



From high school to the big leagues: ZOYSIAGRASS FOR SPORTS TURF

▲ Dan Bergstrom of the Houston Astros in action last season. Photo courtesy of Houston Astros.

At Rangers Ballpark in Arlington, TX home of the Texas Rangers, Dennis Klein, Director of Major League Baseball grounds, says he “would recommend zoysia.” For several seasons, even during World Series Games, the Rangers infield was grassed with Zeon Zoysia, and then Y2 Zoysia, both developed by Bladerunner Farms in Poteet, TX.

“It did great,” Klein says. “Zoysia is a little slower to establish than bermudagrass, and slower for the seams to lock together, but once it’s in there and established it’s really hard to hurt. We put it in in June and wouldn’t replace a piece of grass on it until after the season. We went through a couple of World Series with it. The cutout at first and third base, and in front of the pitchers mound, you could beat balls into it and it wouldn’t divot. It’s really tough grass.”

Klein says the Rangers installed the zoysigrass infield at the request of the pitching coach. “We had been putting zoysia every year on the infield grass because we were able to maintain it at a taller height of cut to slow the ball down. The pitching coach wanted it tall and the zoysia of-

installing the power cords runs across that hill. Concerts are a tough week for that hill and it stands up. We’ve been really happy with the zoysigrass in that role,” he says. “There was one time at a concert, a forklift fork was shoved into the hill and tore the grass. We replaced the divot and it healed back over the winter. I wouldn’t expect to grow warm season grass in the winter but even some November damage healed.”



▲ Opening Night at Minute Maid Park in Houston, March 31, 2013. Photo courtesy of Houston Astros.

fered varieties with more of an upright growing pattern, and a finer bladed type of turf that could handle the heat. That's why we went with it," Klein says.

This past season, the infield was grassed with 419 Tifway bermudagrass, at the request of the infielder players who wanted a shorter height of cut and a faster ball roll on the infield. "The infielders like it fast. The pitchers like it slow. This year we had a better earned run average with it fast as opposed to when I had it taller to help the pitcher," Klein says. "Sometimes coaches over-read these things. In my eyes, both teams have to play on it. You either have players or you don't have players."

At Minute Maid Park, home of the Houston Astros, Dan Bergstrom, senior director of major league field operations, says "I'm really excited about the new zoysiagrasses."

Although the field at the park is mainly grassed in seashore paspalum, Bergstrom has tested Zorro Zoysia, Zeon Zoysia and

L1F Zoysiagrass in certain areas. Right now, on Tal's Hill, the slope at the rear of the outfield that is in deep shade for most of August and September, Bergstrom maintains 2,500 square feet of L1F Zoysia.



▲ The sloping, grassed hill in centerfield at Minute Maid Park in Houston features L1F zoysiagrass. Photo courtesy of Houston Astros.

"We put L1F on the hill and it has been absolutely gorgeous. It's got the esthetics we're looking for. We're able to mow it down tight under 3/4-inch. It's a beautiful color. It's a *matrella* with a super fine texture. It's wear tolerant. It's been bulletproof," Bergstrom says.

Tal's Hill gets different, more aggressive wear than the rest of the field. "When a player makes a play on that hill, he gets there at full speed and stops at full speed, when he is chasing the ball to that hill. Every team that comes in does practice on the hill. The visiting center fielder will run up all over it for a half hour before batting practice," Bergstrom says.

"Our stadium tours go past the hill; it gets a lot of foot traffic. It's also the area immediately behind our stage for major concerts. All of our power cords, and all the traffic related to

WE'VE GOT YOU COVERED

EITHER WAY, YOU'LL WIN WITH TURFCO® SPORTSFIELD TOPDRESSERS



WIDESPIN™ CR-7

- ▶ Broadcast up to 40 feet for maximum productivity
- ▶ Patented WideSpin™ technology gives you the perfect spread with the least adjustments from light to heavy
- ▶ Spinner angle adjusts up and down for maximum versatility



METE-R-MATIC® XL

- ▶ Just hook up and go—ground-drive system means no hydraulics or speed calibration
- ▶ 60" drop spreader with extra large hopper capacity for less reloading
- ▶ Patented Chevron® belt ensures uniform application of all types of materials, regardless of moisture content



WWW.TURFCO.COM

Demo TURFCO on your field — call 800-679-8201 today.

