

Financing and constructing a new field

Charles Dickens might say it was the best of times and the worst of times. Field managers might not be quite that dramatic, but they're no strangers to the risks, rewards and challenges of their profession.

In terms of sports, however, it is the best of times. The demand for quality fields is at an all-time high. It's easy to see why: more kids are playing than ever before. In fact, the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) just released its annual

Sports Participation Survey, which as it has every year for more than two decades, shows more kids playing sports than the previous year. In fact, in the 2011-12 academic year there was an all-time high of 7,692,520 participants.

Look at the top 10 of those sports, and what do you see? A lot of sports fields getting used: football, soccer, lacrosse, baseball and softball are all in the top 10 most popular sports. That adds up to the previously mentioned demand for facilities.

Given the rise of these sports, the turf field could be the best of choices. After all, it's able to host multiple sporting events in the same day without getting skinned, it's not susceptible to many of the problems facing natural grass, and it has better drainage by far than fields that will become muddy following a rain.

Unfortunately, in the current economy, budgeting for new fields—natural or synthetic—continues to be a problem. And sports field builders are seeing schools faced with an impasse when it comes time to build or rehab fields.

But, say the builders and designers, things are looking up.

"We think the tide is slowly turning," says Paul Schinner of The Motz Group, LLC in Cincinnati. "Most contractors in our business were hit harder in 2010 than they were in 2008 or 2009. Now, as things are slowly picking up with the economy, we are hoping that people who have been on the fence will start to spend. The amount of off-season activity (re-



Photo courtesy of Beals Alliance, Folsom, CA



Photo courtesy of General Acrylics, Inc., Phoenix, AZ



Photo courtesy of Vasco Sports Contractors, Massillon, OH



Photo courtesy of Verde Design, Santa Clara, CA

While budget planning can be intimidating, it can open the door to possibilities for more economical options. In fact, in some installations, project owners have taken the concept of saving money, and elevated it to a whole new level.

quests for budgets, consultations etc.) seems to be encouraging."

So where does that leave us? With choices. Sometimes they're difficult, sometimes they're easier than others. According to the book, *Sports Fields: A Construction and Maintenance Manual*, sports field managers facing field construction or improvements can help by suggesting options to lessen the financial burden. Some concessions to be considered:

- Do you need a completed facility now or can you wait a while for fencing, lighting, seating or other aspects of the project? If some aspects will be delayed, be certain to include the means for future additions (extra conduit for future lighting, piping for future irrigation, etc.) in the initial phase.

- Have you decided upon a given surface or specific site, or are you willing to consider alternatives?

Seeking creative solutions to budgeting issues can be accomplished—but it must be done in the planning stages. Once construction has begun, change may not be

easily accommodated, or if it is, it may wind up causing more delays and costing more money—the exact opposite result you were striving for.

The book also notes, "In budget planning, consider not just initial costs but also costs of accessories and amenities to be added later such as goals and maintenance equipment. The cost of financing should be considered. Consider also the long term plan for the use of the facility. Before committing to a project, be certain that you can afford the schedule of maintenance, as well as a reserve for eventual repair and/or replacement. Expert and diligent maintenance is necessary to extend the useful life of fields."

While budget planning can be intimidating, it can open the door to possibilities for more economical options. In fact, in some installations, project owners have taken the concept of saving money, and elevated it to a whole new level. Sam Fisher of Fisher Tracks in Boone, IA watched a high school build a competition-quality track

and field facility by using community donations and input.

"Local people came in with tractors and backhoes and did what they could," noted Fisher. "They did a lot of fund-raising too, within the school."

The former facility had become dangerous and unusable, and had to be completely demolished before any work could begin. But with the town firmly behind the effort and merchants and residents contributing everything from materials to labor to monetary donations, a new facility was built, and came in 25% below budget. (The facility currently has a 400-meter all-weather rubberized track encircling a natural turf football field, with field events, restrooms, concessions, seating for home and visiting fans, a press box, parking for cars and buses and more.) Fisher points to it as an example of community involvement that can help finance a project.

Schinner, too, has seen schools working to raise funds for their own projects as well.

"Booster groups are becoming a bigger part

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and taking a much larger role," he notes. "In some cases, they're completely financing projects. Also, there has been a shift to sponsorships from local business and hospitals that are adding funds in exchange logos on the fields, naming rights etc. Schools are trying to leverage donated 'in-kind' work from local contractors and alums for certain parts of the project that do not interfere with manufacturers' warranty such as drainage pipe and stone, excavation and concrete work."

