



Same stadium, new owners —one turf manager's story

GAINESVILLE IS LOCATED IN NORTHEAST GEORGIA on the shores of Lake Lanier. It is home to the Gainesville Red Elephants, a high school football team with a rich tradition and history. Their home, City Park, is a community landmark. The stadium has been around since the early 1900's, and has been a staple in the community.

The land was donated to the City of Gainesville in 1866 by the Banks family. The property and stadium was managed by the Parks and Recreation Agency. The stadium has been added to and upgraded throughout the years. In 2005 a complete renovation was done to the playing surface and several upgrades were done to the stadium. A sand-based field with subsurface drainage was chosen. A new irrigation system and TifSport bermuda turf were installed. This was a much needed upgrade and has been very well received by the players and community.

The field is set down in a bowl. Air movement is very limited and it has its

own micro climate. We have battled take-all patch ever since the renovation. In 2007 we had to replace 13,000 square feet of sod and in 2008 only 5,000 square feet. I slowly started to get it under control. We started preventative fungicide treatments and an aggressive aerification schedule. On two occasions we were able to completely grow in with no sodding. I kind of just learned to manage it because the disease really never leaves.

I was employed by Parks and Recreation in 2003. In 2006, I was promoted to Turf Manager. Along with our parks, youth league fields and adult softball complex, my responsibilities also included our baseball facility and City Park



THE CREW

From left to right

David Presnell, Ryan Casper, Travis Partin, Josiah Bowers

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Stadium. These two venues are our showcases and very special places to the community. I truly enjoyed managing these two facilities because of their high expectations and the success of our high school teams. Along the way I obtained my Certified Sports Field Manager (CSFM) status, won the 2008 STMA High School Football Field of the Year Award, and precisely molded my turf program to a tee. But just when I thought everything was going great the rug was about to be pulled out from under me.

STRAINED RELATIONSHIP

The relationship between the city school system and Parks and Recreation had always been a bit strained. In the spring of 2011, rumors started to fly about the stadium being deeded over to the school system. With the recession, government agencies were also strained. After all of my

work and planning I could only think "How is this going to affect me?" Was my beloved stadium being taken away from me? I was very concerned but decided to take a positive approach.

Around mid-May, all of the discussions resulted in a decision. The school board and city council made an agreement to deed the property to the school system and Parks and Rec would manage the facility for one year. This also allowed for a new 9,000 square foot field house to be built. I decided to take a different approach than my coworkers. Instead of doing the minimum amount possible, I set out to do the best possible job I could do. This decision proved to be the right choice.

With all the talk about the field, rumors started to escalate about me. Everyone knows how I felt about the stadium and wondered what I would do. Focusing on work resulted in possible new opportuni-

ties. Almost immediately I started getting calls asking if I would consider working for the school system. Behind the scenes I started toying with the idea of starting a new department. The lure of the high expectations the community had for the stadium intrigued me. While one side was coming after me, my current employer was talking to me about staying.

With one year left I buckled down and focused on my turf. Now the baseball facility was rumored to be changing hands also. Things started coming together and my decision was becoming crystal clear. The summer passed and football began. I was focusing on having the best field ever and made it clear to the school I wasn't going to talk to anyone until after the season was over. The football team was having a great season and as a result we hosted four home playoff games. We even had to work during Thanksgiving to prepare for a Friday game. Everyone was excited about playing at home so to me it was business as usual. We lost the last playoff game and the season was over. While I was closing down the stadium my mind started to look ahead. It was time to make a big decision.

Construction started on the field house in January. A construction zone inside the stadium offers plenty of challenges. They were there to do a job and I just tried to keep them away from the field. Finally after a year and a half of waiting I sat down and started talking with the school. This job was going to be a challenge. It would be a complete start up from scratch; from equipment, to a shop and a new staff. One thing was made clear from the beginning. The school wanted the field to be managed at the same high level everyone had come to expect. The standard was not going to change. If anything the standards were elevated.

