

THE STEWARD SCHOOL BASEBALL FIELD

Richmond, VA

■ **Category of Submission:** Schools/Parks Baseball
■ **Sports Turf Manager:** Mark Roberts
■ **Title:** Athletic Turf and Field Manager
■ **Education:** Bachelors Degree in Agriculture from Ferrum College
■ **Experience:** 1998-01: Luck Stone Fielder's Choice Infield Mix; 2002-06: Turf Products (Sports Turf only) Herod Seeds; 2006-09: Innovative Turf

Applications and Consulting (ITAC) — athletic fields maintenance and building; 2010-Present: Turf Manager of 11 acres of athletic fields at The Steward School.

■ **Full-time staff:** Roberts is only full-timer
■ **Part-time staff:** The varsity baseball team, head baseball coach Bruce Secrest, and assistant to the athletic director Garrett Compton.
■ **Original construction:** 2010

■ **Rootzone:** Native soil
■ **Turfgrass variety:** Patriot Bermudagrass
■ **Overseed:** I overseed with a three-way blend of perennial ryegrass called Field General Maxx from Landscape Supply Inc., and it is applied twice during the fall. The first application in mid-September at a rate of 250 lbs/acre; the second application is in late October at a rate of 200lbs/acre.
■ **Drainage:** No drainage system

WHY STMA SHOULD CONSIDER YOUR FIELD A WINNER?

From 2000 until 2010, I worked in sports turf sales and then as a sports turf contractor, covering the majority of the state of Virginia, viewing baseball fields from the Division I college level to parks & recreation fields. With the exception of Division I fields, most fields had a recurring theme. The small details, such as lips building in the grass, edging, and holes in the batters boxes and catching area were being missed; even in fields that were at the higher high school division levels, I found that the small every day details were being neglected.

When I joined The Steward School in 2010 as the athletic turf and field manager and we built the new baseball field, I focused on teaching and instilling the "art" of turf management to the varsity baseball team. I have focused on helping them become aware of the "little details" that make such a huge impact on the outcome of successful turf management. Thus, emphasizing the pride in dedication and "ownership" of their field and why we do what we do. I am al-



ways humbled by and have such a feeling of pride in not only myself, but those players who truly have come to understand the concept of what we do, in their comments on the consistency and play-ability of our field compared to others that they have played on. With our team playing high level travel ball,

they are on a lot of fields across many different states. Players compare our fields to Division I schools, like the University of Virginia and the University of South Carolina. Not to mention, the alumni who are now collegiate players return from college and comment that our field is nicer than most fields at their level of play. In conversation with Billy Wagner, head coach of the Miller School and former MLB player), he commented, "If you want a true playing surface, nicely groomed, major league-style park, Steward is the place."

In addition to working with players at practice, we have a program in which sophomores and juniors participate in a 1-week internship. For the past 2 years, I have had the opportunity to have one of the baseball players intern with me. This allows me to teach, discuss, and enlighten them to all of the aspects involved in the field of sports turf management and hopefully instill that desire in them. At the end of the week, I receive the same response: "There's a lot more to this than just mowing the grass." Yes, there most definitely is.



Equipment list

- Sand Pro with nail drag, mat drag, and drum roller
- Toro 5500-D Reelmaster for mowing
- Toro Greens Master 1600 for infield mowing
- Toro 3200 Workman for moving tarps and tools
- WonderEdger for field edging
- Northern Industrial tamper for mound and bullpens
- Toro MultiPro 5500 Sprayer for spraying ryegrass
- Kubota L2500 Tractor with a Lely 3pt. hitch spreader
- Prize lawn BF #300 Series Walk Behind spreader for spreading seed.
- Toro Edger

Why should our field win Field of the Year? Other than the fact that we have been truly blessed with a beautiful facility and a true playing surface, I have been given the opportunity to teach the art of grounds keeping to students who otherwise would not be exposed to all of the aspects involved in the profession, thus helping to ensure the future of the "art" of sports turf management.

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

Roberts: I make my rounds every morning visiting with the director of athletics as well as all of the coaches that are in season. If there is an issue with a field, face to face is the best way to communicate that. I find email messages are sometimes misinterpreted or misunderstood. I feel that face to face takes that out of the equation, leaving little chance for error. I believe that an important part of being a good turf manager is having open communication and developing good relationships with your coaches. Email has its place and works well for outside user groups, but I still try to make time to speak with those contacts face to face, or at least by phone. I usually reserve email as a back-up for closed field notifications. I guess I am just "old school!"

