

Q&A WITH MURRAY COOK ON MLB IN AUSTRALIA

Editor's note: SportsTurf caught up with global traveler Murray Cook, president of the Sports Turf Services Division of the Brickman Group, former president of the Sports Turf Managers Association, and the international face of field preparation for Major League Baseball, to ask questions about his experience preparing the cricket grounds in Australia for MLB's Opening Day series last March.

▼ **Tom Nicholson**,
Director of MLB's
Oceania office, left,
with Murray Cook.

SportsTurf: What is your relationship with MLB?

Cook: I've worked for the Commissioner's office in varying roles over the past 25+ years managing Opening Day games and numerous MLB events around the world. Over the past 12 years, the consultation and project management services have been provided through our Brickman Sportsturf team, which is a division of Brickman.

ST: What other projects have you worked on for MLB?

Cook: MLB has played games internationally for many years and we typically oversee the entire field of play operations for those games. In addition we assist with new ballpark evaluations and educational clinics related to field and ballpark maintenance. Field safety is a major issue with MLB and the MLBPA.



We have managed MLB games in numerous countries; when the Montreal Expos (now Washington Nationals) played parts of two seasons in Puerto Rico I wore a couple hats, Head Groundskeeper/Stadium Ops at Hiram Bithorn Stadium. We continue to manage this venue's MLB events including the past World Baseball Classic in 2013 and New York Mets series in 2011. MLB also receives requests from international federations to use professional players to compete in international tournaments. Some of those events have been the Olympics and Olympic qualifying games, Baseball World Cups, IBAF tournaments and the World Baseball Classic. Since players' contracts are owned by MLB clubs, we are responsible for evaluating and managing field of play operations in each of these countries before and during the tournament.

ST: How far in advance of the games in Australia did you begin planning on the work that had to be done?

Cook: Planning for the MLB opener in Sydney actually began about 16 months ago. The Sydney Cricket Grounds (SCG) has a storied past rich in history that goes back to the mid 1850's. It is the holy grail of cricket in Australia. Due to our past experience in working with the folks in Australia on projects like the Sydney 2000 Olympics and the Australian baseball league, we had a pretty good idea what it would take to build a baseball field there. However, constructing a Major League level field at the SCG we knew would be a challenge. Back in 1993 we did play an MLB exhibition series at the Oval in London so understanding a cricket pitch a bit was a huge plus. The challenge of this project was more than just constructing a field; we had to create a ballpark. That meant fencing, padding, backstop, batters eye, bullpens, batting tunnel, locker rooms, dugouts, foul poles, etc. And just to add a twist, we had to get it all completed in 16 days.

ST: Share with us what exactly you had to do with the field in Australia and include any especially interesting details or problems that you had to overcome.

Cook: It's amazing what great things we can do when no one worries about who gets the credit. The recognition for the success of this historical event belongs to a huge team effort. The vision for bringing the game to Australia belongs to Jason Moore (Promoter) and Tom Nicholson, MLB's Director of Oceania Operations. The core players in the project management were Tom Parker, the head curator, and project manager Scott Egelton. These guys were just remarkable. From this group we had to assemble the right team of contractors and vendors. Evergreen, better known as Dad & Dave's turf farm, was selected to perform the transition. Graeme, Mark and Chappo not only had to execute the transition but after baseball was through they had to flip it back to NRL rugby in a week. Back in February 2013, we found that the slope of the pitch on the northern end where the infield would be placed would not allow us to construct a level infield; therefore a proper mound would have been difficult to install. In the fall of 2013 the SCG engaged Evergreen to level the area and re-sod before the Ashes took place in January. The Ashes event is comparable to MLB's All Star series. It's a



▲ Laying out field and first harvest of sod from warning track area.

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match that pits England vs. Australia, which has been going on for more than a century. Other key players in the development of the games include Piers Morgan, Jamie Barkley and Michael Bangle, representing SCG Trust. They supported the event throughout the process which helped Tom, Scott and I to create something very special. It's great when the front office has your back.

Some of the items we needed for the project became difficult to find and or create in Australia. One key item to the field was locating the infield clay and mound clays. We worked closely with Andy McNitt's lab in the testing of soils to try and find a mix locally and after numerous tests and blending samples we were at a point of needing to order the clay from the USA. We gave Gail Materials a call and they helped out with a clay shipment that was transported in 11 containers (220 1-ton sacks). We also needed padding for the fence structure. We engaged Bob and Ken Curry of Covermaster to develop the pads and they had Greg Meeks from Turbo Link come over and handle the installation. We found a great terra cotta mix locally for the warning track.

