

30+ year STMA members' influence spreads far and wide

We asked some men who have been members of the Sports Turf Managers Association for 30 or more years to respond to two questions: What is your general philosophy on the art and science of turf management? Who are the most memorable turf managers you have mentored and why are they so memorable?



▲ Steve Wightman

STEVE WIGHTMAN

I do believe that turfgrass management involves both, art and science.

Having been in the business of managing sports fields at many levels over the past 39 years, I found that to be a successful field manager one must have a comprehensive knowledge of the scientific aspects of plant growth in order to meet the demands of today's professional sports business. With that being said, I have also found that a great deal of sports field acumen is necessary, as well. Making intelligent decisions by quickly and accurately deciphering and filtering through all of the variables that a field manager faces on a daily basis is truly an art form.

Possessing the expertise and knowledge of how turfgrass grows is essential. As everyone knows, there are numerous variables that come into play when dealing with turfgrass management (climatic conditions, soil conditions, turfgrass types, irrigation systems, stadium and field orientation, financial resources, team and management expectations and field activity, to name a few). Understanding the potential consequences of drought, heavy rain, heat, cold, frost, snow, shade, high temperatures, clay soils, high salts, low/high soil organic matter, mow-

ing, aerification, topdressing, fertilization, pesticide applications, field use, tarping, resources and expectations are critical in making quick sound decisions on sports fields, especially high-profile game fields.

Having the basic tools and a dedicated staff to properly and efficiently manage the field is as essential to turfgrass management as one's expertise and knowledge. And, there is a myriad of scientific tools and equipment that can assist the field manager in making decisions that may help diagnose conditions and/or problems.

One must also have the willingness to seek out detailed information from others in the industry for verification, tips, ideas and experiences with similar situations so all options in solving problems can be comprehensively examined. Networking with academia and other field managers in the industry can be a big help in determining one's best course of action in providing an optimal playing surface in many challenging situations.

In addition to the scientific aspects of growing turfgrass, I believe there is another important part of being a successful field manager. That is what to do and when to do it in certain situations. Experience plays a big part in this and is a great teacher. I do believe that experience teaches the art of managing turfgrass.

One example of applying the art of sports field management would be how much water to apply on a football field during the days of game week or a practice field during the early season practices sessions. From the scientific side of turfgrass management the grass prefers to be irrigated to field capacity and then allowed to dry down before irrigating again. However, irrigating to field capacity a day or two before heavy field activity most likely would be disastrous to the grass, the soil, field playability and player safety. In my opinion, knowing how much water to apply during

game week throughout the season to prevent grass decline yet provide optimal playability and soil strength is definitely an art form.

I think the art of turf management is based on knowledge gained from education and experience along with predicted information for the future of field conditions (weather and field use). Art is calculating and formulating at least three contingency plans to overcome changes that may occur with future predictions.

I've often thought that the art of turfgrass management could be defined in scientific terms by correlating all of the variables in turfgrass growth and field use to come up with the lowest common denominator that could be expressed scientifically in every situation. However, because turfgrass management involves manipulating so many variables that constantly change day by day and even within any given day I'm not sure if this would ever be possible. Managing various situations, I feel, is the art of managing the turfgrass.

I'm not sure that I've ever mentored anyone and I don't consider myself a mentor (maybe that notion just comes with old age and hanging around so long).

I have always willingly shared my experiences, both successes and failures, with other industry professionals for three reasons: 1) to learn from others so that I might be better at what I do; 2) to help those that reach out to me to, hopefully, make them better; and 3) to help make the industry (STMA) become better, stronger and more professional.

I'm sincerely proud of where STMA and the sports turf industry are today! The quality and professionalism of the people involved today has elevated sports turf management to a new level.

The leadership of STMA over the past many years has guided STMA the pinnacle of support and opportunity for the membership and continues to do so. And the membership, with their involvement and support, are keeping it there. I'm proud to have been a part of that growth and will continue my involvement and support.

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of where STMA
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PAUL ZWASKA

Education, the vehicle of change...

