

F.O.Y.

Field of the Year



● **Level of Submission:** Schools/Parks

● **Category of Submission:** Baseball

● **Head Sports Turf Manager:** Josh Weigel

● **Title:** Director of Grounds

● **Education:** Bachelor's degree in Turf Management

● **Experience:** Bachelors degree in Turf from University of Tennessee (2007). Intern, Indianapolis Indians in 2006. Assistant Director of Grounds at Wesleyan School in 2009, now Director of Grounds at Wesleyan School (2009-present).

● **Full-time staff:** David Thro-wer, Zach Lindner, Jose Flores

● **Other crew to recognize:** Grant Frerking

● **Original construction:** 2004

● **Turfgrass variety:** Bermuda Tif-sport from June-September; overseeded with Pennington's Sunrise Primo perennial ryegrass

● **Overseed:** We overseeded Pennington Sunrise Primo at 16 lbs per 1,000 square feet on October 7. We touched it up with another application in early march but not as aggressive (8 lbs per 1,000).

● **Drainage:** Lines along the skirts in foul territory. Everything is sloped to the warning track where we have drainage lines. This field does not drain well.

By the third day of practice it was almost like we needed to add water to the skin it was so hard. After each day of aerifying, we would roll the skin with a double drum roller to try and smooth out any rough areas we had left.

DON GAEBELEIN FIELD, Wesleyan School, Norcross, GA

CHALLENGES

Because 70% of the game is played on the dirt in baseball, this was a serious problem. I know we all love the green grass and the dynamic patterns but the skin is the most important part. We bring in clay every year and then follow it up by having our skin laser graded. I decided to skip last season due to budget reasons. So this past November we brought in two tandem truck loads of "wet" clay. It was then spread out, tilled into the existing clay, and laser graded. Since it was late November/early December, we did not have much sun and had plenty of rain. Because there are no activities on the field this time of year and the ryegrass wasn't growing often, I would send someone down to mow the field maybe once a week and that was all we would do to the field. By mid-January we started getting dugouts cleaned, repairing the warning track, and continued mowing/fertilizing the field. I noticed the skin was very soft but figured it was due to all the rain we had gotten the last few months.

One week before the first practice the skin was still soft and we had been dry for almost a full week. I took a shovel and dug into a soft pocket and hit a puddle of water. I started walking the entire skin, digging, and hitting water. Due to the weather, the condition of the clay when we put it out, and sealing it back up, there was water trapped 1 foot under the surface. The

biggest problem was that the first practice was in 3 days. I decided to hand till the worst areas and let them sit for 3 days. After 3 days, the top layer was crusted but the stuff underneath was still wet.

The ideal solution would be to till the entire infield and let it sit a day, till it again, and let it sit, and then put a final grade on it. The problem was we didn't have that kind of time. I came up with an idea where we used our Toro aerifier and used 3/4 inch needle tines and aerified the skin. We let the holes sit open all day letting them air out. An hour before practice, we drug the skin and the holes were filled in with Turface. The first day, the field was still soft but playable and level. The second day, firmer, and level. By the third day of practice it was almost like we needed to add water to the skin it was so hard. After each day of aerifying, we would roll the skin with a double drum roller to try and smooth out any rough areas we had left. Once the weekend hit, we tilled the skin and regraded it making the skin almost perfect!

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

Weigel: Communication is probably one of the most important elements of this or any job. I use various forms of communication including e-mail, text, phone, and



▲ **Left: ONE OF MY FAVORITE PATTERNS** (we call it the plaid pattern). **Right:** Saturday afternoon game. This was taken from the left field berm.

face to face. If it is something quick, I either text or e-mail. If it is a scheduling situation, I prefer e-mail so that I have a paper trail. Face to face is best when it is something that needs to be explained more in depth. I try to communicate daily with the coaches/athletic director on our field conditions and also in regard to any changes to their schedules. I have learned that the more often you communicate, the more trust and respect you gain from them. For example, if we have had a lot of rain, they respect my decision to call or postpone a game rather than questioning it because I have been upfront and proactive with them in the past.

