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Hard Working Mark Light Stadium Earns 1996-97

In addition to Mark Light Stadium, responsibility for the University of Miami's other conference-related athletic facilities falls on this hardy crew: (left to right) Emory Lawrence, Jose Gutierrez, Kevin Hardy and Bay Snow. Photos courtesy: J.C. Ridley.

College Diamond of the Year

By Bob Tracinski

Perfectly manicured skinned areas and emerald green fields are a magnet for baseball players. Tops in the college ranks is the baseball field at Mark Light Stadium, located on the University of Miami campus in Coral Gables, Florida. Its near-perfect condition has earned it the 1996-1997 Beam Clay College Baseball Diamond of the Year Award.

Key to this honor is Head Groundskeeper Kevin C. Hardy, who has devoted 17 years to the university's athletic facilities.

Hardy says, "The field was renovated from artificial turf to natural grass in 1993. We planned a field that would be the envy of college baseball, an irrigated, sand-based field with a gravity-flow, underground drainage system to avoid rainouts and get the most use possible for the heavy scheduling demands.

"The artificial turf surface and asphalt base were torn out and the underlying soil removed to a 12-inch depth. A gravity-flow drainage system was cut into this base. Perforated pipe was placed in trenches filled with smooth, small river rock.

"Water flows through the system to collectors positioned out of play along the first and third base lines. These

large reservoirs have closed tops and holes in the sides to serve as combination holding/septic tanks. Any solids are retained to break down naturally, but overflow water can be released into the surrounding ground."

Hardy notes that, with water always an issue in Florida, the drainage system was designed to the specifications of the South Florida Water Management Division. Under normal conditions there are no limits on water-use amounts, but there are limitations on watering times for general irrigation. Water can be used as needed to water-in fertilizers or pesticides and for the daily infield preparations.

Hardy continues, "Once the drainage system was in place, the entire field surface was coated with a two-inch layer of smaller particle river rock. Then the irrigation system was installed, and a 10-inch layer of straight sand was added to bring the field back up to ground level."

The field was then laser graded and sand-based Tifway 419 bermudagrass sod was installed.

Hardy notes, "There was a muck layer on the sod which made it more difficult to get rooting established. We needed frequent aerification to get through the layer problem and establish a good, solid root system."

Later problems appeared with the

sod as well. Hardy says, "By the time the sod went down, it had already gone through a cold period up north. The bermudagrass was overseeded with perennial ryegrass, and though the turf color was a bit uneven, we attributed it to the transition. When the bermudagrass greened up the next spring, we noted even more difference in color across the field, and the 'patches' spread a bit during the season. It became obvious that the Tifway 419 was being overtaken by a more aggressive rogue version of 419."

"After fighting the invading grass with little success, we've decided to replace the sod this summer. Our supplier, who has worked with us through all this, will supply the sod. We'll tear out the old sod and transplant it elsewhere on campus. Then we'll fumigate the field to eliminate any traces of the rogue grass, laser grade and install the 'true' 419 sod."

It will be tough to work this in because there's no off season for the baseball field. Professional team players coming to Florida for spring training camps have found this facility great and use it as much as they can for pre-training workouts on their own. Hardy says, "With the top level players that pop in to work out here, there are times we could field a competitive team to challenge the majors."

continued on page 15



Housing artificial turf until 1993, Mark Light Stadium survives incessant use thanks to proper design and constant maintenance.

continued from page 12

The university's own two-a-day spring training sessions begin the first week of January. Following two weeks of spring training, the Miami Hurricanes begin daily practice, which lasts until the season ends in June. Then comes a five-day, six-team tournament consisting of three games per day. At the season's end, there's a two-week break, at which time Hardy is able to aerify, verticut and topdress. Nine weeks of summer camp follow the two-week break with 150 children covering the field for eight hours a day, five days a week. One week after the summer camp, fall workouts begin. Hardy says, "It's a continuous cycle."

The field is aerified and the cores dragged in right after Thanksgiving. Then, during the first week of December, just after the students leave for Christmas break, the turf is verticut and vacuumed. The bermudagrass is scalped and overseeded with a perennial ryegrass blend. This is covered with a light topdressing of straight sand and an application of fertilizer.

Hardy says, "During all this, the field gets a two-week break. The whole process is timed so the ryegrasses are up before the Christmas camps begin. It works out well. In November, it's too hot here for the perennial ryegrasses. Temperatures fall off in December and stay cool until the end of March warm-up. The perennial ryegrass starts dying out in May, with approximately 80 percent of the field back to straight bermudagrass by the end of May."

