

1991 Man Of The Year:

Baseball's Murray Cook

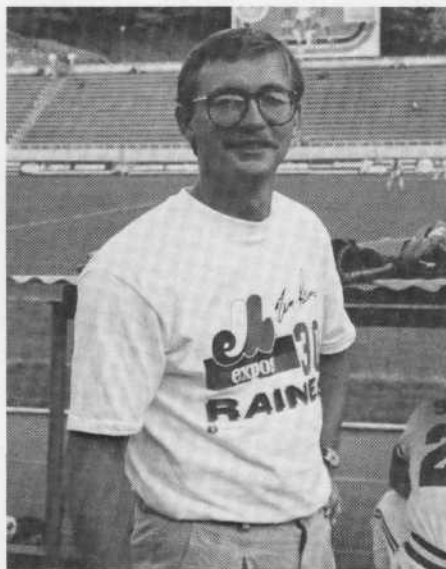
Most teachers address their students from behind a lectern or in front of a blackboard. The 1991 Golf & sportsTURF Man of the Year prefers to deliver his lessons from a pitcher's mound with a rake in hand.

From this position, 31-year-old Murray Cook has had a significant impact on the improvement of minor league baseball and spring training facilities, as well as on relations between the United States and the Soviet Union. That's a tall order for someone so young, but it shows that a new generation of baseball groundskeepers is determined to make its mark in the world of sports.

Since the age of 13, Cook has been studying how to satisfy minor league players and coaches with the condition of the turf and dirt in stadiums. The fact that he was in charge of a professional sports field before he could drive a car in itself reveals some of the problems with consistency and investment in minor league ball. During the next 18 years he made great strides to correct the problem.

Cook has spent most of his career in the minor leagues, either as a groundskeeper, director of operations, or consultant. He is now superintendent of West Palm Beach (FL) Municipal Stadium, spring training site of both the Montreal Expos and the Atlanta Braves.

His ties with the minor leagues remain as strong as ever. In 1989, he traveled with the Eastern League All Stars to three cities in Russia on the first Diamond Diplomacy Tour. This past September he helped organize a seminar for the league in Harrisburg, PA, on baseball stadium operations. It was the first such seminar presented by any professional baseball league to educate general managers, groundskeepers, and



Murray Cook in Dynamo Stadium, Kiev, USSR.

municipal stadium employees regarding field standards.

Cook's success can be attributed to a list of things, beginning with the transition of minor league baseball from a hobby to a business. Timing is a big part of anyone's career. He happened to be involved in baseball at a time when owners began applying basic business principles in order to draw more fans to parks across America. The personable Cook took every opportunity to persuade management that field improvement is a factor in baseball's profitability.

To be persuasive a person has to have confidence, enjoy talking *and* listening to others, be flexible, and make a good impression. On top of that, he needs an excellent memory to capture names, opinions, and other valuable information. What is trivia to some may be vital to others.

You can't preach what you don't practice. Cook had to demonstrate the impact of better field conditions on team perfor-

mance and attendance. He started by learning all he could to deliver what coaches and players wanted. Like other minor league groundskeepers, he worked with limited resources. So Cook came up with ways to pay for needed improvements.

"In single A ball you have to wear more than one hat," Cook reveals. "I used to sell advertising and other promotions in the off-season. Learning the income side of the game was a big help. It put groundskeeping into perspective for me. The more tickets we sold, the better chance I had at getting equipment and supplies for the field."

Cook learned that sales can come into play in many ways. Like other professional groundskeepers, he got calls from high schools, parks, and colleges regarding the condition of their ball fields. He started to market his turf and infield dirt skills to those who desperately needed them. He became an active consultant in the region teaching other groundskeepers how to sell needed improvements to managers of their sports facilities.

While he enjoyed both sales and groundskeeping, Cook discovered that teaching was in his blood. "I had two good teachers around me," Cook explains, "my mother and Morris Creggar, the person who taught me how to be a good groundskeeper as a kid. Both are taskmasters who stress the value of studying and working hard to achieve your goals. They made it fun to learn and demonstrated that it was also fun to teach.

"You have to do your homework," he remarks. "Read everything you can get your hands on. Go to field days and conferences. Call up other groundskeepers and visit their parks when you need answers. Let people know you're excited about your

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job and consider yourself a professional! You have to be a little extroverted and focus on the positive things around you."

As a teenager, Cook started to size up the situation in professional baseball. "Everyone starts at the bottom and has to earn their way up the ladder," he states. "You start in single-A and try to make it to the big leagues. That's true for players, coaches, and managers as well as for groundskeepers."

Cook started with the single-A Salem Pirates of the Carolina League. At the age of 10 he was a bat boy. The following year he was hired to help clean the stands after games. After watching the grounds crew from the seats for two years, he made the switch to the field. When he wasn't working on the diamond, he was shagging balls or throwing batting practice. By the age of 15 he was the head groundskeeper.