In my 34 years in the industry and 31 years with the STMA, the one driving force that has changed the industry to what it is today is education. The number of college educated groundskeepers in sports turf has

▲ **LONG-TIME** Baltimore Orioles head groundskeeper Pat Santarone, left, hands over his rake to his successor, Paul Zwaska.

skyrocketed in the past three decades. When I entered the industry in 1979, there were few in the sports field end of the turf industry with any significant formal education in turf. They often relied on what had been passed on to them from previous sports field managers or what worked for them. Back then they weren't always willing to share their secrets or methods of management. But during the 80's, the tide turned.

As I maneuvered my way through turf school at the University of Wisconsin in the early 80's, my advisor, Dr. Jim Love, alerted me to a new organization called the Sports Turf Managers Association, which peaked my interest since my desire was to get into that end of the business upon graduation. Information was slow to flow in the early years from the organization but luckily, due to my close proximity to the Milwaukee Brewers' ballpark, County Stadium, I was able to meet with Harry Gill and arrange an internship with him in my last summer before my senior year. As one of the founding fathers of the STMA, his willingness to take on an intern (something that was hardly ever done in MLB back then) was admirable. While my time there was brief, the experience was invaluable.

You see, it was actually Harry who got me my job with the Baltimore Orioles. In August 1984, I had sent resumes out to several ball clubs including the Orioles. Their head groundskeeper, Pat Santarone, was looking to hire someone to train to take his position upon retirement. Thanks to Harry's recommendation to Pat, I was interviewed and quickly hired onto the Orioles as the assistant. Pat had said he had wanted someone with a degree in turf to take his place. He could see changes that were occurring in the industry and how much

more technical it had become since his glory days. And so it began.

While I was one of the earlier turf graduates in the sports turf industry back then, I was the "drip before the deluge." As the 90's came along, so did a building wave of turf graduates vying for jobs in sports field management. And it wasn't just men coming from the college campuses; female graduates were breaking the barrier of the once male-dominated profession. And soon, we would see them at all levels of the profession. Along the way, the STMA was rapidly growing and offering an ever-expanding variety of educational opportunities from their annual conference in January, to regional and state chapter events, a monthly magazine and other printed educational materials. The educated sports turf managers were riding the wave into the 21st century.

With the advent of the younger, more tech savvy sports turf managers came their demand to academia for more sports turf specific research. They required better and more diverse equipment, better performing field drainage systems, improved turfgrass varieties, and more eco-friendly and effective turf chemicals and fertilizers. Where education initiated the wave, science would build the intensity. The sports turf industry had come of age. Tasks that seemed impossible just two decades before would become common practice in some cases by the turn of the century.

I left my post with the Orioles at the start of the new millennium. In my final 2 years with the club I had been spending more and more of my off seasons teaching and speaking about field maintenance. It was something I loved doing because I remembered how I was in the early years, hungry for any information about sports field management. And I knew there were plenty of groundskeepers out there with lots of questions. One of the reasons I left the Orioles for Beacon Athletics (then called Beacon Ballfields) was because of Beacon's desire to have someone like me to help educate their customers. It was an opportunity I was anxious to embrace and move forward. Thirteen years later, after a couple hundred seminars and now a new online groundskeeper training program, I still get the thrill each time I get to gush my knowledge and experience to those interested in learning. It is a thrill for me to help those struggling with their field maintenance to understand why something is happening and how to solve the problem. It is a great way to give back to the profession and keep it moving forward. For me, it is a tip of the hat to those

who taught me, Dr. Jim Love, Harry Gill, Pat Santarone and so many others in the profession that it would be impossible to name them.

One could say I've helped mentor many people in the industry, I would probably laugh at that. I was merely helping them understand their problems either through science or common sense. It doesn't always take a college education to figure out a problem and its solution. But like the inquisitive groundskeepers that come to me looking for answers, I still continue to learn new things every time I step on to someone else's field or attend educational conferences. As groundskeepers, we need, no, we *have a duty* to continue to talk to each other, network and seize every opportunity to further our own education. Education pushed the science, and both pushed the change in our industry. The "art of groundskeeping" has become the "science of groundskeeping." It is our education that will continue to move this industry forward for better performing, safer and more aesthetically pleasing fields.



