



▲ **Left:** After each race, John Pitts will survey the field damage from atop the grandstands. **Middle:** Before mowing, Pitts and his crew must pick up one hundred or more of the lug nuts that are cast off by pit crews during tire changes. **Right:** John Pitts uses a Jacobsen LF570 five-gang reel mower to maintain the field at Charlotte Motor Speedway.

RIGHT ON TRACK:

John Pitts draws from a unique background to manage grounds at Charlotte Motor Speedway

Editor's note: This article was written by Adam Slick, the public relations and communications manager for Jacobsen.

MOTORSPORTS is one of the last places you would expect to find a turf manager. But even a sport that lives and breathes on asphalt has a critical need for professional turfgrass.

One nearly every major track around the country, a beautiful section of maintained turfgrass serves as the canvas for sponsor logos and separates pit road from the track—providing a picturesque background for fans in the stands and watching at home.

At Charlotte Motor Speedway (CMS), one of NASCAR's most storied tracks, John Pitts heads up the turf management team. For Pitts, the hardest part of maintaining the "ball field," as it's called, is getting track time.

"It's imperative that I coordinate with our track service guys to ensure the track will be free, and only then can we perform the maintenance we need to," said Pitts. "Anything that will make the speedway money takes priority over what we do, which means sometimes our only option is early morning or late at night."

Although the ball field is just 3.7 acres, timing and logistics makes every mowing session a production.

"With weather and the schedule playing a factor in our ability to mow, there is often two dump trucks worth of clippings to be cleaned up before the track can be used," said Pitts. "When you add in collecting the grass and other details, it takes us about three to four hours to get everything done."



▲ **JOHN PITTS (RIGHT)**, Director of Grounds for Charlotte Motor Speedway and his Foreman Armando Sosa (left) stand on the speedway's "ball field" after a mowing session.



▲ **Left:** A grounds crew member repairs tire ruts left by school buses – yes, school buses. Charlotte Motor Speedway will race buses as part of its regular event schedule. **Right:** To help smooth out tire ruts and other irregularities, Pitts' crew uses a Cushman Turf-Truckster with a roller attachment.

One of the more tedious tasks is picking up the hundreds of lug nuts that tire changers throw into the grass during pit stops.

"Lug nuts and reel mowers don't mix very well, so we have to try and get as many out as we can, but due to large amount the reel mower always finds a few," said Pitts.

Although lug nuts can cause equipment damage, race vehicles that veer into the grass cause the most problems for Pitts.

"Believe it or not, we race full-sized school buses and it's no surprise they leave the biggest ruts of any vehicle out here," said Pitts. "U.S. Legends Cars cars leave the least amount of damage because of how light they are and how their front bumpers are designed. Thankfully, NASCAR drivers stopped doing victory burnouts on the field after Kasey Kane destroyed his car on a manhole cover."

After each race, Pitts assesses the damage atop the grandstands overlooking the field. "From up there, I can quickly get a good idea of how much repair work we have to do that night so the turf still looks good for the next day's race."

Pitts and his crew use a Jacobsen LF570 five-gang reel mower and a Cushman Turf-Truckster with a blower attachment in tandem to get everything done.

"We couldn't do the job we do without the Jacobsen machines," said Pitts. "We went to a lower height-of-cut this year and the LF570 has given us great results. After the recent Coca-Cola 500 event, I was told by several fans that the ball field looks the best it has in 15 years."

Pitts also depends on Armando Sosa, his foreman and nine-year veteran at CMS.

"Armando is my right-hand man," said Pitts. "He works incredibly hard and knows every inch of this massive property. It's really nice to have someone with his work ethic and experience on staff."

In addition to mowing, Pitts will use a roller to smooth out ruts when the soil is moist. He's in the process of overseeding his 419 bermudagrass with Princess 77 in the hopes it will eventually take over.

"I like the Princess 77 because it likes the shorter growth height and very uniform,

we've had great success with the blending of the Princess 77 and 419 for a uniform and vibrant look."

Although Pitts manages just under four acres inside CMS, an additional 2,400 acres outside the speedway also falls under his responsibility.

"A lot of the exterior grass is on the campgrounds, where wet conditions and vehicles produce large pockets of mud," said Pitts. "In the past, we've just dumped gravel or straw on problem areas, but gravel isn't mower-friendly and the straw clogs up our drains. We just recently started to use Turface, a quick-dry material that is made of very fine clay and absorbs water and evaporates quickly."

Pitts draws from a very unique background that includes a horticulture degree from Auburn and time working as an officer in the Army National Guard in Alabama during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

"The horticulture education gives me the landscape design and plant knowledge I need and the military experience helps me create systems and processes to get things done," said Pitts.

Charlotte Motor Speedway is famous for its long-distance races, which fits perfectly with Pitts' philosophy on turf management.

"Before I got here, I think due to time and focus, there was a Band-Aid approach to turf issues. Where it makes sense, I want to look at long-term improvements instead of short-term fixes," said Pitts. "We make the immediate repairs we need to make but also develop a plan to improve conditions each year." ■

HOW TURF BLANKETS WORK

THE FUNCTION OF A TURF BLANKET is to allow for the increase in soil temperature due to the increase in the sun's radiation. The blanket minimizes temperature losses caused by lower nighttime temperatures and maximizes the positive temperature gains provided by the annual or yearly cycle; and minimizing the temperature losses caused by the diurnal or daily cycle. The soil temperature increases and maintains relative warmth. This principle allows for earlier warming of the soil and therefore earlier turf growth response. You can gain 2-3 weeks of early turf development by using turf blankets in this manner.

When covering the turf you increase the risk of snow mold similar to the increased risk involved with prolonged snow cover. Turf

maintained at a higher level of fertility, e.g., receiving late season fertilization, is more susceptible to snow mold. A preventive fungicide application may be warranted. Previous problems with snow mold should be considered when making this decision. If you have never had snow mold, a preventive fungicide application may not be justified. Blankets should be removed periodically to inspect for snow mold.

Blankets are best put down in November or December in cool climates—too early and the soil will overheat—and should be removed 2-3 weeks before traffic returns to the field. After removing the blankets, mow the turf several times to harden it before the field is used. ■