He continued to work for the Pirates while he studied horticulture at Virginia Western Community College. In 1980, he decided to pursue a degree in education at North Carolina Wesleyan College in Rocky Mount. He kept his hand in baseball by landing the head groundskeeper's job for the Charlotte O's, a double-A farm team for the Baltimore Orioles in the Southern League. "I didn't have much free time, but I was doing what I liked most," he recalls.

Following graduation, he left baseball to be a social worker for one year. "I stayed in touch with my buddies from the Carolina and Eastern Leagues," Cook notes. "They tipped me off about the Salt Lake Gulls, the Seattle Mariners' new triple-A team in Salt Lake City, UT. It didn't take much to convince me to move to Utah. I missed baseball more than I thought I would."

Unfortunately, the Gulls lasted only three seasons. Cook returned to Salem where he kept busy as a field consultant for the Pittsburgh Pirates and a number of teams in the Eastern and Carolina Leagues.

"The problem in the minors is just about all the stadiums are owned and operated by cities," Cook points out. "They would take care of the stadium fields the same as their other park fields. Nobody had ever taught them how to build mounds, work the basepaths, or rake out lips. They didn't understand the difference between maintaining a professional field and a park

field."

The National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues (NAPBL) employs two inspectors for more than 170 minor league stadiums in the U.S. and Canada, one person for each side of the Mississippi River. Each year they critique all stadiums in their region for the condition of the stands, lighting, concessions, and field. Problems are outlined on a report for the city and team to arrange improvements.

Despite this system of inspection, there are still disputes over who must pay to correct the deficiencies. The team typically



Cook demonstrates mound preparation during Eastern League groundskeeping seminar.

leases the stadium from the city. If the lease does not clearly assign responsibility for improvements, disagreement between the city and the team can result in delays and substandard playing conditions.

Minor league players are paid by the Major League franchise and loaned to minor league farm clubs. Poor playing conditions not only can affect a team's record, they can hamper player development. For this reason, the farm directors of each Major League club want the best possible playing conditions. The fact that field standards were an issue in the latest contract between NAPBL and Major League Baseball indicates that inconsistency of field standards is a problem in professional baseball.

Under the terms of the new contract, a minor league team can have its certification revoked by NAPBL if they don't meet certain standards. That increases the pressure on farm teams to work out field improvement measures with city-owned facilities.

Cook has found himself in the middle of this controversy for the past five years. "I'm lucky to have been working for the Eastern League," he remarks. "There has been a

conscious effort by Charlie Eshbach, president of the Eastern League, and the presidents and owners of the league's teams to upgrade stadium fields. They have been receptive to field renovation and training management and groundskeepers about construction and maintenance."

Eshbach credits Cook with his league's head start in field improvement. "We've talked about better field conditions for years," he states. "Murray provided us with a workable vehicle to carry it out."

Cook, on the other hand, points to the organizational expertise of Scott Carter, president of the Harrisburg Senators in Harrisburg, PA. Cook moved to the Senators, a double-A team in the Pirates' organization, in 1988. "Scott represents an organized, business approach to baseball," Cook claims. "He has assigned a high value to field conditions in relation to the success of professional baseball."

The Senators are benefitting from Carter's "new look" type of management. The former banker discovered the potential of minor league baseball when he researched various types of sports investments for a customer.

"In the early '80s, two things were holding back minor league baseball," Carter states. "Many teams were undermanaged because they were owned by hobbyists instead of businessmen. Secondly, many of the facilities were poor. Meanwhile, cities began to invest in facilities to supplement economic development activity. Some of these cities were in good markets for baseball."

Carter evaluated 90 different minor league operations between 1984 and 1986. The Eastern League was attractive because it was older, more established, and had the lowest travel of all three double-A leagues. It also had two cities with great potential for double-A ball, Springfield, MA, and Harrisburg, PA. Stephen Reed, Harrisburg's mayor, also was anxious to gain a franchise for his city.

One of the teams receptive to Carter's idea was the Pittsburgh Pirates. He took a close look at a number of the Pirates' farm teams, including Salem. "One thing I discovered is Major League teams look for good stadiums when they select farm teams," he adds. "Salem had one of the best. Murray was the groundskeeper at the time. He had the unique ability to work with

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people, solve problems, and get the job done. I was also trying to identify good people. Murray stood out among all the teams I visited."

Another person Carter met during his travels was Jerry Limeur, owner of the Nashua (NH) Senators. "Jerry is one of the world's greatest baseball fans," claims Carter. "But he is also a professor of political science at the University of Massachusetts and his team was not drawing well in Nashua. I showed him my research and we discussed the idea of moving the team to Harrisburg. We ended up striking a deal in 1986."

Harrisburg was in the midst of developing its waterfront on the Susquehanna River. The city built a new baseball stadium on an island in the middle of the river purely on speculation in 1986. Luckily, the Senators fit right into the city's plan.