◀ **MIKE SCHILLER**, CSFM, left, with Harry Gill

MIKE SCHILLER, CSFM, STMA PAST PRESIDENT

I really have been blessed to be part of STMA since nearly the inception of the organization. Eric asked for my "philosophy on the art and science of turf management"; my whole career I tried to provide the safest playing surfaces possible within the constraints of our budget. Whether I was working on the fields during my Air Force career, or for one of the Park Districts or schools I have had the privilege to work at, my goal was to provide a safe, aesthetically pleasing playing facility.

This goal was because I felt a recreational player or student athlete deserved to be playing on the best surface we could provide. I always felt each participant deserved to feel like a pro, and we tried to provide a safe consistent surface for them to showcase their talent as this may be the highest level of competition they may play at.

And I tried to instill these thoughts in each of the talented people I had the opportunity to work with. I felt we were in the business to

keep our facilities safe whether it was our swimming pools, playgrounds, or all our playing fields; our users needed to know we were doing our best to keep things safe for them.

I always tried to be more of a teacher which I guess is also a mentor. With all the wonderful people I had the opportunity to work with over my career, I always tried to pass along the things that had been passed along to me by the wonderful mentors I had in my life.

Because these people helped push me along I was able to pursue my passion of athletic field maintenance. Of course I had a few other responsibilities as well, but my passion was always caring for the facilities where baseball players could get a hit or make a stunning defensive play, or where a football team could do everything correctly and score a touchdown, or a lacrosse, soccer or field hockey player could score a goal.

I left the Air Force and got into the Park and Recreation profession at just the right time, when soccer was growing at an insane rate. I have seen the same now with lacrosse and field hockey as well, each required some education and cultural practice tweaks to make these fields as safe as possible.

At the start of my career I lucky enough to attend an educational conference hosted by Eric Madisen and the *Park and Grounds* magazine staff, and I also attended the Midwest Turfgrass Conference at Purdue University. At these two sessions I had the opportunity to meet Dr. William Daniel and a gentleman known as Harry C. Gill, aka "Pops or Gramps." Harry had been a golf course superintendent when Bud Selig, then the owner of the Milwaukee Brewers, talked Harry into taking over the care of the old County Stadium turf and infield. Harry knew turf, but not in-field management. So he started making phone calls.

Doc Daniel was a Turf and Agronomy professor at Purdue and was the man who came up with the idea that became the Prescription Athletic Turf System (PAT) system. I was very lucky that these two men took me under their wing and truly helped me grow professionally and in my knowledge of turf maintenance.

As Harry's quest for athletic field management knowledge grew, a gentleman from Minnesota contacted Harry and became a friend and mentor. Dick Ericson had been the head groundskeeper at Old Metropolitan Stadium in Minneapolis and then he moved over to the Humphrey Dome and managed that until his retirement. And one other gentlemen from down in Kansas City shared information with Harry—his name was George Toma.

As the four of these men shared information and questions they thought an avenue was needed to share athletic field information. The first real sports turf session was held at Doc's Midwest Clinic, which had always been golf-oriented. That first session had more than 100 people attend and Doc knew his program did not have enough room to allow this group to grow.

Harry and Eric Madisen worked up an agreement to host the sessions at Eric's annual educational seminars for parks and schools employees and a new session dealing with Sports Field maintenance was born. The numbers grew and the four men's sharing of ideas grew to become what is now known as the Sports Turf Managers Association.

These four men took me in, shared information and ideas and helped challenge me; Harry was known to my kids as "Gramps" and they loved him and I did as well, he was a good friend and one of my mentors. So was Doc Daniels, who often times when in Chicago would just drop in and see how I was doing. I could always call Dick or George if I had a problem and they would give me their ideas on how to solve the issue;

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they never said how to do it, but suggested what might work.

Another man who has been very important to my career is Roger Bossard, the 3rd generation groundskeeper who has been with the Chicago White Sox as long as I can remember. His granddad, uncles, father and cousin were all involved with athletic field management. When I just got out of the Air Force and had a problem, I called him, and Roger returned my call and has had a great influence on me and my career in turf management.

