

F.O.Y.

Field of the Year



TD Ameritrade Park Omaha

- Level of Submission: College
- Category of Submission: Baseball
- Head Sports Turf Manager: Dan Blank
- Title: Turf manager
- Education: Associate's degree, horticulture and turf management
- Experience: Internships with St. Paul Saints ('04) and Milwaukee Brewers ('05); Assistant Groundskeeper for Louisville Bats ('06); Head Groundskeeper for Birmingham Barons ('07) and Buffalo Bisons ('08-'10); Turf Manager at TD Ameritrade Park Omaha ('10-present).
- Full-time staff: Eric Williams, assistant turf manager
- Original construction: 2011
- Turfgrass variety: Original sod from Graff's Turf Farms. Currently: 85% Kentucky bluegrass/15% perennial ryegrass
- Overseed: Compared to 2011, we tried to ramp up our overseeding program for 2012. Because of the variety of events we host throughout the season and its constant use, overseeding is definitely part of our regular maintenance plan. Rates and frequency of seeding are as follows: 1 lb /1,000 bluegrass at least once a month; 1/2 lb/1,000 ryegrass every other month
- Drainage: Corrugated plastic drain tile. 24" to 18" main line running down center of field (centerfield to home plate). 6" lateral lines every 10. Also have SubAir system; heated air forced through drainage system.

CHALLENGES

TD Ameritrade Park Omaha opened in 2011 with the intent of being a multi-use facility. That being said, management has certainly held up their end of the bargain in the short amount of time that the facility has been in use. Aside from being the home of the NCAA Men's College World Series, we also host Creighton University baseball, the College Home Run Derby, RedSky music festival, Omaha Nighthawks football, and in February 2013, hockey! Just the sheer variety of events held at the stadium creates challenges in terms of trying to develop, schedule, and implement an annual management plan for the field.

When the College World Series moves in, the stadium is transformed top to bottom. On our end, we are challenged with coordinating our routine field maintenance around all the extra practices, run-throughs, meetings, and additional setup that occurs on the field before the tournament. In particular, we assist ESPN with installing in-ground microphones at home plate and the pitcher's mound. Once those are in the ground, our crew has to be careful not to purposely rake or drag over them as we prepared the field for the games.

The summer of 2012 was absolutely brutal. Like much of the nation, we were faced with intense heat and drought conditions for much of June, July, and August.

The RedSky Music Festival is about the worst-case scenario you can imagine for a sports field. In mid-July, two-thirds of the field was covered with protective plastic flooring for 10 days. Additionally, a large stage was built in centerfield, and temperatures averaged around 98 degrees for the duration of the event. Needless to say, the field took a severe beating.

The Omaha Nighthawks of the United Football League also call our place home. The league has been plagued by financial problems for the last two years, and quite frankly, we weren't sure until September if they were going to play or not. From our stand point, we did as much as we could to the field to prepare despite the uncertainty.

This coming February, we are hosting an outdoor hockey event on our field. Although some of the details aren't completely worked out yet, we have a basic understanding on the logistics on building the rink and general set up. However, perhaps the most obvious challenge that remains is how the weather will be for the event, and what measures we need to take to protect the turf. After the event, we will have one month to get the field ready for Creighton baseball in March.

SportsTurf: What channels of communication do you use to reach coaches, administrators and users of your facility? Any tips on communicating well?

Blank: For Creighton University games and practices, I deal directly with the coaching staff and also receive information from our Event Manager for the stadium.

During the College World Series, every day I speak often with NCAA committee members and again am frequently in contact with the Event Manager.

For any other event, I get most of my communications from the Event Manager.

We use the standard forms of communications; cell phones, emails, two-way radios, but the most effective is face to face.

ST: What are your specific job responsibilities? What do find most enjoyable? What task is your least favorite and why?

Blank: My primary responsibility is to provide the best possible baseball field that I can for the biggest stage in college baseball. One that looks great, but more importantly, plays flawlessly. Far and away, any baseball game is my favorite event, and the College World Series is the most chaotic and the most enjoyable. My least favorite task is, without a doubt, snow removal. I used to look forward to a good blizzard or two during the winter months but assisting the maintenance staff with snow removal has pretty much taken all the joy out of it.

ST: How did you get started in turf management?

