



Labatt Park: Baseball North of the Border

Baseball is generally not the first game that springs to mind when you think of sports in Canada. It's true that Canada does have two professional major league baseball teams, the Montreal Expos and the Toronto Blue Jays, and the hometown fans of those teams are as devoted as any. But hockey is the game that the country embraces above all others. Thousands of hockey rinks dot the towns, cities, and provinces of our northern neighbor. Children there often start playing hockey before they can lace their own skates.

But in London, Ontario, an industrial city located 60 miles north, and across Lake Erie, from Cleveland, OH, baseball's popularity rivals that found in any city in the United States. London, with a population of approximately 300,000, has 450 teams in its Slo Pitch softball league alone, and various baseball leagues are open to players of all ages.

In the winter, 325 teams in London brave snow and sub-freezing temperatures to play "Snow Ball." A large, highly visible orange ball is used for the game, and rules are the same as those of Slo Pitch softball.

The field that hosts all these games is Labatt Park, winner of the 1989 Beam Clay Diamond of the Year Award in the Professional Division. Not coincidentally, 1989 was the same year that the AA affiliate of the Detroit Tigers, appropriately named the London Tigers, began calling this Canadian city home.

Field quality is what attracted the Tiger organization to Labatt Park, and the man charged with maintaining this outstanding, 112-year-old diamond is superintendent Mike Regan. He has cared for and nurtured the diamond since 1982.

Labatt Park was constructed in 1878, on "the forks" of the Thames River. The diamond's outfield is close enough to the river's edge for home run balls to land in the water.

The field was owned and operated by Labatt Canada Breweries until 1936, at which time it was donated along with \$10,000 to the City of London. The donation was put to use in 1937 when the Thames overflowed its levy and wiped out the Labatt Park main grandstand.

Regan, 32, is a native of London. Like most boys in the London area, he grew up

playing hockey and baseball, and he developed a love for both games, as well as an interest in their respective playing surfaces.

As a teenager attending Wheable Secondary School, Regan worked part-time helping to maintain hockey rinks. After graduating from Wheable, he earned his refrigeration license, a requirement in Canada for persons in charge of hockey rink maintenance. He worked for the City of London for several years, maintaining hockey rinks in the winter and swimming pools in the summer. When the position for a superintendent opened up at Labatt Park in 1982, Regan applied and was given the job.

"I didn't have any education in turfgrass management," he said. "But I had always been interested in the profession."

Regan realized immediately that fascination alone would not enable him to maintain Labatt Park, and he read every article on turfgrass management he could find. An article in *Sports Illustrated* on George Toma was particularly inspirational to him.

In 1985, after "making all the mistakes there were to make," Regan felt that he and

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Labatt Park were on the right course. But he wanted to supplement his hands-on learning with academic study. He enrolled in an independent study course in turfgrass management at Guelph University. "It's a correspondence course," he explained. "You have to be really disciplined to study this way. Most of my studying is done in the winter. I have a few years left to go, but I have accomplished the basic credits for the turfgrass management program."

His knowledge and experience were put to the test in the spring of 1988, when pythium blight attacked the field. At first, Regan didn't know exactly what he was up against. "We're unfamiliar with pythium in this area, because we've never had it before," he explained.

"Our pythium problem started near the visitors' dugout. At first, pythium looks similar to dollar spot and fusarium. They must have brought it in on their shoes. I think the hot, humid summers we've had over the past few years have also contributed to the problem," he said.

Although Regan had never encountered a pythium attack before, he suspected that he was about to. He contacted the superintendent of a local golf course, and the superintendent agreed. "A day later, my field was totally white," Regan said. "That's why pythium is also known as 'cottony' blight."

"Nobody up here stocked the chemicals we needed to treat it, but I managed to round some up. I used Terraneb, a chloroneb, to treat it. Now we plan for it. Last year it showed up in June. This year it didn't show up until August," he stated.

Planning and preventative maintenance have played a major role in Regan's success at Labatt. He keeps scrupulous records of his pesticide, fungicide, and herbicide applications, as well as his maintenance procedures. "It's difficult to remember everything you did to a field from year to year," he explained. "That's why I keep records."