I guess for the last 40+ years I have tried to pay it forward and share all the information I gained from these men and many others and tried to help whoever would call and ask me a question, I think that is the call to all of us in STMA help each other, whether you share a success or a failure if your information helps save someone time or money, that is what this group is about and what Harry and our founding fathers wanted it to be.

PAY IT FORWARD

There are four men whom perhaps I had a little bit to do with their success and growth:

Mike McBride, who came to me early in my career and had been in sales and wanted to do something outside and was willing to work hard, ask questions and learn. Mike was creative, a quick study and did a great job on athletic field grooming and lining and helped grow the sand blasted sign-making in the Chicagoland Parks Systems. His talent created signage still seen all over the area. Mike moved on and became the Superintendent of Parks in Lombard, IL and has since retired and is now helping turf managers as a consultant for a local turf equipment supplier.

Rick Bold and I have formed a rather unique relationship; we have known each other for more than 30 years, but over the past 15 we have kind of mentored each other. We shared ideas and issues and helped each other solve problems; we also helped each other out in sharing equipment. Rick became a CSFM and has been the Superintendent of Parks for the Glencoe Park District for many, many years and does a great job serving the Glencoe Community.

Eric Fasbender, now at Louisiana State, came to the Schaumburg Flyers as an intern and then became their head groundskeeper. Eric and I struck up a great friendship and I am sure I have learned more from him than he

from me. I am proud of him as he is a true leader in the industry; he did a great job for the Oregon Ducks and is carrying on his hard work at LSU. He loves what he does and it shows. He also gives back, especially with the hard work he does on the Student Challenge Committee of STMA.

And someone I apparently have mentored without even knowing it is my son Matthew. Matt used to come with me on weekends for special event set up, or ball field set ups, and he observed and as he got older he helped work. Even though I have tried to encourage Matt to enter another career field, he has dedicated himself to the grounds industry and is currently helping manage the athletic fields for the Vernon Hills Park District. With Matt's inquisitiveness and always wanting to learn more about turf and infield management, he is now becoming my mentor.

I hope in some way that I have touched the lives of these four men, and increased their love of working on athletic fields. I am proud of each of them and proud to call them all my friends. I do hope that Harry and Doc look down from heaven and smile at me and the efforts I have made to keep the dream alive.

I do know that I have loved every minute I

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have been involved with STMA, I have made so many wonderful friends over the years and I have gotten so much more out of being a member than I could ever have imagined. I was blessed to have so very many wonderful people help me in my career and I hope that I have made them proud.



**JOHN A. FIK
CSFM/CGM**

Today's Sports Turf Management is a blending of art, science, creativity and technical competency to provide a safe and aesthetically appealing sports surface. Television and the internet

have had a big influence on the sports turf industry as well as the golf course industry. With this has brought a greater effort to keep the client/customer educated and to manage their expectations. Safety of the athletes has become a primary concern of all sports turf managers and learning from industry peers on how to improve safety keeps you one step ahead any litigious actions.

Chris Metcalf CSFM/CGM started with our company in December 2000 as Grounds, Landscape and Sports Fields Manager at Aurora University and received his CSFM designation on July 1, 2012. Chris has always been someone who has wanted to learn more and constantly pushes himself and his crew in providing a more safe and attractive campus. When he called and told me he was applying to become a CSFM it was just another example of how stay-

ing at the status quo was not for him.

Darrel Maier is a former golf course superintendent that started with our company on June 1, 2010 and is currently the Grounds, Landscape and Sports Field Manager at St. Luke's School (a private day school) in western Connecticut. The state of Connecticut, as well as many other states in the Northeast, is under a strict "no spray" policy for all public and private K-12 schools. Darrell is constantly researching information through university studies, on line resources through STMA and talking with other sports turf managers to get the latest BMP information. He is looking at converting one of his Kentucky bluegrass fields to a lower impact improved Tall Fescue variety as a test case. He has come up with imaginative ways to control some of the diseases that occur on Kentucky bluegrasses. ■