through September, urea-based
13-2-13	May through September, ammonium sulfate-based (these products are rotated so as to give the turf a variety of food sources)

Fertilization (foliar)

12-0-0-6 April through September, biweekly apps as needed to enhance color

Irrigation

Hunter Industries control panel with 120 and 140 heads
Hand-watering with Tricure pellets as needed

Mowing

TriPlex reel for outfield and aprons
Walk-behind greens mower for infield and bullpens
Height of cut: 1 1/8-in for OF, 1 inch for infield

Aerifications

Solid tine in spring and summer, as needed to help eliminate compaction
Hollow tine in July or August to help the bermudagrass to reach optimum performance level

Topdressing

Sand applications that accompany aerification and overseeding

Nail drags

Pre-fabed 6 x 4-foot
Spring tines on infield groomer

Screen drags

4 x 6-foot	For infield
3 x 5-foot	For warning track
2 x 5-foot with leveling board	For basepaths and edges
3 x 12-foot	For special situations

Miscellaneous

Edging is done every week during the season
Sod rotation All sod for field is pulled from bullpens and new turf is replanted in bullpens

Equipment used

John Deere
Field vacuum TC 125
TriPlex trim & surrounds mower 265313
Tractor 4320
Gator XUV 620i
Sand Pro 1200 Hydro
Rotary push mower 2500B
TriPlex greens mower 2500B
Walk-behind reel mower 260C
Pro Gator 2030A
Gator Tx Turf
Aercore 800

Toro topdresser 2500
Wacker roller RD12
Gandy drop spreader
Anderson broadcast spreader
Tru Line field striper
Whipper Clipper edger
Ryan Jr. sod cutter
AG Meier sprayer A19556

STMA Affiliated Chapters Contact Information

Sports Turf Managers Association of Arizona:
Chris Walsh cwals@scottsdaleaz.gov

Colorado Sports Turf Managers Association:
www.cstma.org.

Florida #1 Chapter (South): 305-235-5101
(Bruce Bates) or Tom Curran CTomSell@aol.com

Florida #2 Chapter (North): 850/580-4026,
John Mascaro, john@turf-tec.com

Florida #3 Chapter (Central): 407-518-2347,
Randy Fisher, rfisher@kissimmee.org

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New England STMA (NESTMA): www.nestma.org.

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www.wstma.org.

don't have another option you can skip mowing. If your airless painter malfunctions you can grab a can of aerosol and finish the job. This is definitely not the case if you don't have a quality staff because "You are only as good as your people." I will put my staff up against any in America as they have proved themselves time and again, including this season when they successfully opened the ballpark while I missed the first month due to a medical disaster. They ARE the reason that we excel here at Arvest Ballpark, and I am very blessed to have these guys as well as a front office staff who pitches in to help with late night tarp pulls and extracurricular event logistics, which makes our lives easier and our team more successful.

ST: Are you yet involved in "sustainable" management practices? If so, what are you doing?

Sowell: We are not currently involved in organic fertilizers and such, but we do run a recycle program throughout our ballpark separating trash and waste, we also recycle used field material by donating them to local high schools. We also have spent much of the last season improving our irrigation system to make it more effective and cost efficient. ■

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