

ISOTOPES PARK,

Albuquerque, New Mexico



- **Category of Submission:** Professional Baseball
- **Sports Turf Manager:** Casey Griffin
- **Title:** Director of Field Operations
- **Education:** Oregon State University Bachelors of Science degree in Horticulture with emphasis in Turf Management
- **Experience:** My knowledge of the turf industry continues to expand. With a great enjoyment for the outdoors, my interest in turf began in 2003. I have built upon my experience by continually working in all aspects of turf maintenance. I worked a 3-month internship for the Eugene Emeralds and later wrote my thesis based on that experience. While attending OSU, I worked on their athletic grounds, primarily focusing on their baseball, softball and soccer facilities. Immediately after graduating in 2008, I came to Albuquerque and have worked my way from graduate intern to management to now director. Through these experiences, I have learned new maintenance practices and observed different management styles that have helped shape me into the professional leader I am today.
- **Full-time staff:** Gil South
- **Other staff:** Davin Sandia (intern), C.J. Gershon (intern), Guy Feltman, Jeremy Lachman, Michael Gonzales, Robert Gonzales, Thomas Nelson, Travis Stanhope, Jeremy Sandia, Quinn Padilla, Kirk Allen, Braadley Vallez, Cody Hathaway & volunteer James Keefner.
- **Original construction:** 2003
- **Turfgrass variety:** Four Variety Kentucky Bluegrass Blend- 25% Bewitched 25% Prosperity 25% P-105 25% Moonlight SLT
- **Drainage:** Herringbone
- **Renovation in 2012:** A complete re-sod of the field was preformed, as well as changing the existing grade of a ½% crown on the infield to a flat grade. The outfield was not “re-graded” although it was herigated and worked many directions. In addition, portions of the irrigation

system were redesigned. Along with the removal of the game mound, approximately 2” (140 ton) of infield mix material was removed from the existing dirt playing surface.

Since being built in 2003, the bluegrass varieties began to colonize and *Poa annua* had taken over approximately 50-60% of the grass surface, which resulted in a weakening root system and undesirable aesthetics. This rectified poor playability and player safety that could no longer be overlooked. Due to heavily ramped grass edge to clay surface transitions, it became necessary to remove/drop our infield mix playing surface 2” in order to tie in our new short cut bluegrass sod to a seamless infield skin playing surface. The ½% crown on the infield was eliminated and laser graded to a flat surface to remediate the feeling of the pitchers throwing uphill. Although the rubber sat at 10” above home plate, the crown of the infield and numerous re-sods in front of the mound gave the perception that the rubber was in fact lower than regulation standards.

The sideline irrigation zone was split to allow for flexibility in watering times considering shade and sun issues that varied through the year. For example, in late fall and winter our first base sideline was often frozen over, or overwatered, in order for the 3rd base sideline to receive adequate moisture. An additional zone was also added to the infield irrigation system. Previously, there were four Hunter I 40 heads, one on each side of the infield, which resulted in poor distribution uniformity, excess overlap, and frequent puddling on skinned areas due to high spray volume. To remediate this issue, I replaced the four I-40's with four I-20's and added three I-20's to the new zone. This allowed for excellent distribution of water, while eliminating all overlap and puddling issues on skinned areas. Although the I-20's were more susceptible to drift, the amount of time spent hand watering the infield on windy days was minimal in comparison to time spent constantly repairing puddled up skin areas.



WHY STMA SHOULD CONSIDER YOUR FIELD A WINNER?

There were a multitude of challenges we faced, and a series of triumphs we achieved this year. One of the many challenges was that of the field renovation. Renovations are clearly difficult regardless, but having the responsibility of overseeing a \$250,000 project within the first month as Director was an extremely intense and rewarding opportunity. Additional projects we took on were the re-structuring of the bullpen mounds and home plate area, foul line re-surfacing, and instituting a knowledgeable approach for Poa management.

Paramount to the success of a nearly flawless field during the extreme spring and summer in New Mexico is the attentive care and hard work that was put in over the fall and winter. Example of this was our 9-11" root depth coming into the season. Weather posed un-predictable challenges as well. After enduring a college season that began in February in 25 degree weather, suffering through one of the worst droughts in history (3.37" total precipitation, April-August) we were dealt a monsoon season which at one point, delivered 89 mph winds and 41 % of our seasons rainfall in a 45-minute period, during a game. Through a schedule of roughly 100 game/on field events, we maintained a level of excellence that resulted in a Pacific Coast League Presidential Commendation award.

As sports turf managers, we all deal with constant challenges; however in this particular year with this particular set of circum-

stances I feel that our crew and our field performed at an extraordinary level. My staff went above and beyond the requirement for success as a sports turf management crew and our relentless dedication was exemplified by consistent playability, predictable performance of our playing surface, player safety and an aesthetically beautiful ballpark.