All the pros note that cutting corners should never be done at the expense of the finished product. In working to bring down costs, it is essential for consumers to remember that sports facilities are specifically tailored to athletic use. They are not simply green spaces, grassy areas or anything else. (And when working with a turf surface, this goes without saying).

Seek out contractors, as well as designers and suppliers, who specialize in sports facilities, and ascertain that they understand all issues the project will be facing, including time constraints, budget requests and more. Ask where community involvement would

be appreciated, and where it would be appropriate. The investment in knowledgeable partners will pay off throughout the course of the project, and in years to come.

If you're not sure about how to find a sports-specific contractor, ask for recommendations from colleagues who have put in or rehabbed sports fields. Find out who they've worked with, and whether they were happy with that person. In addition, find out whether the project proceeded on time and on budget—or whether there were surprises, good or bad. You can also go to the website of the American Sports Builders Association, www.sportsbuilders.org, and use the search feature to locate companies in the area.

Once you have the right partners, it's time to make sure your organization works well with them. The old adage, "too many cooks spoil the sauce," is still valid. For a project to be successful, there must be one person (and only one) who is authorized to work with designers, contractors and more, in order to discuss the ongoing status of the project. Examples of this person

might be a school principal, field manager, athletic director or other. That person, in turn, should establish a flow of communication with those working on the project, as well as with the end user. Regular meetings should be held to discuss the progress of the project, as well as any questions or concerns. That point person, then, can relay this information back to the design/build team.

Expertise and information are the most important commodities that should be working together to make your project succeed, both from a financial perspective and from a performance standpoint. Singly, expertise and information are valuable, but together, they're invaluable, and will give you the long-term satisfaction everyone wants. ■

Mary Helen Sprecher wrote this article on behalf of the American Sports Builders Association. Available at no charge is a listing of all publications offered by the ASBA, as well as their Membership Directory. For info, 866-501-2722 or www.sportsbuilders.org.

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By Matt Kniffin



American goes solo in maintaining baseball field in Germany

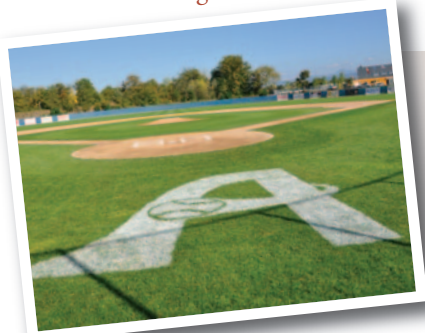
WE KNOW the extensive amount of time, equipment and money it requires to take a baseball field to the level it should be at. In some places, like Neuenburg am Rhein, Germany, money and equipment is at a premium but accepting a low-quality playing surface just isn't an option. When in Germany you will be hard pressed to find any baseball field let alone a good one. But, in southwest Germany, right along the Rhine, you will find one of the best in Europe.

This field is host to the Neuenburg Atomics. They currently play in the second Bundsliga but over the past 5 years have played two seasons in Germany's highest level, the first Bundesliga. Like most baseball clubs in Germany, Neuenburg has had a history of American influence. That combined with hard work and dedication by many German baseball enthusiasts has made this small town team very successful. The head groundskeeper is Rob Piscatelli who is originally from Poughkeepsie, NY. Rob has been

on baseball fields all around the globe playing and coaching, and of course, maintaining them.

Most specialized baseball field equipment is not available in Germany. Importing this equipment is an expensive option for some clubs but not for the Atomics and their limited budget. It is amazing to say that a field of this quality is run on an annual budget of about \$3,500. Piscatelli has pieced this field together through hard work and problem solving. The pictures and success of the club show the results. We got a chance to talk with Piscatelli about his fields and how he has found success in a difficult place.

KNIFFIN: How many fields do you have in Neuenburg?



PISCATELLI: We have two fields: our main field that our first and second baseball teams play on, and the second field which we have completely skinned and hosts our softball teams and youth teams. We also have a clubhouse, which was built for when we hosted the European Championship in 2010.

KNIFFIN: What are some the difficulties of being a head groundskeeper for a baseball field in Europe?

PISCATELLI: The first problem is to me the biggest, because if you have no idea what a field is supposed to not only look like but more importantly play like then it really doesn't matter what tools or equipment you have. There are a lot of reasons for this. Most players or teams here were never taught how to do that or were taught by people who don't have a clue so even if a field is built new or renovated it's still brutal. So players end up playing on terrible fields their whole career and don't know any different and so it goes from generation to generation.

KNIFFIN: Is it difficult to find the right equipment in Germany?