The baseball facility was also turned over to the school, and I began to develop the department the way I wanted it ran. One consideration was whether or not to contract out some services for the first 2 years in order to buy equipment and implement our program. Either way, the school system wanted to hire me to oversee the process. Baseball and soccer soon started and I was working double-time. I spent most of my free time working on a

plan for my future. My family was very supportive. My wife never said a word as I worked 16-hour days preparing. Around April, I finally made a decision. Now after 2 years of wrangling, I accepted a job with the school system. During this process my father's health had declined and he passed away toward the end of the season. I am so thankful I was able to talk with him about this and get his advice.

MOVING FORWARD

With my decision made, I turned in my notice and looked to the future. I would stay to the end of May and begin my new job on June 1, 2013. We were slated to take over July 1 so I wanted a month to get everything in order. The baseball and soccer teams were making deep runs into the playoffs so my schedule never relented.

After looking at every possible angle we decided to do all the maintenance in house. Some of the other school fields were under contract so I would have a year to prepare. We leased a fleet of Toro equipment, posted

two full time positions and a part time position. I decided to implement an internship program to fill the part time position. Using the month of June to prepare was soon thrown out the window. I learned that aeration/topdressing and resodding was scrapped by Parks and Rec so it would all fall on me. Instead of pointing fingers, once again we decided to buckle down and handle the situation.

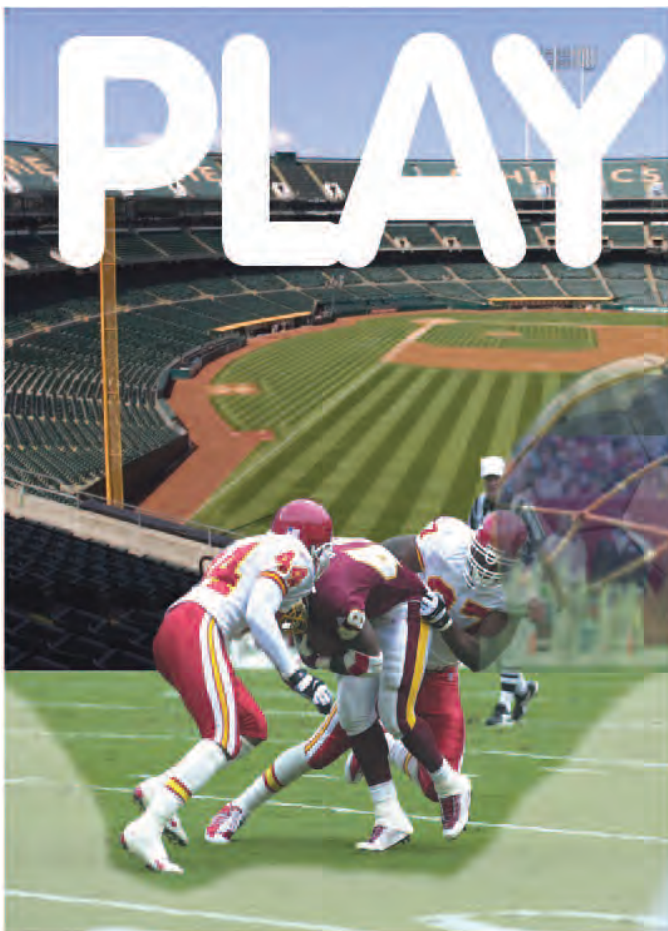
With our first game being televised and our new field house being dedicated, I knew a lot of eyes would be on us. Training the crew was done while we were in full swing. It turned out great because I learned what each person's strengths and weaknesses were. As a crew we were thrown right into action. They had to learn on the fly and under pressure. Football season went off without a hitch, and a lot of people said it was the best the field had ever looked. The team ended up winning a state championship so we are looking forward to another great year.

Looking back at things I think every-

thing turned out perfect. I wouldn't change my decision and I think the school system made the right decision. Next year we will be adding the remaining fields and picking up additional equipment and staff. I have had great support from everyone in the school system, from my department head, Keith Vincent, to the Superintendent and the School Board. They were determined to make this a success and they all stood behind me. Starting a department completely from scratch offered a lot of challenges; however, it has made me a better manager in the long run.

I wanted to tell this story to help my fellow turf managers if they find themselves in a similar situation. Most of us are truly dedicated to our turf and do whatever it takes to give the athletes the best surface possible. Just remember if you always give your best it will pay off for you in the long run. ■

David M. Presnell, CSFM, is athletic fields manager for the Gainesville (GA) City Schools.



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