

# HOW SPORTS TURF SAVED A LIFE

**F**or 28-year-old Craig Sampsell working in the sports turf industry has been his passion as long as he can remember. From youth sports to the professional ranks, he has manicured athletic fields of all shapes and sizes. But the path has been anything but straight and narrow.

Growing up near Indianapolis, Craig was quickly drawn to turf management through his father, who owned a sports field construction and renovation company called Diamond Designs. Before Craig could drive a car, he would accompany his dad and uncle to projects around the state to lend a helping hand. While most kids were competing on these fields, Craig was learning about proper safety and field preparation techniques.

His love affair with natural grass turned serious at 16, when he dropped out of high school to work full-time for Diamond



▲ Louisville Slugger Field. Photo by Mike Stewart.

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◀ Craig Sampsell

Designs. Three years later, the company folded and, in early 2003, Craig and his dad were without jobs.

Fortunately, their sports turf expertise was quickly acknowledged by Carmel Dads' Club, a 100-plus acre sports complex near Indiana's Clay County. Dad and son were hired full-time in August 2003 and spent countless hours together mowing, aerating, edging, overseeding and topdressing. As things just started to feel normal again, the family would suffer an even larger tragedy.

In January 2004, Craig's mom took her own life. Racked with grief, he began to head down a very dark road. For the next few years, he was uncertain of his purpose on earth. He didn't have a high school degree or any direction to follow. Craig gained significant weight and began smoking to deal with the stress. Regardless of the tough times, his appetite for sports turf never faded and he tried to stay focused on his work at Carmel Dad's Club.

Finally, Craig's luck began to turn. In January 2006, just 2 years after his mother's passing, he met his future wife, Caroline. She immediately started guiding him back to a better track and questioned why he hadn't pursued his GED. Craig didn't have an answer and, to be honest, he didn't have an answer for most questions in life.

With Caroline's persistence, Craig was a high school graduate by August 2006 with an Honors GED and, soon after, enrolled at Indiana University-Purdue University of Indianapolis (IUPUI) to study sports management.

To learn more about his specific trade, Craig became a member of the Sports Turf Managers Association (STMA) and conducted extensive research online. He reached out to other sports

turf managers via e-mail, phone and social media to try new techniques in hopes of improving the fields he was managing. The response was overwhelming and members from far and wide shared best practices with Craig.

His skills in sports turf management, especially baseball, improved and were slowly being noticed by others in the industry. Long-time STMA member Tom Nielsen took a particular liking to Craig's kind personality and tireless work ethic. In May 2010, he hired Craig to work for the Louisville Bats' turf crew, the Triple-A minor league affiliate of the Cincinnati Reds.

Craig and his wife packed their bags and headed south to follow his dream of one day helping to manage a professional baseball field. Once Craig got settled into his new position, Tom took a deeper interest in his lifestyle, helping him quit smoking and lose more than 70 pounds. By August 2010, Craig had transferred to the University of Louisville to continue his sports management degree while working full-time for the Bats.

Craig and Caroline wed on July 24, 2012. This past December, Craig graduated from the University of Louisville and was hired as the Bats' assistant groundskeeper February 1, 2014.

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After receiving the new job offer from the Bats, Craig's family urged him to take time for himself and relax. While a few days to catch his breath was nice, it also gave him an opportunity to reflect on the sports turf managers he had connected with along the way, and how they had been so instrumental in his career ascension.

The more he thought about it, the more people he realized he needed to acknowledge personally. In mid-January, Craig attended his first STMA Conference & Exhibition in San Antonio. It was the perfect opportunity to reconnect with friends and colleagues, while also thanking those whom he had never met but had spoken with online over the years.

On April 10, the Louisville Bats open the 2014 campaign versus the Columbus Clippers. Craig and the turf crew are putting in long hours before the first pitch at Louisville Slugger Field to make sure fans and players are greeted with a top-notch field. Every blade of grass and speck of dirt will be treated with care. It's something Craig has taken pride in his entire life and April 10 is no different. ■

*Glenn Gray is with Buffalo Communications, the public relations agency for the Sports Turf Managers Association, @glenngray on Twitter.*



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