PISCATELLI: This may not be a big deal for baseball clubs that have money after all we live in a global economy and anything you want if you have enough money you can get. But for most baseball clubs in Europe this is not the case and since the tools needed to maintain a baseball field are somewhat specialized, they are very difficult to find so there is a lot of improvising that needs to be done. Just a short story about when I was first looking for a simple hand tamp and couldn't find one. After looking in every store I knew I

The guy looked at me as if I just asked him if he could fly me to the moon and then said, "What would you need something like that for?"

finally went up to a road construction crew that was working on a street project to ask where I could get one. The guy looked at me as if I just asked him if he could fly me to the moon and then said, "What would you need something like that for?"

So long story short I had to build my own until years later I could find one.

KNIFFIN: What are some of your innovative solutions for maintaining the field without the tools and material you would have here in the States?

PISCATELLI: A rake drag is something that I have had to create because our field has a large amount of worms in early spring and fall which leave a total mess on the grass making it nearly unplayable. For this I took a flexible metal mat drag with a wooden breaker bar in front then attached 4 metal hand rakes to the front. As soon as the sun has been out for a few hours and the worm excrement begins to dry the rake drag is pulled along and is able to not only

break apart these small piles but smooth them out and in turn acts like a topdressing which we should be doing yearly but are not able to afford. So Mother Nature and a little ingenuity provide that for us.

One of the biggest problems here is the lack of specialized material like mound clay or quick dry. These products are non-existent in Europe unless you import them, which is very expensive. As someone who hates holes in baseball fields I was determined to find a solution. I watch every week as other teams push dry, dusty clay back into huge holes in the mound or batters box only to see it come right back out on the first pitch. I spent hours upon hours talking to people, surfing the Internet, and making my own test samples or different materials added together. After years of evolution I was able to make a product that holds up to the test. It has been a lifesaver in repairing my bullpens, game mounds, and home plate area. It is worth more than gold here for a groundskeeper.

Piscatelli later explained how he was able to find at a 100-year-old brick factory, with owners of about the same age, hidden in the Black Forest. They provided unfired clay bricks that when soaked in water, have been critical in his making his own mound clay.

Of course, baseball in Germany is very different from baseball in America. Some clubs are shrinking or while others are flourishing. In this soccer-first society public funding for ball fields is hard to come by. Maintaining a high quality field is not easy under these conditions especially when you consider the lack of sports turf maintenance education. For Piscatelli and the Atomics they have come up with cost saving and effective ways to take their field to a high level but on a low budget. Using this example we can be inspired to do more on a lower budget. ■

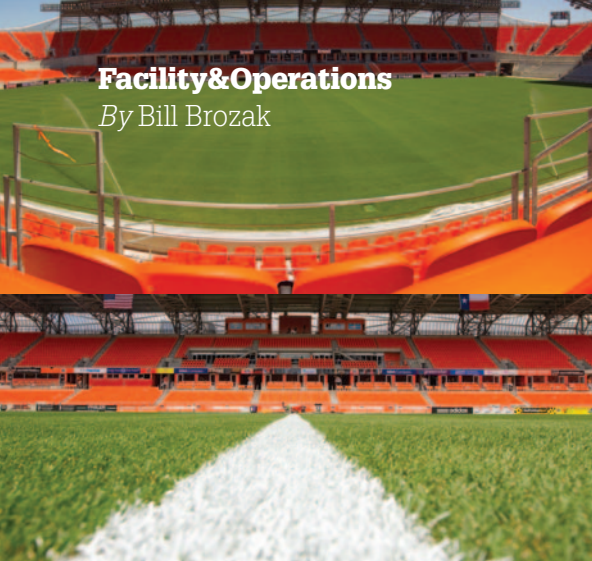
Matt Kniffin teaches history Chapel Field Christian HS, Pine Bush, NY. He worked for the Neuenburg Atomic's grounds crew in 2009 and 2010.



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The 1st year at BBVA Compass Stadium in Houston

Bill Brozak works for WinField Solutions, a company that offers turf seed and chemical products from its base in Shoreview, MN.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE to make a first-year field first-rate? Turf, teamwork and a whole lot of know-how. Rodney Griffin took on Texas-size triumphs and challenges at the new BBVA Compass Stadium, home of the Major League Soccer Houston Dynamo. The stadium opened in May 2012, cost \$95 million, and has a capacity of 22,039. The venue will also host Texas Southern University football games. Also, beginning in 2013, the stadium will host the USA Women's Sevens, one of four events in the newly launched IRB Women's Sevens World Series in the sevens variant of rugby union.