TURFCO MANUFACTURING, INC. | 1655 101st Ave. NE | Minneapolis, MN 55449-4420 | TOLL FREE 800-679-8201



▲ South San Antonio High School's ball field grassed in Zeon Zoysia. Photos courtesy of Richard Mendez.

Zoysia has also been used on baseball fields at the high school level. Richard Mendez was the sports turf manager at South San Antonio High School in San Antonio when the field was renovated in October 2010. The original plan was to grass with bermudagrass but once he saw Zeon Zoysia, Mendez changed his mind. "It blew me away," Mendez says. "The feel of the grass, how when a ground ball is hit it slows the ball down because it is so thick, that was a good thing for our infielders, for the ball to slow down."

The base paths, infield, and outfield were all grassed with Zeon. Mendez says he noticed a difference in maintenance requirements almost immediately.

"I cut down my watering by 33%, if not more. This grass just needs less water," Mendez says. "I didn't have to run the sprinklers, especially during the tournament nights, so we didn't have to come to a wet field in the morning. For us it was a big plus, to be game ready a lot sooner for the morning game."

He also used less fertilizer on the zoysia than on the field when it was bermudagrass.

"We didn't have to fertilize but maybe a pound of nitrogen a year. That cut back our budget quite a bit. Our athletic director was pretty pleased about that, that we didn't have to buy as much fertilizer as we did with bermudagrass to keep it green," Mendez says.

He also no longer had to overseed the field.

"Maintenance costs were cut down in the fall and the spring because you didn't have to overseed anymore. The reason to overseed is to keep the body of the grass. Bermudagrass loses the body, zoysia does not. I wanted to paint it but we didn't. My test was that it would need to be green by the time our annual tournament came along in the second week of March. We had a green baseball field by then," he says.

Mendez says he sees a place for zoysia on sports fields.

"I think zoysia is going to be the grass of the future for sports fields because of the low cost of maintenance, especially

in high schools, because school budgets are cut. If we can have less maintenance costs we can put that money into education," Mendez says.

Coach Donaldo Perez of Somerset High School in Somerset, TX guided his baseball team to the playoffs that were held at South San Antonio's field grassed with Zeon Zoysia. Perez says that both he and his players noted an improved difference on the zoysiagrass field.

"The grass at South San is so tight-knit. The ground balls to our players were so sound, a lot sounder than most fields. They were pure

ground balls toward you. The field plays real smooth," Perez says. "The grass makes a difference in how the ball is played. I felt that that field really was a really good field to play on. We had some true hops. There are other fields that you play on that are not the same. This was really player friendly, ground ball friendly."

Charles Harris is president of Buy Sod, Inc., a licensed producer and installer of Zeon Zoysia in Pinehurst, NC and a member of the The Turfgrass Group's Zeon production network. Harris says he's grassed two high school baseball/softball fields with Zeon Zoysia in North Carolina so far.

"Zeon is very fine-bladed and esthetically, it's a great turf. The ball rolls across it very well. It's very dense," Harris says.

Using zoysia on the fields he's installed, he says, has produced "positive feedback. They've been very happy with the result of what we've put in."

Although zoysia is a very dense turf and can withstand a lot of wear, "once damaged, it doesn't have as quick a recovery as bermudagrass," Harris says.

Harris says the key is for sports turf managers to be aware that maintenance requirements on a zoysiagrass field are different than on a bermudagrass field. "I think it's just people getting used to growing zoysia. You can't grow it like a bermuda-

grass. It doesn't need the same amount of nitrogen feed. It's a little slower growing so the maintenance practices are different. It's a learning curve as they get into it," Harris says.

