

# TOURING THE NEW HOME OF USA FIELD HOCKEY

**S**ome dads build their kid a treehouse or a fort in the backyard.

Former Auntie Anne's Pretzel giant Sam Beiler built his daughter the largest and most spectacularly diverse, sports, entertainment and events complex in North America—Spooky Nook Sports.

Beiler originally wanted to build a few volleyball courts as a nod to his daughter's competitive passion, but when big dreams meet big dollars, big things happen and Spooky Nook is, if nothing else, big.

The massive, 50-plus acre complex lies in the rural heart of Pennsylvania's Amish country in East Hempfield Twp., minutes from downtown Lancaster. Despite its middle-of-nowhere feel amid farmland, Spooky Nook now appears on the international sporting map as it is the new home for

the US Women's Field Hockey program, formerly based in Southern California.

Moreover, the Nook is a veritable Ellis Island of amateur athletics welcoming sweat-soaked masses yearning to play from Pennsylvania and beyond. A July basketball tournament drew more than 350 teams. A national field hockey tournament in February drew 161 teams.

The air dome, the facility's signature landmark, resembles a giant bed pillow and is easily visible from the nearby highway. The Astroturf field beneath it must be watered regularly in order to comply with international field hockey safety standards.

Adjacent to the pillow is the sprawling, metal exterior of a massive, former distribution warehouse for Armstrong Flooring. The 700,000 square feet beneath that roof is where the Nook's legend is being forged.

▼ Some of the 60,000 square-feet of Connor Hardwood, the largest single expanse of Connor Hardwood in the world.





For 10 years before its rebirth, that facility was a dank, dark and dirty, man-made home for raccoons, mice, and creatures that climbed, but the basic structure was sound. Beiler bought the property for \$11 million, raccoons and all.

"When we walked the property in November of 2011 we both had a vision for what it could be," said Steve Goris, Spooky Nooks Chief Operating Officer. "We literally sat down with a piece of graph paper and cut out all these little courts in different sizes and kind of laid out where things could line up...we handed that to some architects."

Before the first mouse had been evicted, Goris' calculator began whirring. "We wanted to figure out ways we could program so that we could get a return on investment," he said. "We didn't take a 'build it and they will come' attitude," Goris said. "We did a lot of research. When you're investing your money you need to diversify your portfolio. Well this business is kind of the same."

On June 3, 2013, just 8 months after renovation work began on the \$25 million project, Spooky Nook opened its doors.

Now, the only creatures climbing inside arrive in cars, wear athletic gear, and pay to scale the 30-foot-high walls, synthetic rock arches, and other challenging features in the facility's climbing center.

A separate "Clip N'Climb" area, the first of its kind in the United States, invites all levels of climber, young and old, to ascend walls and towers knobby protrusions.

Just inside the entrance is a food court with smoothies and other

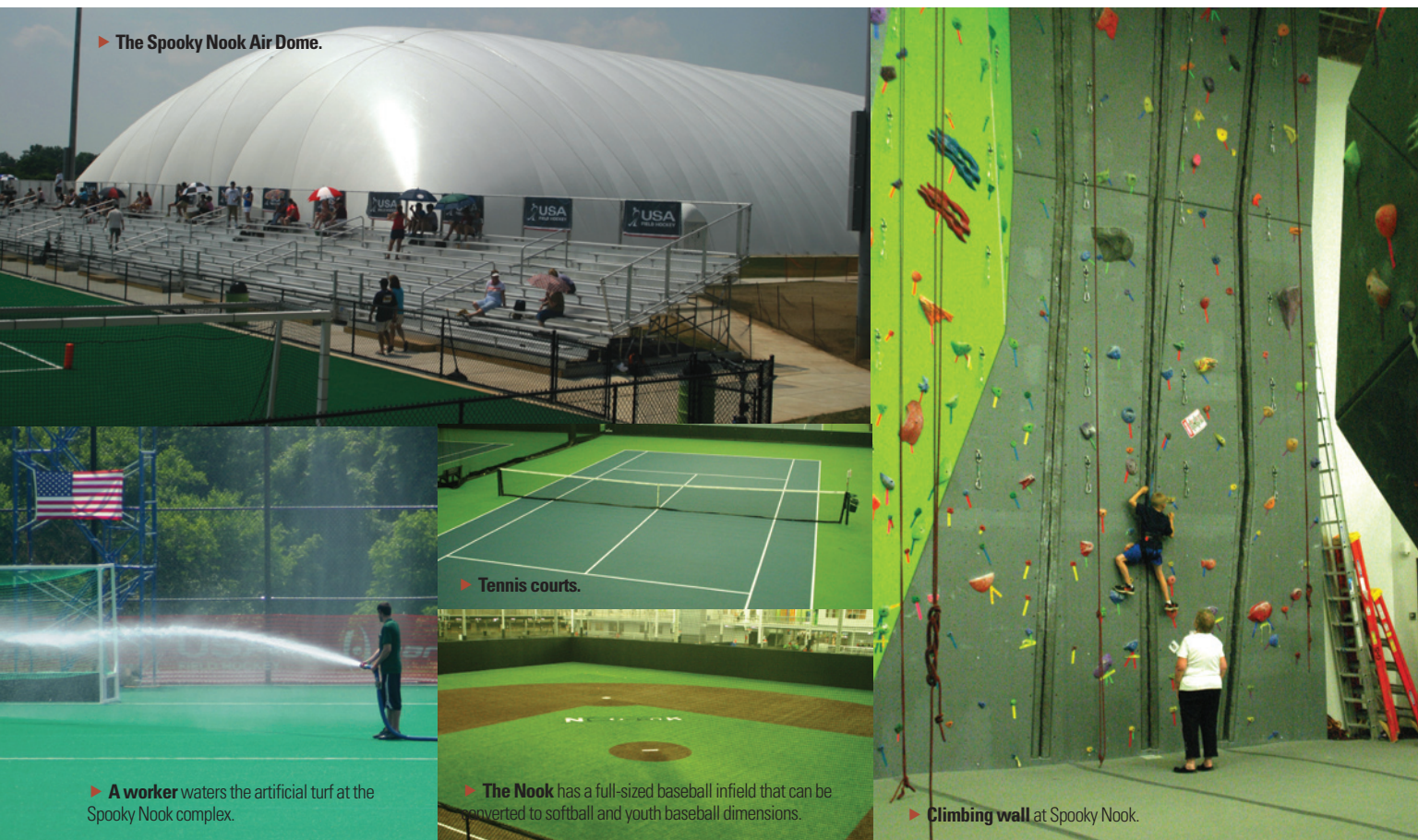
healthy foods, and an arcade whose primary function is to occupy the bored siblings of competing athletes or even competitors who are in between games.

