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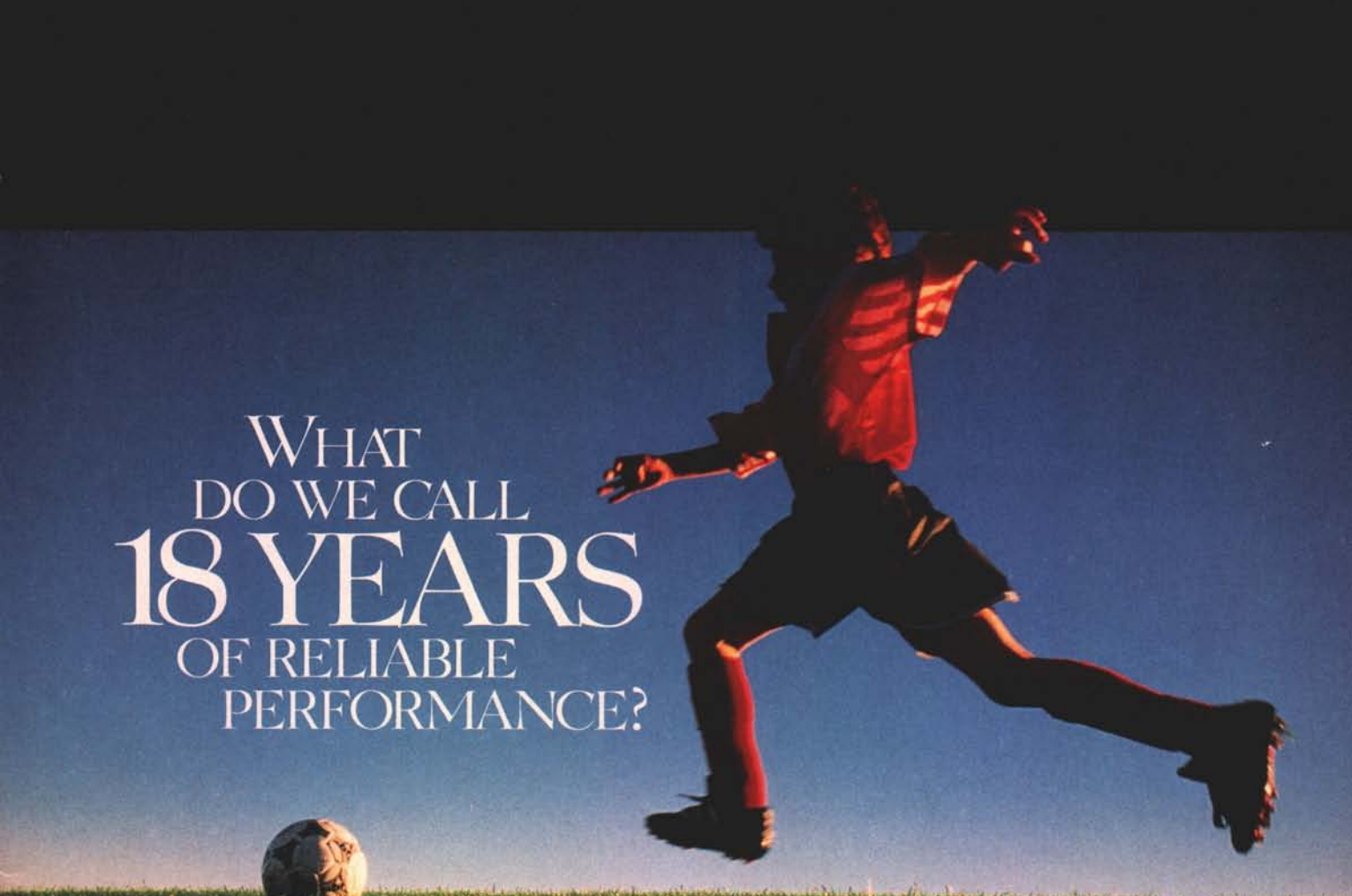
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VOLUME 14, NUMBER 4

APRIL 1998

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Steve Horne's award winning field at Hoover Metropolitan Stadium. Courtesy: Steve Horne



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## The El Niño Factor

**E**l Niño has had a tremendous impact on the work load of many sports turf managers. While weather conditions always influence this industry, an extended period of storms, excesses, and unpredictable temperatures has put management skills to the test.