Although zoysia is a very dense turf and can withstand a lot of wear, "once damaged, it doesn't have as quick a recovery as bermudagrass," Harris says. "So the question is, how will it recover? What is the threshold for the number of events it can withstand? In many ways, it's better for maintenance and es-

thetics, but what we have to consider is, is it the right fit for the facility? I think it needs to be experimented with more and used more. It's certainly is a very good turf for sports turf. It could definitely work very well."

Kevin Morris is the Executive Director of the National Turfgrass Evaluation Program based in Beltsville, MD. Morris worked at NTEP for 15 years with the late Jack Murray, the legendary USDA turf breeder who is credited with bringing many of the zoysiagrass accessions from Southeast Asia into the United States, including, among others, the turf that eventually became Zeon Zoysia.

Morris says NTEP recently completed a 5-year trial on zoysiagrass and the program has plans to launch a new zoysia trial this summer that includes some 35 unique entries. So far, most of the testing NTEP has done on zoysia has been for home lawns and golf use. The program has yet to conduct a wear tolerance test specific to sports field use.

Still, Morris says, "zoysia holds a lot of promise." He notes that although there are real distinctions between cultivars, zoysia, in general "does have better winter hardiness than bermudagrass." The grass can also survive in lower pH soils. "The whole pH and low maintenance aspects are where it has advantages over bermudagrass or the cool season grasses," Morris says.

Brian Schwartz, Ph.D., is a zoysiagrass and bermudagrass breeder at the University of Georgia. "Zoysia has a stronger leaf ... it doesn't wear a path as easily. It's a lower fertility input grass. So, from a benefit for the end user, they'll spend less on management and it maintains density. That's very important to an athletic field, that it maintains density with less input. If you fertilize bermudagrass with the same level of N, it would be alive but not as dense. I could see it working. That's why I think it would be a positive. There's better color retention into the fall. In the fall it doesn't change to the dormant color without a real freeze. Bermudagrass starts turning dormant, not only with cooler temps but with shorter day lengths. So, a lot of the zoysias need a freeze to turn them dor-

mant. Some of them will be growing and recovering from a traffic event in the fall when there's football. So, that's a positive," Schwartz says.

"On the negative side, once the leaf in the canopy does get worn, it will have a harder time recovering as fast as bermudagrass," Schwartz says.

He says that he'd like to see more research on zoysiagrass for sports turf use. "I would love to see a football or soccer field grassed with 50 yards in zoysia and 50 yards in bermudagrass. That would be the coolest thing in the world for me. It would receive the same amount of wear and we would see which one would hold up. That's never going to happen, but it would answer 90% of our questions on one or two fields," Schwartz says.

"I just think there's a yearlong benefit of having zoysiagrass on a sports field like baseball or softball, where you're not worrying about wearing it out. For lower

yearlong nitrogen rates, and less yearlong watering, you can keep the density so high and uniform with less inputs. Especially on a municipal level where you may ignore a field for a period of time, zoysiagrass could be ignored and you could get it back very quickly. At the lower input level, it could be very successful and beneficial for folks who can't keep up with the mowing rates and nitrogen rates that a high end bermudagrass would need," Schwartz says. "Add in some shade issues with stadiums, you have a fit for zoysiagrass for a lower requirement for light. Zeon would make a beautiful fit for stadiums because of shade." ■

Stacie Zinn Roberts is an award-winning writer and president of What's Your Avocado?, a writing and marketing firm based in Mount Vernon, WA



WANT TO REACH QUALIFIED BUYERS?

- TARGETED LEADS
- SUPERIOR PENETRATION
- PROVEN VALUE
- OUTSTANDING RESULTS

Then rent our list of targeted, qualified readers for your next direct mail promotion.

Call today for more information regarding our product lines and extensive database marketing programs.



Cheryl Naughton

cnaughton@specialtyim.com

678-292-6054 Fax: 360-294-6054