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

Weigel: I am the Director of Grounds which means that every growing thing outdoors is my staff's responsibility. We now have just over 20 acres of athletic fields to maintain as we just added 5 more this past summer. We also have 65 acres of ornamental grass and landscape that we maintain, totaling 85 acres of ground. Included in these 85 acres is a playground as well as a walking/running trail on which our cross country team competes in the fall. All the set-up for games, meets, and matches falls under our watch. Football, softball, cross country, baseball, soccer, lacrosse, tennis, and track make up our athletic schedule. As of this coming spring when we will add a middle school lacrosse program; every varsity sport we have will be replicated in middle school. We also maintain areas for band practice during the fall by doing things such as lining the baseball field for their practices during the week. Our graduation ceremony in May is held outdoors, and preparing for it is also our responsibility.

Seeing the student athletes compete on the fields is the most enjoyable part of my job. The end result of all our hard work and dedication is put to use at the end of the day when a team takes the field. My crew and I enjoy seeing the visiting teams use our facilities, especially when they compliment the way the fields look and play. Even our student athletes compliment us on a daily basis, which is always nice to hear.

My least favorite task is the office work and budgeting. It is a necessary part of my job, but I much prefer the actual hands on work on the grounds.

ST: How did you get started in turf management?

Weigel: While growing up, I mowed several yards around town, and always enjoyed it. At the time, I didn't realize you could actually go to college and study turf. I started my freshman year at Indiana University where I studied Sports Marketing/Management. The following year, I transferred to the University of Tennessee where my girlfriend (now wife) was enrolled, with intentions of continuing the same major. There I met Dr. John Sorochan, associate turf professor, who persuaded me to go into the turf field instead. The following year, I interned with the Indianapolis Indians and realized this was something I had a real passion for. After spending 3 years and a summer with Dr. Sorochan at UT, together with a baseball season under Jamie Mehringer, the then-head groundskeeper for the Indy Indians, I knew my future was in sports turf.



▲ **ONE OF MY FAVORITES.** This was preparing for our summer tournament that takes place at the end of May and goes into June (travel team baseball). This is the only travel team tournament we host at the school.

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

Weigel: A lot of people think that because we work at a school, our hours are short and we only work when classes are in session. As most readers know, this is not true. We deal with living things and much of what we do is dependent on weather conditions beyond our control. Just when you think

everything IS under control, a new plant disease springs up or a main water line breaks and floods a field. When I first started as the director, I spent a lot of time at work and felt like I needed to do everything. I would work on weekends and sometimes bring my wife in with me just so we could spend some time together, even if it was just driving around campus and checking the fields. A year ago, we had our first child, and I have since tried to slow down and spend more time at home. A real plus is that our son is in daycare here at Wesleyan so I can drop in and see him whenever I want. Another positive is having a great staff I can rely on. David Thrower, Jose Flores, and Zack Lindner make it a lot easier to get away and trust that the job is taken care of. I try not to work much on the weekends anymore but that doesn't always work out as planned. Another challenge is visiting our families in Indiana. We usually like to go for a week around Christmas and a week in the summer. Obviously, the winter is a good time to get away, but the summer trip can sometimes be hard to coordinate with my work schedule.

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

Weigel: I tend to believe in "if it isn't broke, don't fix it." After tinkering with our plan for 4 years, the last two have been very successful. Adding deep tine aerification to our football and baseball fields has been the most beneficial process that we have implemented. Steve Mitchell from Mitchell Reel Works comes in over the summer to pull plugs on our fields. These plugs can be as deep as 10 inches in length. This has helped tremendously with our drainage and transition. We have not had to sod any of the fields since we initiated the deep tine process. The only change I could foresee is deep tining the baseball field twice next summer instead of just once.

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

Weigel: Currently I am researching soil moisture monitors that will be hooked up to our irrigation software to help us conserve water on our fields. As yet we have not selected a particular product.

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

Weigel: Each day at Wesleyan can present a new challenge. The addition of 5 acres of soccer fields and a middle school lacrosse program is just one example of the constant change in my position. More grounds mean more maintenance, painting, and other responsibilities. Wesleyan always strives for perfection and is constantly adding or improving something on campus to attain that goal. My job is to do whatever I can to insure that the grounds live up to the high standard that our staff and students deserve and have come to expect. ■