El Niño brought the southern section of the U.S. weeks of clouds and more rain than we could handle; athletic fields ranged from wet to saturated. In the north, ice smothered some fields; snow piled high on others. The country's mid-section rode a roller coaster of changing weather; a blast of winter was followed by a few spring-like days, and then winter returned with another deep freeze.

Many sports turf managers spent the majority of the winter months moving snow, clearing mud, or finding innovative methods to remove excess water. Winter kill attacked both newly established turfgrasses and well established fields. Trees and shrubs broke under the weight of snow and ice or snapped in blasting winds, and required extensive trimming and removal.

Early season field renovation projects and normal spring maintenance could only be done in spurts, or were delayed or simply postponed. Planned new construction faced frustrating delays.

Games were scheduled, rescheduled, and rescheduled again. Skinned area material of baseball and softball fields washed into the turf, and some fields were better suited for hockey play than spring soccer.

Fields that withstood the winter faced the spring stress of heavy wear, as games were shifted to any playable surface. The ski events canceled in Nagano were nothing compared to the cancellations of spring ball and parks and recreation games in the U.S.

But as with all storms in life, El Niño also brought out the best in many of us. Yes, there were complainers. Some were overwhelmed and fell hopelessly behind. But more often, this was a time of sharpening management skills and rallying forces, of increased commitment and dedication throughout the staff, and of good humor and camaraderie despite ever-extending work hours. In some cases, El Niño even channeled attention and funding to repairs for long-term field problems.

Sports turf managers whose facilities escaped heavy damage offered to share their resources with those hardest hit. Often help came as suggestions and advice freely given, simple sharing of information from people who had been there, done that, and could help solve a problem.

Suppliers made emergency shipments, brought in needed materials in their own vehicles, or arranged for loaner equipment to help finish jobs during short breaks in the weather. Help came in the form of equipment sharing between sports turf managers, or in offers of field time to fit in important games. In some cases, a coalition of local sports turf managers brought their crews and equipment to a damaged community field and pitched in to bring it back to playable condition.

To all of you who weathered the storms with flying colors, and to all of you who lent a helping hand, thank you. Once again you came through as true professionals.

*Stephen Guise has recently accepted the position of director of business development for Marina Landscape, Inc. of Anaheim, Calif.*

**Stephen Guise, STMA President**

## TIP O' THE MONTH

### Wet Weather Blues

**W**ith the rains and floods El Niño has brought to some parts of the country, homeowners and professional turf managers alike are faced with the task of repairing flooded turf areas.

To improve recovery of flooded turf, immediately remove deposited debris, silt and sand after the water recedes. A combination of shovels, rakes and water hoses works best for this job. Consider regular raking to keep any remaining crust broken up throughout the season.

If the grass is not green after the water recedes and does not "green-up" with adjacent non-flooded areas, consider vigorous aeration followed by reseeding this spring. Action should be taken as soon as possible.

Other wet weather tips:

- **Mowing:** Avoid scalping tall grass by setting the mower up a notch or two, and try to mow when the turf is dry. Mow more frequently than usual, and gradually lower the height-of-cut back to the original setting.