Rodney Griffin is no stranger to laying the groundwork for athletic facilities. Griffin is the former turf manager for the Houston Astros' Minute Maid Park and Houston Texans' Reliant Stadium. And now, at Houston's newest downtown professional sports facility, the AEG Facilities-managed BBVA Compass Stadium, he completes a trifecta with the home to an MLS team.

To say that Griffin has "a lot of experience with turf" is an understatement. This former University of Houston football letterman was a groundskeeper for the Houston Astros and worked for four years as part of the grounds crew for Super Bowl XXXVIII. Griffin knows his turf and, obviously, likes a challenge.

So when the opportunity came along to be part of a brand-new stadium, Griffin couldn't say

no. He joined the stadium team in January 2012, as the turf and grounds Manager just a few short months before it opened. Since then, the stadium has hosted four to five events a week.

Griffin knew the first-year field at BBVA Compass Stadium would be full of new challenges, but he knew he had the experience, tools and teamwork in place to make this new soccer pitch feel like it had been there for years.

A new stadium meant the first challenge was selecting and installing new turf. Griffin recommended that TifGrand bermudagrass be selected. "The designers told me light was going to be an issue. The orientation of the stadium means that some of the field is in shadows and some in sun-light at different times of the day."

Other difficulties to consider are the summer heat and Houston's native humidity. "A big challenge to any new stadium is that every stadium has its own microclimate and this stadium, in the summer, is one of the hottest places on earth," says Griffin. "Usually heat is fine and we are using a bermudagrass that is really made for heat. But humidity, that's even more of an issue. The tissue of the field can stay slightly moist, which creates an environment for disease."

SOCCER STAR EXPECTATIONS

A second and interesting challenge for Griffin is the expectations of the players. "Soccer players are extremely picky about their turf," says Griffin. "They like their turf a certain way, so we always have an open dialogue with our players about what they like. They will travel to

another stadium and come back and tell me what they liked about that stadium's turf."

Unlike football or baseball, the movement of the foot or cleat across the turf, and the way the ball travels across the grass, is an important component of the game. Players want their feet to move across the surface of the grass without ever touching dirt. To achieve this, Griffin says, the grass must be mown at three-fourths of an inch or below.

Plus, in soccer, the grass needs to look good. "For football, if the field is strong but doesn't look perfect, that's okay," says Griffin. "But for soccer, the field needs to be strong and look good. The aesthetics are really important. For instance, striping is a part of the rule book in major league soccer and players are very particular about the turf for that reason."

For Griffin, every stadium has new and different challenges but one expectation is always the same—he has to figure out how to solve problems. "Problems pop up all the time; and my bosses at BBVA Compass understand that happens but at the end of the day. I need a team of people who can help me handle the situation. I could have a main line blow up during a game or a mower that doesn't start. Ultimately, it's my

RODNEY'S RULES

Rodney Griffin's keys to success: Number 1, keep it simple. The Guy Who Mows, Knows. Any good groundskeeper knows his or her own field and mows it personally. That way, small problems are evident before they become big ones. Understand it is a team effort. Rodney surrounds himself with people he can trust. Surround yourself with people who can service what they sell. Timing is everything.

staff that needs to help get it right.”

He has put together a team of professionals who help him out in challenging situations.

“I have developed a network of people and relationships who can come help me out. How good is the groundskeeper if his mower breaks down? I have known the guys I deal with for years, and they are dedicated to finding solutions for me. That’s especially important when you have a new field.”

TURF TEAMWORK

The turf at BBVA Compass Stadium is not yet a year old, so Griffin is always alert to new or developing problems. “Keeping bermudagrass healthy and green is a challenge. I focus on the strength of the rhizomes and root system to make sure it stays healthy.”

So far the shadows and sunlight are a daily challenge but one that the turf is meeting. “The benefit of bermudagrass is its strength,” says Griffin. “But it’s not always beautiful. How it performs is something we watch closely as well as how it looks, too.”

To help find the right type of treatments to keep his turf vibrant and healthy, Griffin part-

ners with turf seed and chemical supplier WinField. Together they diagnose any turf problems quickly and remedy the situation before the turf is affected. Griffin has worked with WinField at all of his former venues.

John Cabori, with WinField, is also watching this new turf closely. “While we have seed available, this project involved washed sod and the new TifGrand seed. This system was chosen by the Houston Dynamo because of typical stadium issues such as shade, and TifGrand has some strong advantages in these settings. As with any new variety, I have to be ready for any challenges that might pop up.”

