

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 Bundesliga 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.*



Templine changes the playing field

**ecochemical**  
TEMPLINE FIELD COATINGS + EQUIPMENT

THE INNOVATOR IN ECO-FRIENDLY PAINT + STAINS  
eco-templine.com | 800-677-7930