- **Red Thread:** Red thread is very active in wet weather. It appears as small purplish-blue and eventually tan colored spots, and is characterized by a distinctive red colored "thread" growing from the tips of infected leaves. If you have not fertilized in a month or two, an application of slow-release fertilizer at a rate of 0.75 to 1.0 lb. N per 1000 sq.ft. should help control the disease. □

*The above tip comes from Zac Reicher, assistant professor/turfgrass extension specialist for the Turfgrass Science Program at Purdue University. His tips can be found on the program's web site: <http://www.agry.purdue.edu>.*

*If you have a tip you'd like to share, send it to sportsTURF 2101 S. Arlington Heights Rd., Arlington Heights, IL 60005, or send an e-mail message to [sberens@aip.com](mailto:sberens@aip.com).*



#### May 18-19

University of California-Davis Extension course: "Sports Turfgrass Management for Professionals," Alameda, Calif. Phone: (800) 752-0881 or (530) 757-8899.

#### June 3-6

The 48th annual International Design Conference in Aspen (IDCA), Aspen, Colo. Theme: "It's not about sports - it's about design." Contact IDCA: (970) 925-2257.

#### June 15-16

The Environmental Horticulture Integrated Pest Management Conference, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, Calif. Contact Bob Rice: (805) 756-2830.

#### July 16-18

Turfgrass Producers International Summer Convention & Field Days, Sheraton Hotel, Tysons Corner, Va. Contact TPI: (800) 405-8873; or Tom Ford: (847) 705-9898.

#### July 25-27

International Lawn, Garden & Power Equipment Expo, Kentucky Expo Center, Louisville, Ky. Phone: (800) 558-8767 or (502) 562-1962.

## CORRECTION

In last month's STMA Message, Kent Kurtz's name appears as Ken Kurtz due to an editorial oversight. I apologize to Mr. Kurtz, and to Stephen Guise for the error. Also, the March Front Office names Iowa City as the crash site of U.A. flight 232. The disaster and subsequent rescue effort occurred in Sioux City, Iowa. Again, I apologize for the mistake.



## More Mischief to Come

**G**rowing up in the Midwest, I had never even heard of El Niño before this year when the media flooded the airwaves with information on the phenomenon. To me, it appeared to be the invention of some upstart meteorologist who was looking for a convenient explanation for every weather anomaly we were experiencing.

Of course, readers on the West Coast should be quite familiar with El Niño already. As I have discovered, it affects the world's weather patterns every two or three years, and throws things completely out of whack every 15 years or so. It creates droughts in some areas of the world, and causes heavier than normal rains in others.

The Center for Ocean-Atmospheric Prediction Studies (COAPS) describes El Niño as the periodic warming of waters in the Pacific Ocean: "The phenomenon known as El Niño has been observed as early as the 1600's off the coast of Peru. At varying intervals, anomalistically warm waters off the Peruvian coast appeared around Christmas and were dubbed El Niño for the Christ child."

COAPS recalls the last major El Niño event, which occurred in 1982-83. It was dubbed "Mother of All Los Niños," and its storms wreaked havoc on the West Coast. But that system pales in comparison to the El Niño that continues to dominate the weather reports this year.

Adam Glenn of ABCNEWS.com is calling this year's El Niño "the worst this century." There may not be much relief in sight either; the phenomenon is expected to continue to exert a strong influence on weather patterns throughout the spring.

According to Alexander Higgins of the Associated Press, when the phenomenon does dissipate, conditions generally return to normal. But there is a possibility that a reverse pattern can form. "La Niña," a pool of colder-than-normal water in the Pacific can form in its place. It completely reverses the pattern of extreme weather, and brings heavy rains to areas that were dry and drought to areas that were soaked with rain.

Weather forecasters may be excited by new tools that allow them to predict and describe the El Niño phenomenon, but we are still going to get hit just as hard by the intense storm systems it creates. The best defense a sports turf manager can have is a good humor about the whole thing, and a quick response to any disaster nature throws our way.

Incidentally, we finally did get a taste of the "Child's" mischief here in the Midwest last month. El Niño pounded Chicago with a snowstorm that I won't soon forget.

