Building two new fields in 3 years

BEING PART OF A NEW FIELD CONSTRUCTION can be looked at as either a blessing or a curse, however, once you catch the bug and have the opportunity to build one you may want to do nothing more but do it again. I looked at it as a chance to attain the elusive "perfect" field. I know it's impossible and that's what keeps me humble yet coming back for more.

I oversaw the installation of Parkview Field in Fort Wayne, IN (Single A affiliate of the San Diego Padres) in 2008, and then the install of Werner Park in Papillion, NE (Triple A affiliate of the Kansas City Royals) in 2010. Taking care of a 5 or 10-year old field is one thing, that's common, but there's not a text book or established management plan for a new one. The best thing you can do is talk to people who have done it before.

Much like custom building a car before it’s rolled off the assembly line, I was lucky enough to be brought on board during the install process and have input, which is often times not the case in the minor leagues. All of a sudden you start thinking about changes you want and not problems you inherited. When it will make your job easier and your crew more efficient, go for it. I'm not talking about asking for heat or an air system, but simple things like quick connect locations, ¾-inch hose connections like I have in my bullpens, or infield and
warning track cutout sizes. We intentionally
offset the mound radius and made it larger
in Omaha to minimize wear for our extra
high school games. It may not be a cure all,
but every little bit certainly helps.

Irrigation design is also a key impor-
tance. Most designers submit a neutral lay-
out because everyone has different
preferences. Head layout is extremely im-
portant especially on your infield grass and
foul territory because a couple feet from
center either way and your cutouts will al-
ways be wet. I also try to have the installer
keep heads away from player locations to re-
duce a bad hop but also for maintenance. If
I’m resodding or aerifying behind where the
second baseman or shortstop plays, I don’t
want a head right there.

I prefer to manufacture or fix anything
we can in-house which means we have a lot
of tools and the same goes with our irriga-
tion. Our remote controller for the system is
such a time savior for locating heads (espe-
cially before aerifying) and running cycles
without having to go to our controller lo-
cated in center field. Along with that are our
infield skin zones; I know the coverage is
not always perfect, but it has benefits. We
use it when the team is out of town to keep
moisture in the skin, since the wind can
wreak havoc if it dries it out, as well as be-
tween lower level games. High school dou-
bleheaders are tightly scheduled and
sometimes the only way to water is to turn
on those zones for a minute or two; it’s bet-
ter than nothing.

Another thing is to know your material
specs put in place by the field designer and
to be approachable. Get a feel for how
things should look and be installed and go
from there. The better relationship you have
with everyone involved from the general
contractor to every subcontractor, the easier
they will be to approach and talk about
changes, but keep in mind the domino ef-
fect. It’s hard to change one thing, whether
it’s an elevation, home plate diameter or
pipe size, without that changing other
things down the line, so talk it out with
everyone.

Understanding what materials are being
installed helps with the design but also the
maintenance. My track material on both
fields was a higher maintenance crushed lava
material. As I came to find out, that meant
extra watering and constant grading and
dragging to maintain the negative slope for
drainage. I understood that early enough
and was able to purchase a large enough box
grader and laser setup that not only allowed
me to constantly work the warning track,
but also allowed me to grade my infield skin
whenever I needed. This multi-use need
helped me sell the purchase to management.

Taking pictures is the single best way to
document the install and have some sense of
assurance on what’s below once it’s covered
up with sod and clay. I don’t love to read, let alone take the time to
write, but taking pictures tells a much greater story
and says everything without saying anything. It al-
 lows you to look back, compare and see
many things that may have been missed on
installation such as buried valve and drain
boxes, head locations, even how the field
drained before the sod was laid.

All contractors will tell you “We want
you to be happy” or “If you’re happy, then
we did our job”, so make sure you are
happy. The potential problem with that is
being too nice. Don’t settle for “that will do”
or “I’ll fix it later”, it will come back to bite
you. I did a terrible job about this on my
first field and a little better job (emphasis on
little) the second go around. Don’t make
more work for yourself that you won’t have
time to perform in the spring. It’s under-

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standable that the fine detail work may not be just how you want it, but edging, mound and plate construction, even infield skin grading should all be written in the specs and finished to a game-ready condition.

Sod is down, the infield is graded and mounds are built so now what? Depending how far along your budgeting and equipment process is this becomes a great time to get a feel for the field and equipment. If possible have everything lined up and see if it’s possible to have the field handed over that fall. This is a great time to get a relationship with equipment dealers, demo their equipment and see what you like. It is also time to begin your fertility and fungicide program and get a feel for the products and the field.

All of this being said, don’t lose sight of one of the most important areas of the whole job, the maintenance shop. By this time I’m sure your new home has been promised for completion 2 months ago, but keep at it. Many times the importance of this area and the timeframe it’s needed in is overlooked. Just like irrigation is needed before sod is laid, the maintenance shop is a key part for prepara-
tion, organization, and storage before the season.

Attic stock materials may be built into the specs but storage of them is not. The last thing you want is $5,000 of loose materials sitting outside on a construction site getting contaminated. Plenty of work will need to be done come spring time and the last thing you will want is a disaster of a shop and materials when games start in the spring.

I faced this in Fort Wayne when the shop was promised in November and we finally were able to move equipment in 2 days before the team came into town in April for workouts. You make do, you get by and hopefully if there is a next time you’ve learned the importance like I did this time in Omaha. Everything goes so much smoother and more efficiently when you have organization, no matter what the setting is.

There will always be challenges on every field, new and old, but the more you know about your field the better prepared you can be to keep an issue from turning into a disaster. Relationships are key in this industry and just about everyone is willing to talk and help out, as long as you are willing to ask. Don’t make that the hardest part.

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