His treatment of European chafer grubs with Dursban is a perfect case in point. A common pest in the London area, the insect attacks the plant's root system. Symptoms appear similar to those of drought. "After the grubs are established, you can pull the turf out of the ground like a toupee off someone's head."

Regan continued, "I attribute our chafer grub problem to our lights and our location, right on the river. In the evening, when you turn on the lights for a game, you attract the adult specimens from around the river. As soon as you turn off the lights, they head for the ground. Fortunately, they have an annual life cycle, so it's easy, by keeping accurate records, to treat them in a preventative fashion. I always know when to expect them, and I know when I last sprayed for them."

To fully understand the importance of planning to Regan's field maintenance



Pitcher's mound at Labatt Park is groomed, watered, and covered between games and practices.

procedures, one need only look at his high-use turf program for 1988-1989. During its six-month playing season, Labatt Park hosts approximately 165 assorted baseball games. "We never have any 'windows' in the baseball schedule," Regan commented. "That's one of the toughest parts of maintaining this field."

In July 1988, the Tigers decided to base their AA affiliate in London. Their season was scheduled to begin in the spring of 1989. The park itself needed renovations, including new light poles and bleachers, which increased the seating capacity from 2,000 to 5,500. The renovation projects, which began in the fall and were mostly completed in the spring, had to be finished before April 6, 1989. The Tigers' home opener was scheduled for that day.

The diamond, which had attracted the Tigers to London in the first place, could not be neglected while the changes to the park were being made. Bob Neska, director of recreation for the City of London who is responsible for the city's recreational areas and their budgets, directed much of the renovation to the park itself, Regan kept the field in top shape.

Regan, his supervisor, Jim Blaxall, and Neska work closely together. "Mike goes to Jim when he needs something, and then they come to me," said Neska. "My hat's off to Mike. To his credit, he's built the field up over the past number of years, and it is exceptional."

Regan is equally complimentary toward Neska. "He's the man who's really helped me the most, especially when I've needed equipment," said Regan. "He spent all his time here during renovations. When I needed someone to make a decision, he was there."

The fertilizing program for Labatt Park in 1988-1989 began in November with a dormant application of C.I.L. Fairway 25-4-10, with 50 percent S.C.U. at one pound per 1,000 square feet. Regan applied the same fertilizer in May and June at .75 pound per

1,000 square feet.

On the same day in November that he put down his first fertilizer treatment, Regan applied Scotts Fluid Fungicide 2 with Quin-tozene 9-x-20 kg., for the prevention of snow mold.

Topdressing of the infield and home plate area was performed on September 6, using a 50/50, loam-sand mix at one cubic yard per 1,000 square feet. During the next two days, Regan overseeded with Yorktown II turf type perennial ryegrass, using a Jacobsen Slit Overseeder. He applied the seed, 400 pounds in all, in two directions.

The entire field is mowed to a height of 1.25 inches. The outfield is mowed five times per week, with a Jacobsen Tri-King Triplex with five-blade reels, in two directions to achieve a striping effect. The infield is mowed daily. Regan uses a walk-behind rotary mower, he said, because it reduces the effects of compaction.

Regan's concern about the effects of compaction on the turf and player safety extends beyond using a lightweight mower for infield mowing. "Outside of nutrition and irrigation, I believe that aerification is the most important thing you can do for the turf," he said. "It promotes a good root structure and nutrient uptake, and relieves compaction."

During the 1989 Labatt Park playing season, the field was aerified after every Tiger home stand, which translated to approximately once a month. Both the outfield and the infield were aerified in two directions on each occasion, and the plugs were dragged into the field. Regan used a Ryan Tow Aerifier on the outfield. For the infield, he used a Toro Greens Aerator. When pythium blight appeared, Regan stopped aerification practices until it was under control, to avoid spreading the disease.

The turf is irrigated at a rate of 1.5 inches of water every five days. Irrigation is entirely manual. There are six quick-coupler valves in the outfield, one in the infield, one hand

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valve on the first base side of the infield, and another on the third base side of the infield.

Labatt Park was constructed on an existing flood plain. The infield is sloped at a one percent grade away from home plate, so drainage is not a problem, even during the heavy summer rains. Drainage tiles have also been installed in front of both dugouts.

Regan pays as much attention to the skinned portions of the field as he does to the turf. During the season, he uses Turface and sand to dry damp spots, and in the fall he rototills them into the skinned areas.