**Steve Berens, Editor**

## Hoover Metropolitan Stadium: Home of the Birmingham Barons

*Beam Clay awards a history maker*

by Bob Tracinski

The Birmingham Barons' Hoover Metropolitan Stadium made awards history when it was named the STMA/sportsTURF / Beam Clay 1997 Professional Baseball Diamond of the Year. For the first time, the same head groundskeeper has been honored twice for his work at two different facilities and at two different levels of baseball.

Steve Horne, the Barons' director of field operations during the award-winning 1997 season, was head groundskeeper/stadium manager at the University of Mississippi when Swayze Field was selected College Baseball Diamond of the Year in 1992. Horne had already accepted his current position as director of field operations for the AAA Memphis Redbirds when he submitted the entry for Hoover Stadium "on behalf of the Barons Ball Club and the wonderful people of Birmingham." Mike Zullo, Horne's assistant in 1997, has since been named the new head groundskeeper for the Barons.

That's not all. At the end of the 1997 season, Horne and Zullo were recognized by the Southern League, Major League Baseball and the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues with the Groundskeeper of the Year Award.

These are the newest honors for a long-standing team. The Barons' tradition dates back to 1885. The team won

the first of its 12 Southern League titles in 1906.

Birmingham millionaire industrialist A. H. (Rick) Woodward bought the team in 1910. He moved it to the first concrete and steel ballpark in the minor leagues: the 12.7-acre Rickwood Field. It served as the Barons' home field until 1987.

The City of Hoover built Hoover Metropolitan Stadium in 1987.

petitions, and church festivals. The Southeastern Conference Baseball Tournament came to the Met in 1990 and 1996, and will return for a four-year stint in 1998.

"Millions viewed the Met on TV when basketball's Michael Jordan joined the Barons for the 1994 season," says Horne. "Home field attendance ballooned to 467,867, and Dave Elmore's Elmore Sports Group bought the Barons the following year. In 1996 the team started its second decade of affiliation with the Chicago White Sox."

These events led to a major field renovation in 1996. Management chose Southern Turf Nurseries to be the prime contractor. They stripped the sod, completely removed the infield and foul territory materials, and re-graded the subsurface.

The Champion Sub Surface system designed by Southern Turf Nurseries includes an underground network of perforated piping covered by geotextile fabric. They covered a 12-inch layer of sand with a light layer of

peat, and tilled to create a profile that delivers maximum percolation rates. The new Rain Bird underground irrigation system can be programmed manually or with an automatic timer.

Horne joined the Barons right after the old grass had been removed. He says, "We replaced the entire infield skinned surface with a mixture of clay



The Birmingham Barons make good use of their award winning field at Hoover Metropolitan Stadium. Courtesy: Steve Horne

Gresham, Smith and Partners of Birmingham developed the design in conjunction with HOK of Kansas City.

According to Horne, "The Barons serve as the Met's facility managers and primary tenants. The Met also hosts Hoover High School football and youth baseball games, auto and boat shows, concerts, high school band com-

# FOCUS

soil, white sand and Pro's Choice Soilmaster to provide the right combination of drainage and texture.

"We also completely reworked and rebuilt all of the pitcher's mounds. They are maintained with a combination of Beam Clay Mound Mix, Pro's Choice Pro Mound, and a top layer of Soilmaster.

"We replaced the original white slag rock in the warning track that circles the field with a material from Crimson Stone. The new sod was Tifway bermudagrass overseeded with the Medalist Gold blend of perennial ryegrass cultivars at a rate of 10 lbs. per 1000 sq.ft."

An already-narrow window of opportunity set aside to accommodate these renovations was shortened by an early winter. Also, the high school football team's playoff games extended its season and took more time away from the project.

Despite these limitations all went well, and the field was in great shape when the work was completed. Unfortunately, the winter of 1996 was a real killer. It wiped out bermudagrass in much of the South, including the new sod that had been installed at the Met.