A 100,000 square foot, elevated mezzanine concourse overlooks all of the indoor courts and fields. It also houses the general membership gymnasium as well as a special training area for competitive amateur and pro athletes. All the gym floors were installed by Ecore Commercial Flooring of Lancaster.

The 10 NBA-quality, Connor Sports hardwood courts total 60,000 square-feet, the largest single concentration of Connor Hardwood anywhere on the planet according to Spooky Nook's Director of Business Development, Patrick Grant.

There are 28,000 square feet of modular Connor Sport Court distinguished by its blue color and used for multiple sports including basketball, volleyball, field hockey, and Futsal, a popular indoor, 5-on-5 version of soccer. There are six premium quality tennis courts. "We needed it to be able to do multiple sports. If you have a basketball game you need to be able to dribble on it and at the same time it needs to be able to take the pounding that indoor field hockey puts on it with sticks striking on it all the time. You can't really do that on hardwood," Goris said.

There are three 60-by-120 foot enclosed Astroturf fields as well as a full-sized, adult baseball infield that can be altered in size to accommodate softball and youth baseball. There are 13 baseball/softball batting



► The Spooky Nook Air Dome.

► Tennis courts.

► A worker waters the artificial turf at the Spooky Nook complex.

► The Nook has a full-sized baseball infield that can be converted to softball and youth baseball dimensions.

► Climbing wall at Spooky Nook.



and pitching tunnels with nets that can be raised to the ceiling. That corner of the building is popular with local colleges and high schools looking for winter workouts.

Jumping, running and sweating is not a prerequisite of facility use. There are more than 100,000 square feet of exhibit space, and smaller meeting rooms, for everything from birthday parties and banquets to reunions, conventions, proms and holiday parties.

Orthopedic Associates of Lancaster, a partner in the facility, has offices near the front of the building. It offers on-site physical therapy offices and sports injury urgent care for Nook participants.

The other half of the giant former warehouse is known as the field house. It is home to 110,000 square feet of flooring divided into two, 55,000 square-foot sections. The area can accommodate 10 full-sized indoor field hockey pitches, 30 volleyball courts, or 16 basketball courts. A 15-worker conversion crew is responsible for rolling out the Astroturf, or taking it off depending on the event being held.

Behind the facility is a full-sized, multi-use synthetic turf field. Water cannons and hoses keep the turf to international specifications. Nearly all of the water used is collected from rainfall via a complex system of rain gutters on the facility's 14-acre roof. One inch of rain yields a half million gallons of water which is stored in holding tanks.

The turf under the air dome is a water-based synthetic over a rubberized form of asphalt, a design that helps the field retain moisture. There

are two fields like it in the world, the other being Manheim, Germany, according to Grant.

Sensors detect moisture, temperature and wind speed. Two giant, tractor-trailer sized air rotations units process that information and maintain perfect conditions.

Three brand new, sand volleyball courts, covered with special volleyball sand, were recently completed. In typical Spooky Nook fashion, the courts can be converted for use in sand soccer, sand field hockey, and sand training for sports performance.

The only major hiccup in the for the Nook was a transportation and parking nightmare that occurred in late February when a 3-day national field hockey tournament and a 2-day state volleyball tournament overlapped. "It was all part of the learning curve," Grant said. "We felt like we've actually improved since then. We've expanded some of our lots, added additional parking, added additional staff, and we feel like it's behind us."

There's more growth on the horizon. The Nook will open a 132-room hotel in the spring of 2015, Goris said.

"We want it to feel like you are getting away from maybe from the sports environment to a place where you can kind of "Zen out" a little bit." ■

*Jeff McGaw is a free lance writer in Harrisburg, PA.*

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