



From the Sidelines

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Finally made it

As long-time readers of this space might recall, I am a Penn State grad. In the late 1970's, Beaver Stadium on the east end of campus wasn't much more than a really, really big set of bleachers with (not enough) bathrooms underneath. Fast forward to last month when the Keystone Athletic Field Managers Organization set up a chance to walk the turf at Beaver Stadium as part of Penn State's Field Days. I finally stepped foot on the hallowed field, more than 35 years after I'd first seen it.

Herb Combs, CSFM, athletic field supervisor at Penn State, addressed the tour, starting with some history of maintaining the Kentucky bluegrass turf, which for many years was the prized darling of local turfgrass legend Bob Hudzik. Combs is in his 9th year at Penn State, the last 4 of which he's been in charge following Hudzik's retirement. He is responsible for more than 200 acres of grounds and fields at the University Park campus, employs seven full-time crew members, including the luxury of one full-time mechanic. There are 19 other student workers, of which 75% are normally PSU turfgrass students, who work on 20 acres of quality turfgrass, 60 acres of intramural fields, and seven synthetic surfaces.

He said only the softball field on campus was built to modern standards of athletic field construction; the current field in Beaver Stadium was built in 1960 with a gravel blanket under 18 inches of native soil, with only a steep crown for drainage. As he put it, "no fancy heating system, no fancy growing medium, no fancy drainage system." Combs said that legendary coach Joe Paterno wouldn't allow any changes to modernize the field during his long tenure at the helm, though an irrigation system was added in 2006 to replace water wheels. The field has only been re-sodded four times in the past 35 years (the end zones were resodded this year).

Combs said his is a constant learning curve regarding learning what the various coaches he

deals with want. "We keep our heads down and do we what do," he advised. "You can say 'no' three times but coaches usually eventually spin things to their advantage."

Combs credited Hudzik as being ahead of his time when many years ago he devised a "drill and fill" program in which the crew used a hand auger, yard by yard, to pull the native soil and backfill with sand to improve drainage. Combs also said the current popularity of fraze mowing, removing the top ¼ to ½ inch layer of a field to remove problematic materials, was a process begun by Hudzik in the 1980's to incorporate sand into Beaver Stadium's soil profile. With no verticutter on hand, Hudzik instead used a Jacobsen overseeder after removing the seeding equipment, leaving just the knives to disrupt the turf before putting down the sand topdressing.

The turf is mowed at 1 inch and receives 5 or 6 pounds of nitrogen a year and now features four Toro soil sensors to check moisture levels. Combs does test the Gmax hardness levels regularly to add to the more than 30 years of records that Hudzik kept on all issues relating to the field's maintenance.

Andy McNitt, PhD, the turfgrass science program coordinator, professor of soil science, and director of PSU's Center for Sports Surface Research, was on the tour and recommended to attendees that to fight layering in the rootzone, "You have to beat it up with deep verticutting and hollow tining aeration; beating it up allows the roots to grow through those layers."

McNitt and Combs also discussed watering fields, and both emphasized that stressing your grass a bit is a good thing. "You want it stemy and gnarly going into the season," McNitt said. "A bit of drought stress is okay; then you load it up again with water and let it go awhile again." ■

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