With the baseball season underway and the perennial ryegrass phasing out, quick replacement with a thick-cut, sand-based sod offered the only logical solution. Horne says, "With the help of the dedicated efforts of my assistant at that time, Pat White, and of the crews of the City of Hoover and Southern Turf Nurseries, and with more than a few prayers, we replaced over 45,000 square feet of sod during the team's eight-day road trip. When they returned, the field was again in great shape."

Mike Zullo came on board in the early part of 1997. Before joining the Barons, Zullo had gained football field experience at Ole Miss. He had also spent a year handling multiple fields of every type as athletic fields supervisor at Itawamba Community College. He had worked with Horne when they were student managers at Ole Miss, and then again as full-time employees there. They shared the same drive for perfection.



**Pictured from left to right: Barons President & GM Bill Hardekopf, Head Groundskeeper Steve Horne, Asst. Groundskeeper Mike Zullo, and Vice President Tony Ensor. Courtesy: Hoover Metropolitan Stadium**

1997 was an easier year. With a "normal" winter and no major field renovations on the schedule, Horne aimed for an award-winning field. He says, "All the basics were now in place, so we concentrated on fine-tuning the overall program and polishing the details. It's a big goal for a two-person crew, and we couldn't have accomplished it without the equipment provided the Barons by Tieco Equipment of Birmingham. Ransomes and Tieco deserve a huge thanks for all their help."

With the multiple uses of the Met's field, there's always the conversion factor. The mound is torn down, and all skinned areas are covered with sod to prepare for football in the fall. Then it's back to baseball before winter closes.

But Horne relishes a challenge - his eventful 1996 proves that. During that one year period, he made the move to Birmingham, tackled the field renovation and sod replacement - and got

married. Fortunately, his wife Iris is both supportive and understanding.

Juggling multiple priorities is part of sports turf management; keeping the focus is essential. Horne says, "Player safety has always been my top priority for the field. Players understand and appreciate things the fans never see - like turf that allows the ball to make a clean roll to the glove, or a skinned surface with a soft top layer so they can lay out for a base and a firm under layer so they can run flat out.

"You can't be set in your ways in this type of work. I'm always open to learning better ways to do things. But my philosophy is simple: I give 100 percent every day and expect my crew to do the same."

Awards, like ball games, are won by consistent performance. Zullo says, "Aiming for the Beam Clay Award helps motivate you to dig a little deeper, to do that little bit extra for both safety and aesthetics that puts your





Horne maintains his award winning field, even with its seasonal conversions. Each year, the mound is torn down, and all skinned areas are covered with sod to prepare for football in the fall. *Courtesy: Hoover Metropolitan Stadium*

field over the top. Once you see your field at that level, that becomes the motivation to keep it there."

Horne adds, "It all comes down to the basics. Always leave the field a lit-

tle better than when you walked on it that morning." □

*Bob Tracinski is manager of public relations for the John Deere Company in Raleigh, N.C., and public relations co-chair for the national STMA.*

*The Beam Clay Baseball Diamond of the Year Awards are sponsored by the Sports Turf Managers Association, sportsTURF Magazine, and Beam Clay. They recognize excellence in maintaining safe and professional quality diamonds. Winning baseball diamonds are selected in three categories: professional, college, and schools/municipalities/parks.*

*This is the 12th year the Beam Clay Baseball Diamond of the Year Awards have been presented. Each year, four major league groundskeepers serve as judges. This year's judges were: Tom Farrell of the Toronto Blue Jays (AL-East), Barney Lopus of the Anaheim Angels (AL-West), Ralph Frangipani of*



Horne submitted Hoover Stadium for consideration of the Beam Clay Award "on behalf of the Barons Ball Club and the wonderful people of Birmingham." *Courtesy: Steve Horne*

*the Philadelphia Phillies (NL-East), and Eric Hansen of the Los Angeles Dodgers (NL-West).*

*continued on pg. 13*

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