He described his daily maintenance procedures for Labatt Park's skinned areas. "First we fill in low or worn areas with a red-brick soil, and we drag the basepaths with a steel drag mat to make them level and smooth. Then we brush the edges of the grass with a stiff bristle broom to remove any infield material that has accumulated there and can cause lips."

Regan continued, "We hand-rake the edges of the infield, and apply water to keep the infield from drying out and becoming hard. If necessary, we water again before batting practice, and we always water the infield and drag it before a game."

The worn areas around the plate and mound areas are also rebuilt, groomed, and swept. Then they are dampened, allowed to dry so that they are still moist but not sticky, and covered until batting practice or game time.

All things being equal, the daily maintenance procedures and overall cultural practices at Labatt Park are enough to keep anyone working 80-hour weeks. But all things were not equal in London during the fall of 1988 and the spring of 1989—the



Harry Gill (center) presents Baseball Diamond of the Year Award to Mike and Beverly Regan.

Tigers were coming. As previously mentioned, renovations had to be completed before April 6. The weather, however, was oblivious to any schedule requirements.

"We needed to re-sod the infield area around home plate, which had been used for Slo Pitch softball," explained Regan. "We had to start the job in the fall, so we scurried around to get the sod and installed it. And it rained all fall."

"In the spring, when the frost started coming out of the ground, the resodded area became a bog—you could sink up to your ankles in it. With all the rain we had in the fall, the root system didn't have a chance to get established before the frost came out," he said.

The entire resodded area had to be completely excavated, using a skid steer loader. The saturated loam was replaced with a sand/topsoil mix. Local sod farms, experiencing the same saturation problems in their own fields, could not use heavy equipment to harvest sod. Regan finally found a grower in the area who would provide him with 1,000 yards of hand-cut sod.

The wet fall of 1988 was responsible for another renovation problem in the spring of

1989. Three weeks before the Tigers season was scheduled to begin, the new light poles arrived. To set these 110-foot concrete poles, which would replace the existing 55-foot poles, an 80-ton crane had to be brought onto the field's warning track. The crane sank three feet into the saturated, rapidly defrosting soil.

"We had to replace the entire warning track," stated Regan. "Once we got that in order, we were ready to go."

Weather in London can be problematic in general. The area receives approximately 36 inches of snow annually. Lake Erie is located approximately 25 miles to the southeast, and Lake Huron is approximately 25 miles to the northwest of the city. The result is an abundance of icy, "lake effects" blizzards in the winter, and tornadoes in the summer.

"We can have the coldest, most raw winters, and then turn around and have the hottest, most humid summers," Regan admitted. "Summer temperatures during the day can get up to 95 degrees, with 95-percent humidity."

"But I've only passed out once on the field," he added.

Regan stays in close touch with the London Weather Office during the season, especially in the summer. "I send them tickets to ball games," he said. "Some days, when it looks like it may rain, I may be on the phone with them every ten minutes. With the Tigers and their schedule, it's very important to avoid rain outs."

To keep the infield dry during the summer months, Regan avoids creating lips on the edges of the turf, which can not only lead to puddling but can produce some rather wild hops from a driven baseball. He also uses a tarp to cover the infield. The few shallow puddles that do collect on the infield he dries using sand and Turface.

"You have to be careful about exactly when you put down the tarp," Regan warned. "That's why I stay in constant touch with the Weather Office. If you put the tarp down when it's sunny in anticipation of rain, you can burn the grass. But you can't wait to put it down until a thunderstorm hits, because by then it's too windy."

After spring training in Lakeland, FL, the London Tigers will begin their season on the road. Their first home game at Labatt Park is scheduled for April 20, which is two weeks later than their first game at the field in 1989. As for Regan, he certainly won't squander the "extra" 14 days he has to prepare the field for Canada's only AA professional affiliate. Labatt Park, the 1989 Beam Clay Diamond of the Year in the Professional Division, will be ready for 1990. "I take a lot of pride in what I do," he said. "And I get a lot of acknowledgement for it."

"The players have nothing but good comments about the field," added Neska. "Getting ready for a professional team was an exciting learning experience for all of us. Everybody involved cooperated to get the job done, and the ballpark is a real part of the city." ☺



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