To help ensure the field remains a bright shade of green, the kind soccer players and fans prefer, Griffin uses Mikropak, a crystalline micronutrient that is applied every 2 to 4 weeks to maintain color and vibrancy. Each application creates a wave of green on the field and enhances the beautiful but strong field that Griffin wants and needs for his players.

Cabori adds, “We simply prepared ourselves for the unknown since it was such a new variety. We all learn something in these cases that ends up helping others who decide to use it down the line.”

“For instance, others will be watching and learning from Rodney since he is using a relatively new product, TifGrand,” says Cabori.

“While proven methods were used, some new methods may be needed to maintain the high quality and that’s where Winfield comes into the picture. Rodney is like an experienced NASCAR driver, and I am like his crew chief. He communicates to me what he needs and I work to make sure he gets the best setup for the event.”

So far, the turf and the teamwork are paying off.

“Any good groundskeeper knows his own field,” Griffin says. “I see every square inch of the field and know that any big problem starts out with a small one, so I have a team who can come in and help me approach the small problems too.” The field is performing well, in his estimation. And so is his team.

“A lot can be learned from Rodney and his approach,” Cabori says. “Keep it simple is Rodney’s number one rule. Second is, understand it is a team effort. Rodney surrounds himself with people he can trust.”

For this first year field, turf and teamwork are the big payoff. ■



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» **DEN GARDNER** pictured with Second Lady Dr. Jill Biden. Gardner represented Project EverGreen and GreenCare for Troops at an event in Washington, DC honoring America's top 20 volunteer military programs.

As I walked through three separate areas of security a couple months ago at the White House (yep, Mr. Gardner Goes to Washington), my thoughts turned to September 11, 2001, and how the world has so drastically changed since that day of horror for millions of Americans.

I said to myself: "How on earth did being involved with Project EverGreen result in us getting a group to the White House? It's almost too difficult to comprehend!"

The burden on military families through two wars has been incredible. These true patriots have kept us safe for more than a decade since the death and devastation that day at the Twin Towers, the Pentagon and a field in Pennsylvania where an airplane of heroes went down to prevent another murderous attack by terrorists. But little did we know the role Project EverGreen would play the past half-dozen years in the lives of these thousands of military families.

Although the tragedy of September 11 will stay with us forever, a simple request by Project EverGreen board member Phil Fogarty 6 years ago ultimately resulted in a national program to spread the good word about the benefits of green spaces through GreenCare for Troops. Today, with a database of more than 12,000 military families and 3,500 volunteers nationwide, this Project EverGreen program is known nationally.

To this day, I'll remember that conversa-

tion with Phil (a lawn care operator in suburban Cleveland). "I've been helping some military families with free lawn care while the major breadwinner has been deployed," he explained. "Maybe we can do this nationally through Project EverGreen—help a couple hundred families and get a little publicity for our organization."

A few hundred families, huh? Well, this idea resulted in my journey to the White House back in April (with current Project EverGreen Executive Director Cindy Code and GreenCare for Troops Manager Joy Westenberg) to be recognized as one of the top 20 volunteer military programs in the nation by the White House. Through the Joining Forces Community Challenge (www.whitehouse.gov/joiningforces), Project EverGreen was recognized for its efforts by First Lady Michelle Obama and Second Lady. Dr. Jill Biden.

During 2 days of tours and receptions at the Pentagon and the White House, organizations across the country were saluted for their efforts. You know you've made a difference as an organization when the Chairman

of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—Army General Martin Dempsey and his wife Deanie—pulled me aside at the Pentagon reception and remarked that they remembered reading about our program and how we've affected the lives of so many military families. "This is just the first step," General Dempsey said to me. "Now we need to meet their needs as they return and face a new life back from war."

Wow! Project EverGreen has a major role to play. And we will be there, helping families and promoting how important it is to have a managed green space from an environmental, economic and lifestyle standpoint. How proud TPI members must be to know that through their financial contribution to Project EverGreen, they are making a difference in the war on terrorism.

And don't think I didn't get goose bumps on the South Lawn of the White House when Dr. Biden, during her remarks, picked Project EverGreen and GreenCare for Troops as one of the three out of 20 she mentioned verbally to the audience. "Programs like GreenCare for Troops, a free lawn service for military families, helps make dreams come true," she said. ■

Reprinted with permission from Turf News. Den Gardner was the first executive director of Project EverGreen in 2003, and is currently is on the executive committee of Project EverGreen. He also serves as editor of the Turfgrass Producers International's Turf News. TPI has been a contributor in time, talent and funding for Project EverGreen since its first meeting 9 years ago in Minnesota. Executive Director Kirk Hunter has been active on Project EverGreen's officer committee for many years.