The local turf, better known as cooch grass, is a hybrid bermuda-type turfgrass. We visited Evergreen's sod farm to see the



◀ **October 2013 renovation** of leveling area where infield would be placed.

"ready-play" sod several times. We had to use the ready-play in front of the dugouts and it was amazing. During cricket season it is mowed at 10 mil and we needed to raise the cut to 23 mm. Since the cricket season didn't end until February 27 we couldn't start until the 28th. The wear on the wicket was extensive and we knew this would be a challenge but in the end it looked pretty good.

Once the construction was completed we had to switch to maintenance mode. Early in the winter we engaged Jim Myrland from Beacon Athletics to assist us with the backstop design and also field maintenance equipment, BP equipment and various materials.

Tom Parker's staff of 12 became our core maintenance staff during the games. Their experience in managing the wicket clays was similar to our infield and mound clays; a few of Tom's guys did not know a great deal about the game of baseball but were eager to learn. Again, they were just awesome. The tarp crew was a group of volunteers, 40 guys in two shifts. These guys were life savers when it came to going above and beyond the call of duty. They were at the park for 16 hours a day taking time off from work and family just to be a part of this historical event. It was really special getting to know some of these guys who were members of local baseball club leagues around Australia.

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On Opening Night a large group of thunderstorms began to develop to the west of the ballpark and move our way. It had not rained in several days so obviously Opening Night was selected by Mother Nature. The storms shortened batting practice and the pregame show, but we were able to get the game started only a few minutes late. When rain threatened we had to cover two areas, the wicket and the infield. The wicket is constructed of materials very similar to the pitcher's mound. It's a heavy clay product with just enough organics to grow natural grass. The wicket cover was 100 x 100 feet and ours was 170 x 170. Because they overlapped at second base when they were rolled out, orchestrating the tarp pull was a bit of fun. What we knew is that if the wicket was left uncovered during a moderate storm we would be in danger of canceling the game because we could not amend the soil to dry it out with any conditioners or it would ruin the wicket clays that had been played on for 150 years.

ST: What other groundskeepers were instrumental in the Australian experience?

Cook: Our Sydney Sportsturf team was created several months ago but had to change due to a last minute added an event in Panama. The Yankees played two games against the Marlins at Rod Carew Stadium and that caused us reach out and find a few more guys since the two events were happening almost at the same time. In Sydney

we brought over Chad Olsen and Eric Ogden from our Brickman Sportsturf team and added Darrell Lemmer and Chad Kropff, both of whom have helped us on many other international events. In Panama we sent Brad Detmore from our team and added Joe Skrabek and Dennis Klein.

ST: What did you learn from the Australian experience that you can take to your next project?

Cook: With any major project we always learn so much and see so many different ways to perform tasks. This event was so special because it was the first time MLB had played a game in the country, the first season opener in the Southern Hemisphere, and the first MLB field to be constructed on a cricket pitch. By far, the best part of the project was working with the Australians. Everyone had the "glass half full" attitude even during times that were a bit worrisome for us Americans. We set the bar pretty high and in many cases due to our team efforts exceeded the expectations of the ballclubs and fans. I have met Team Australia's coaching staff on numerous occasions. They were so excited to finally see a field constructed in the country of this caliber. Before the event we had a couple exhibition games with the Australian National team. During their team batting practice they allowed some of their family members to take BP and catch balls on the outfield. Australia Team Manager Jon Deeble



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Photo by Murray Cook.

said, "This may be the only time some of these players and their families may ever play or see a field this nice in our country so we are having an Aussie baseball family BP."

ST: What is your next project?

Cook: Well there are several potential events in the works but I really can't share that info however we know that MLB international and the Commissioner's office are devoted to growing the game worldwide. Next year we will start the World Baseball Classic qualifier venue evaluations. The Toronto Pan American games will take place next year and this is playing on a couple new fields. This year we will have a series in Canada and Dominican Republic. We do several sets of field maintenance clinics each year. My heart has always been to give back and I truly enjoy sharing what I have learned and more importantly learning from others at these clinics. It's an exciting time for baseball with a great potential to get back in the 2020 Olympics in Japan. ■



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