ST: What are your specific responsibilities? What is your favorite task? Least favorite?

Roberts: My title is Athletic Field and Turf Manager. I manage and maintain 11 acres of bermudagrass, which consists of three rectangular fields and a baseball field. I have full responsibility for all of these fields, both agronomically and their playability. Our athletic facilities manager, Garrett Compton, and I work very closely on the rectangles. Garrett does most of the painting of the fields as well as game setup. I help with this when time allows. On the flip side, I do everything on the baseball field, and Garrett helps me when his time allows. In both spring and fall, we can have anywhere from two to five games a day. With only two of us, things can be a bit crazy at times. I could not do this without him! We also have a great administration team in our director of athletics and our coaches. They trust my judgment and adhere to my call of closing a field due to the weather and playability issues.

I find game days most enjoyable, especially baseball in late April when the ryegrass is striping nicely. It is quite a thrill to see op-

posing teams that visit our facilities for the first time. We are blessed with a very nice field, and some of the teams are more than impressed by what we have.

My least favorite task is a tie between canceling games and edging. I hate to cancel games due to bad weather that we experienced prior to game day, not at game time. I pride myself on getting games in when other teams have to cancel. (Did I mention we do not have an infield tarp?) Edging is very time consuming and a lot of work for a one-man crew, but the results are great, so it's worth it.

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

Roberts: I received a General Agriculture degree in college and was working for a local co-op when Luck Stone, a Virginia-based, crushed stone producer, created a topsoil division. I was brought on as their salesman for this division. It didn't take long before we were mixing high quality infield mix, which is what brought me to the sports turf industry in the late 90s. From there, I went on to work as a salesman for a turf products supplier. The best part of that job was that I continued to work with the same athletic directors and coaches that I already knew. In 2006, Rodney Hopkins, (a friend and a customer) started up a company, ITAC (Innovative Turf Applications and Consulting). I was asked to join him to perform sales and hands-on turf maintenance, making ITAC my first true sports turf position. In 2010, I moved on to The Steward School. It's been a learning experience to get here, and I am very appreciative of those who mentored me along the way.

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

Roberts: The biggest challenge for the skinned area is getting the teams on the field in early February. In Virginia we can have freezing and frost until early April, as well as rain and snow. I spend a lot of my time drying dirt. I use a lot of Turface and a 500-pound roller. I add two tons of Turface (I like the Heritage Red) to the top of my skin in late January or early February and nail drag it into the top half inch. I continue to add Turface as needed throughout the season. I also roll the infield at least once a day in early season. I always keep the infield tight; it helps hard rains to sheet off and gets us back on the field sooner. I also add 20 tons of infield mix and have my skin laser graded every August. After a particularly tough weather

season, especially like the one we had in the spring of 2014, it really helps get things back in shape.

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

Roberts: The Lord blessed our baseball program this past year. Along with Field of the Year, our baseball team won the state championship for our division. With that, our baseball parents and sports boosters (The Spartan Club) are providing us with a new logo-covered windscreen that will enclose the field and add to the overall aesthetics. I am also painting our school logo behind home plate and plan to do more for the upcoming season. I am field testing a new high clay infield mix for Luck Stone. It has only been down for a week at this point, but I am very excited about what I have seen so far. I constantly strive to add new things and tweak old ones. I do not ever want to become complacent.

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

Roberts: I feel we need to be advocates for our industry. It is our responsibility to let anyone who will listen know what we do and how technical and challenging a job it truly is. Educating the public should be ongoing. We need to stay on the cutting edge and not be afraid to try new techniques. I hosted the VSTMA Field Day in June and had fraze mowing demos done in the outfield. It was great for the industry to see. I have been monitoring it all summer and tweeting pictures. I can't wait to do the entire field next summer. I also feel we need to implement as many green practices as possible. We live in a time when everyone is more environmentally conscious, so staying on the front end of that is good for our industry.

I would also like to add that no one wins one of these awards alone. I would like to thank my wife, Sherry, and my sons, Wyatt and Jack, for understanding why Dad is at the ball field so much. I would also like to thank Bruce Secrest, Steward's head baseball coach and my friend. I could not keep this field this nice without him and his team's help and cooperation. I am a truly blessed man to be able to do what I love every day! ■

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