Winter is the most hectic season for Hardy and his three-person crew because they handle all the university's conference-related athletic facilities. (Intramural fields are handled by a different crew.) Besides Mark Light Stadium, there are three football practice fields, for seven acres of bermudagrass, and the 70-yard artificial turf field, the track area, tennis stadium, basketball gym and the athletic administration grounds.

The university is currently trying to find the space for a soccer field. The campus is nestled in the middle of the community and essentially land-locked. The school is considering an area where the ROTC building formerly stood. This space is being considered as a band practice site as well, so if the field were built there, soccer would



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have to share use-time with the band.

Football extends into December. In January, Hardy's crew renovates the field for spring practice, which is only four weeks away. Track-and-field runs from January through May. The crew also sets up the gymnasium for women's basketball and handles the post-game reset. Hardy says, "The only sport we're not involved in is swimming."

With the sand-based field, Hardy follows an aggressive, balanced fertilization program adjusted to meet needs identified through soil testing two to four times a year. He says, "Our granular blends are applied every three weeks. In between, we spray on liquid nitrogen and minor nutrients as needed to spoon feed the turf. As time goes by and the turf builds natural humus in the sand, we're able to retain nutrients a little longer.

"The field is mowed every other day. Aerification is performed at least four times a year — more often in the high wear areas. Verticutting and removal of the clippings take place twice a year, followed by a light topdressing.

"Worn sod areas are replaced as

needed with sod from our 'sod farm' located behind the center field fence."

A "normal" day begins at 7 a.m. with the crew's first hour spent policing the ground. Football and baseball practice start at 1:30 p.m. The football field is mowed for the alternating five-yard striping effect with painting added every five to seven days.

Hardy says, "The baseball playing field is used six days a week during the regular season for either games or practices. We're in-use approximately 130 of the first 151 days of the year. We average 44 home games, plus 12 tournament games of the University of Miami; 10 high school games, plus six high school tournament games; and 70 practices. From 95 to 98 percent of our baseball games are played at night, which means at least three crew members are on-site until midnight or



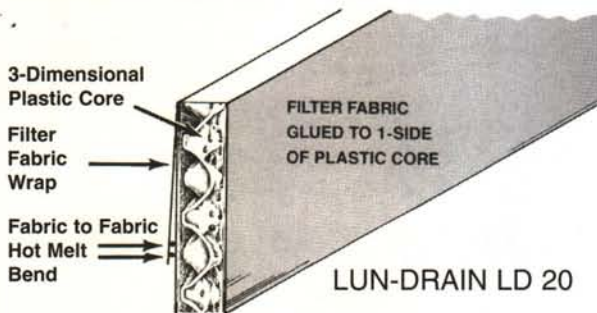
Emory Lawrence mows the stadium's 419 bermudagrass, a practice performed every other day.

later."

Because Hardy's goal is to have the playing field in top condition for every event that takes place on it, baseball field preparations are exactly the same for practices and games. Hardy says, "The skinned areas of the infield are nail dragged and groomed daily and are resurfaced and leveled twice annually. The baselines and edges are broomed after each practice or game. These areas are pressure-hosed on days the field is not being used. The

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screens and tarps are placed prior to practice. Following practice, the field is prepped again for the game. Then there's the typical sixth-inning skinned area touchup. The pitchers mound, bullpens and homeplate are packed daily after use."

While the football field gets enough to-the-bare-ground wear to need pre-emergence controls, the few weeds that pop up on the baseball field are pulled by hand. Disease problems always are an issue with Florida's hot, humid weather. Hardy follows a preventive spray program with curative applications made according to IPM procedures. Mole crickets also need constant monitoring, though baits and spot treatments generally are effective in keeping them from invading the fields.

Hardy loves his job, maybe because of the challenge. He started out at the university as a walk-on football player, but injuries and coaching changes kept him from that elusive scholarship. Hardy took a full-time position at a youth center to trim away his college

debt. He was drawn back to the university when his roommate, an assistant baseball coach, informed him the groundskeeper position was available.

Hardy grew with the program, constantly studying and seeking opinions and advise from "every sports turf manager I come in contact with. Those at Pro Player Park, the Orange Bowl and spring training sites throughout Florida have always been helpful. Because opinions differ, I do my own testing and find that many times it's the effort, not the products themselves, that make the difference."

He says, "It's great to be able to do what you love and get paid for it. Besides that, I have a terrific crew. They're totally dedicated, pay close attention to detail and won't settle for 'good enough.' They've devoted a lot of time to this field. Emory Lawrence has been here nine years, Bay Snow five years, and Jose Gutierrez four years."

Hardy has also found help in the STMA, of which he's a member. "The organization is the most useful tool a sports turf manager could have. The

publications and the communication with other professionals throughout the industry are invaluable. The local chapter seminars and field days are essential for continued education in this profession."