Moisture management is the key to the success of our field. In Albuquerque, this has to do with the combination of wind, heat, and lack of precipitation. To maximize the effectiveness of our watering program, the use of wetting agents/pellets is vital. When hand watering turf areas, Aqua-Aid, a wetting agent pellet is attached to our 1" hose. We also use bagged clay and occasionally clay bricks as a backfill to high traffic area edges in order to help maintain the integrity of that edge.

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

Griffin: Our preferred channel of communication is direct conversation; occasionally I will speak with our coaching staff via phone to keep one another informed as to mutual needs and wants. Generally speaking, we are talking with them (coaches/manager) daily. We have weekly meetings with our entire front office staff to ensure the lines of communications always remain open. Whenever we schedule outside events to take place on the field or at the stadium, we discuss specific guidelines pertaining to facility use in person and always present any restrictions up front to avoid confusion. It also allows us to prioritize field care as well as be flexible with what is required of us if necessary.

Tips on communicating well: early and often. Regular communication is mandatory to avoid potential surprises that could set you back. Pick and choose your battles, you have to remain flexible and keep the bigger picture in mind. Having a discussion about why you are reluctant to have something happen on your field might help you understand why it's necessary and allow you to adjust accordingly. It also helps the other party understand where you are coming from and how their event might adversely affect your field.

ST: What are your specific responsibilities?

Griffin: As Director of Field Operations I effectively oversee the playing surface at Isotopes Park. Included in that, are managing a staff of roughly 20 people during approximately 100 on field events (games, concerts, weddings, fundraisers, campouts, clinics, high school & college games and any other special events). The development and execution of a specified nutritional program for the grass based on annual soil and tissue testing that ensures a safe, consistent and aesthetically pleasing look, while taking into consideration an efficient and conservative moisture management program. Additionally, managing the care of our landscape, equipment maintenance and detailed recordkeeping of field maintenance, equipment, budget, and employees.

ST: How did you get your start in turf management? What was your first job?

Griffin: As a native of Oregon, I grew up around farms that ranged from blueberries to corn to Christmas trees. But what first drew my interest were all the grass seed farms. After competing in baseball, and working on golf courses, turf management became a keen interest. Once

deciding to attend Oregon State and study the science behind turf grass, the writing was on the wall and there was no looking back, sports turf was it! While at school, I attained my first sport turf "job" and completed an internship with the Eugene Emeralds (short season San Diego Padres). This opportunity gave me great insight on how get a lot done with very little. It was a kick start to where I am now.

ST: What practices do you use to keep your infield skin in peak condition?

Griffin: I rely heavily on consistent cultural practices and developing the right combination of conditioners pertaining to the different type of seasons we have here in Albuquerque. Being that this is a high altitude desert, moisture management is extremely challenging. We have very low humidity index, little cloud cover, high temperatures and extreme winds. Spring time (March-May) brings on any given day, winds that gust from 20-50 mph. July-September is our monsoon season where we can get ½" -2" of rain in the matter of a minutes. Regardless of season, we want our infield skin to play consistent and to do that we must be consistent. During home stands, every morning we work our skin with a nail drag for a couple of hours, allowing our infield mix to tighten up. We strive for about 80-20 ratio with vitrified to calcined clay in the spring. The vitrified really hugs to our clay and allows us to retain our moisture through the winds, while the calcined clay helps reduce our compaction and gives us good protection by not penetrating our infield mix. In the summer (July-September) our rain season has arrived and we use more of a 50-50 ratio. A lot of this is preventative but by increasing our calcined clay content, we are helping absorb any potential rain that may come through. Both products work well together.

ST: What changes if any are you considering or implementing for the winning field in 2014?

Griffin: As far as changing anything for 2014, our goal is to continually strive to be the best we can be as a crew. You can never pay too much attention to the little things. No one has ever said that edge is too crisp or that line is too straight. Nutritionally speaking, we are in a constant state of research, growing and learning from knowledge shared through colleagues, reps and industry publications. Each year brings unique challenges and we just have to be prepared to adapt. That's the fun part of being in the turf industry.

ST: How do you see the Sports Turf Manager's job changing in the future?

Griffin: As the industry continues to grow and develop I would like to see corresponding employment opportunities become readily available for those who are qualified. I see the standard set for sports turf applicants being raised considerably. There are always the newest and greatest products being developed, but by no means do we need to reinvent the wheel. As much as new techniques are always being implemented, the turf manager position will always rely on the ability to get out on your grass and understand what it needs. ■

STMA would like to thank Carolina Green, Ewing, Hunter Industries and World Class Athletic Surfaces for their continued support of the Field of the Year Awards Program.