Blank: I got a late start in this industry. I received my bachelor's degree in an unrelated field and spent seven years as a manager of operations in the hospitality industry in the Minneapolis area. Being born and raised in Minnesota, I have always been a big Twins fan and maybe even a bigger fan of the game of baseball itself. In the early 2000s I knew in my heart that the Twins would soon be getting a new outdoor stadium and if I wanted to be a part of that crew I would need to get after it. While continuing to work full time, I returned to school and received my Associate Degree in Sports Turf Management. I began my climb in this industry with internships with the St. Paul Saints and the Milwaukee Brewers followed by my biggest break of all, heading down to Louisville, KY to spend a season with Tom Nielson at Louisville Slugger Field. Following that summer in Louisville, I became the Head Groundskeeper for the Birmingham Barons (through Southern Athletic Fields) for a season. Then the Buffalo Bisons came calling, and I spent three fun seasons in western New York. In the fall of 2010, the opportunity to be the Turf Manager at TD Ameritrade Park Omaha came up and between taking over a brand new facility and returning to the Midwest, it was too good to pass up. Three seasons under my belt and looking forward to many more.

▼ **CREW MEMBERS;** Kyle Poljanac, Alex Sindelar, Joe Morgan, and Brandon Cutler painting the CWS logo.

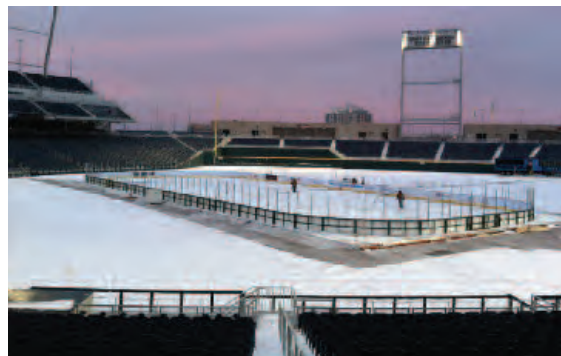
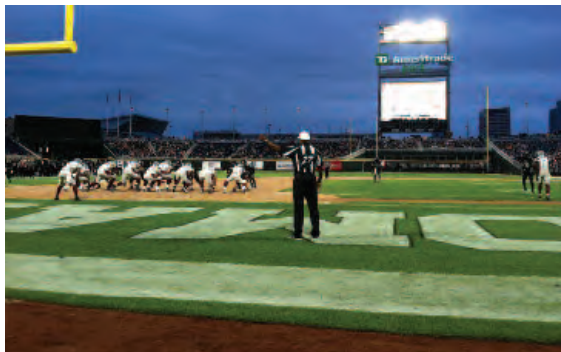




▲ **LSU takes** the field during the College World Series practice and media day.

▼ **Top: THE OMAHA NIGHTHAWKS** of the UFL called our field home for the 2011 and 2012 seasons.

▼ **Bottom: FLOODING OF HOCKEY RINK** in preparations for the Mutual of Omaha's Battles on Ice.



ST: How do you balance your work and personal time?

Blank: During an event such as the CWS, there is not much of a balance. My wife and kids actually move back to Wisconsin for those two weeks in June. For Creighton games and other events that we host, I am fortunate to be able to have my family come down and spend time with me during the events themselves.

ST: What changes are you planning to make or have you made to your maintenance plan for 2013, if any?

Blank: The biggest change we made was the addition of a continuous seeding program. We slit seeded the entire field with Kentucky Bluegrass three times this season at a rate of about 3.5 lbs./mft². We also went out twice a week with a broadcast spreader in the areas that would show wear in an effort to always have new turf coming up.

ST: Are you yet involved in sustainable management practices? If so, what are you doing?

Blank: We perform the more traditional practices such as returning clippings, the application on humus in some of our fertilizers, regular aeration and topdressing, annual soil testing to determine next year's fertilizer requirements, and the use of foliar fertilizer applications to increase the plants uptake while using less as compared to a soil feeding.

ST: How do you see your job changing in the future?

Blank: I see pressures being put on Turf Managers in general to get more involved with the previously mentioned "sustainable" management practices. I also feel that water use issues will become more and more of a hot topic in the coming years.

As far as TD Ameritrade Park Omaha, who knows? It makes me a little nervous for my turf when I think about the kind of events a creative sales staff can come up with but exposure of the ballpark to a greater audience is never a bad thing. ■