Hardy credits his home support team as well. He and wife Kim just celebrated their tenth wedding anniversary. He says, "She's been totally supportive and is 'coaching' our sons, Kyle, age seven, and Ryan, age three, to be the same. This support really makes a difference, especially with all the long hours involved."

Hardy's efforts certainly make a difference. Coaches and teams have expressed their appreciation of his expertise and dedication by presenting him with four football and two baseball championship rings. The Field of the Year Award is yet another confirmation of his successful program.

Bob Tracinski is the manager of public relations for the John Deere Company in Raleigh, N.C., and public relations co-chair for the national Sports Turf Managers Association.

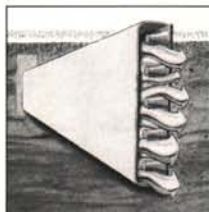
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Peoria Sports Complex's stadium draws capacity crowds during spring training. Photo courtesy: Phoenix Photographic & Associates.

Spring Training in the Valley of the Sun

By Chris Bunnell

The old debate continues: Do contemporary athletes compare to our heroes of the past in their performance? Many say that modern ball players — even though they may be larger, faster and stronger — cannot match up to the likes of Babe Ruth, Hank Aaron or Pete Rose. While that debate rages on, there is little argument about playing surfaces. Almost everyone agrees they have improved — especially spring-training sites.

Free agency has created pressure to provide excellent workout facilities. A team can be more attractive to a player when it has a state-of-the-art spring-training site. Just as the modern athlete now trains year-round, modern baseball training facilities are being used constantly. Arizona is on the cutting edge of spring-training sports facilities, and all are kept up to Major League standards. There is no doubt that the fields and facilities have improved to meet the need of the professional athlete.

Currently seven Major League teams have spring-training sites located in the metro Phoenix area. This "baseball heaven" is all within a 15-



The San Francisco Giants warm up for the season at Scottsdale Stadium. Photo courtesy: Bill Murphy.

mile radius. To the south, the Colorado Rockies are located at Hi-Corbett Field in Tucson. The Arizona Diamondbacks and Chicago White Sox are planning to build Kino Park in Tucson similar to the Peoria Complex described below. All of the Arizona sites have been recently constructed, renovated, or planned for construction within the next year to bring the total of Major League teams to ten.

Anaheim Angels

The Angels' facility in Tempe was improved by HOK Sports Facilities Group when the team moved out of Palm Springs, Calif. The Mariners previously played in this ball-yard. Tempe Diablo Stadium has a beautiful backdrop of Tempe Butte for dramatic effect. There are also two practice fields and a half field on site. The



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Angels also have training fields located in the East Mesa area.

Chicago Cubs

The new 12,500-seat ballpark in HoHoKam Park, built for \$18 million, sits on the site where the Cubs have played since 1977. The playing field will remain the Dwight W. Patterson Field. The Cubs have been in Mesa since 1952. The newly constructed

state-of-the-art stadium is absolutely beautiful! The full field and a half field are located on site. Fitch Park houses additional training facilities and was renovated the same time the stadium was constructed.

Milwaukee Brewers

The current facility at Chandler was constructed by one of the STMA's founding fathers, Harry Gill. The club



HoHoKam Park in Mesa was completed this year for the Chicago Cubs. Photo courtesy: City of Mesa.

will be moving to a new site in 1998. The city of Phoenix will build a new stadium with 4 1/2 practice fields in West Phoenix.

Oakland Athletics

The A's built Papago Park Baseball Facility for spring training in 1995. The team plays in Phoenix Municipal Stadium and trains in this complex just down the road. This complex has four playing fields and two half fields. There are six "shooting gallery" bullpens with four mounds in a row. There are five indoor batting cages with mounds and four outdoor cages.

San Diego Padres and Seattle Mariners

This is the largest baseball training facility in the Major Leagues and is the prototype for many future sites. The Peoria Sports Complex, in the Phoenix suburb of Peoria, was constructed in December of 1993 for the spring of '94. This is an extensive facility for spring training with 12 full fields, two half fields and the stadium playing field. There are 105 mounds, including the five in the stadium.

San Francisco Giants

Built in 1992, Scottsdale Stadium was the leader in moving spring training to a more sophisticated state. The stadium was designed by the HOK Sports Facilities Group. The Indian School Park training facility houses the minor league players down the road. This site has four full fields and one half field.

Chris Bunnell is grounds supervisor at Escondido School District in Escondido, Calif. He serves as president of the Southern California Chapter of STMA and teaches a class, Golf Course/Sports Turf Management, at MiraCosta College in Oceanside.

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