



Working with your distributor

Little League World Series groundskeeper appreciates advice

SETH WHITEHILL, head grounds-keeper for the Little League World Series (LLWS) complex in South Williamsport, PA, for several years has been working with distributor's rep Phil Easton of Direct Solutions, a division of Agrium Advanced Technologies. The complex holds more than 75-80 games in the 3-week tour-

namment; there are six fields on 80 acres including two stadiums. Whitehill takes care of the fields on his own during the spring and fall, but during the weeks leading up to and the during the World Series, volunteers (organized by the Keystone Athletic Field Managers Organization, the state's STMA chapter) come in from all over to help with the fields' maintenance.

"We didn't have a consistent growth rate throughout this year, and 2012 was hell," Whitehill said. "Clay is the native soil at the LLWS complex and there are sand slit drains cut through the fields. Wetting agents are crucial so you don't look and see the dry spots across the entire field. This year we had a large amount of rain during the beginning of the summer months, following a hot spell."

Whitehill said he has never seen a worse disease problem than he did during 2013. Neighboring facilities were experiencing a lot of dollar spot, brown spot and summer patch and pythium, with some of the diseases surfacing two or three times in certain areas. With Easton's help, Whitehill got a step ahead of the game and his turf remained disease free.

"When I started with Little League we had an existing relationship with a distributor but I didn't see eye-to-eye with them, so we had a bidding process to find a new one. Jeff Fowler (of Penn State Extension and STMA Board member) and I worked together to draw up a maintenance plan and then asked three bidders to tailor their bids to that plan, and we then selected the most cost-effective bid," Whitehill said.

"Phil Easton has become a good friend of mine. He is a great reference; he is really good with diseases and he loves to fix a problem. He likes the challenge of fixing problems. I consult with him regularly, for example on fungicide products when a period of extreme heat is expected. We also developed a granular and foliar fertilizer program.

"He knows what to look out for and what products to use so we don't get into any trouble. During the weeks leading up to the World Series, from May-September, foliar applications were made every other week. Easton also worked in a liquid for color and a root builder into the management program.

"Phil comes here 5-6 times a year and we walk around to discuss what's working or not. He has a real good grasp of the sites here at Little League, and we use soil tests regularly to see how we might improve it, and also to tailor the next year's plan to alleviate any possible issues," Whitehill said.

"Every field is different; my job is to recommend the correct products to fix problems," Easton said. In Williamsport, there is a lot of wear and some rooting problems so we had to work to get the turfstand to withstand the pressure. My job is to try and find out what turf managers are trying to accomplish first, and



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then supply some supporting data to back up my recommendation and earn the trust of the turf manager."

Whitehill said, "I call Phil several times a month to update him on what's happening here and to talk about what diseases or other problems he's seeing in this area. Developing this kind of relationship with a distributor can be such a beneficial tool for turf managers; he knows what others are seeing in the region and so talking with him regularly makes my life a heckuva lot easier.

We are great friends now and I didn't even know him a few years ago.

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"What my job really is not salesman; it's consultant. My job is to help the turf manager figure out what his or her field needs, then put together a program within the available budget," Easton said. "What can we do for what you can spend?" is the question that needs answered.

"For Seth, I recommended a silica product and it's really helped with the wear; he has a better stand now. I've found that sports turf managers are not as familiar with foliar products as golf superintendents. Seth's attitude is to do everything correctly; he has excellence built in and wants his fields to be the best they can be, and he's willing to work the hours necessary to make that happen. He is also open to new ideas; his attitude is 'let's see what happens.'" He is the reason the LLWS fields looked as good as they did this year," Easton said.

"Many of our volunteer staff have been helping with field preparations and for 17 consistent years. This year, feedback Seth received from volunteers was that the fields look better than they ever have," Whitehill said. "Even the ESPN camera crew noticed how nice the fields looked this year.

"We have a break room at Lamade Stadium with a TV in it so during games sometimes we are in there watching. There is about a 10-second delay on the broadcasts, so we'll hear the crowd roar and then guess what happened," Whitehill said. "TV helps us out because you can't see any spots that are thin or beat up, where we might have used grass clippings to hide any brown spots. There are 38 games on the two stadium fields over the 2 weeks and there isn't much time to get much done except the between game fixes on the mounds and batters boxes, dragging the infields, and of course putting down fresh lines." ■