The new Harrisburg Senators opened with great fanfare in the following April. The playing surface looked fine from the stands and the fans were not upset by a number of fielding errors during the opening homestand. Every team has the jitters early in the season. The fans were still thrilled to have their own professional baseball team.

The players, on the other hand, complained of bad hops. The infield dirt was also too hard and damp. The area between home plate and the mound was wet and slippery. Carter wanted better for the Senators.

In Salem, the Buccaneers were off to one of their best starts in years. Cook had rebuilt the team's diamond the previous year and had it in top condition for the new season.

Carter didn't waste any time. As the Senators packed for their first road trip, he called Cook and asked him to fly to Harrisburg the next day to see if he could bring Riverfront Stadium up to par.

"Scott told me he had four days to do something about the condition of the field," Cook recalls. "He picked me up at the Harrisburg airport and gave me a rundown on the problems on the way to the stadium."

"The city had not used a sports-related consultant in the design of the playing field," cites Carter. "When Murray measured, he found some of the bases were off

by two feet and the mound was wrong. In addition, the field was very bumpy and the infield dirt as hard as most warning tracks."

Cook went right to work resetting the bases and rebuilding the mound and batter's box. Then he aerified the infield heavily, verticut lightly, topdressed with sand, and rolled it smooth. Finally, he scarified the basepaths and instructed the city maintenance crew on how to work the dirt and water it properly.

"The main problem with the field was drainage," explains Cook. "It had a decent



Eastern League President Charles Eshbach delivers pitch on first baseball mound built in the U.S.S.R.

drainage system but it had been installed too deep! Aerifying opened the field up so it could drain better. We went over how to install and remove tarps, how and when to irrigate, and a few mowing techniques. We crammed a lot of information into three days! In general, many of the problems were normal for stadiums maintained by city crews. They need some guidance and training."

Carter hired Cook as a consultant for the '87 season. Every two weeks Cook returned to Harrisburg to check the field. That year, both the Buccaneers and the Senators won their league championships! Furthermore, the Senators drew more than 200,000 fans to the stadium in its first season.

The following winter, Carter convinced Cook to move to Harrisburg and helped him set up a consulting practice within the Senators' organization. During the next season, the two concentrated on ways to improve conditions in professional baseball.

Carter, an experienced banker, wanted documentation to track maintenance, including a maintenance outline, schedule, and check list. He wanted to develop a

clear-cut budget so that he could intelligently negotiate maintenance costs with the city. That year, the club successfully renegotiated its lease with Harrisburg to obtain greater control over playing conditions.

Both energetic and creative, Carter and Cook discussed ways to make the minor leagues more businesslike and professional. Ever since the late '70s, when Cook met Dr. David Chalmers, extension specialist at Virginia Polytechnic Institute in Blacksburg, he had envisioned seminars for baseball groundskeepers. This idea began to take shape in Harrisburg.

"Murray was the first baseball groundskeeper I've dealt with," reveals Chalmers. "He was always pushing to get information and to train himself. He wanted to standardize field care so it could be shared with other groundskeepers. He is a stickler about technique, consistency, and following a maintenance schedule."

Turf was just part of the groundskeeper's responsibility. "I was amazed to hear and see how much detail goes into maintaining the infield dirt," adds Chalmers. "He showed me that groundskeeping is an art as much as a science.

Murray is a strong teacher and very professional."

As Chalmers has discovered, baseball clubs often want one thing and the city has something else in mind. Minor league baseball needed someone to explain the difference, settle on standards, and monitor conditions on a continuing basis. Cook looked for every opportunity to explain the problem to those that could help.

Baseball's management had to give field conditions higher priority so they could negotiate effectively with city officials. It worked in Harrisburg. Cook believed it could work equally as well in all the leagues. He found Carter and Eastern League President Eshbach willing to listen.

However, before Cook could carry out his seminar idea, an opportunity arose that he could not pass up. In 1988, the city of West Palm Beach, FL, and the county agreed to jointly provide \$500,000 a year for the improvement and maintenance of its stadium and spring training center. Municipal Stadium is the only baseball complex serving two Major League teams, the Montreal Expos and the Atlanta Braves. The city was looking for a head groundskeeper to take over the task of renovating seven fields

and building an eighth.

Kevin McHale, former general manager of the Expos, had heard about Cook and his work in Salem from one of his scouts. He called Cook and urged him to contact Bob Burdett, the city's stadium manager regarding the position. "When I went down to Florida to talk with Bob, I thought it was about a consultant type of arrangement," said Cook. "They'd used consultants before and Scott [Carter] encouraged me to take on more consulting work." After meeting with Burdett about the facility and ways to improve things, he decided to apply for the full-time superintendent's position.

"I knew that Murray wouldn't be in Harrisburg for long," said Carter. "But I also knew he'd be there if I needed help again." In fact, many owners were taking notice of the success of Harrisburg and the way it operated. Word spreads quickly in the tightly-knit minor league system.

In the past two years Cook has delivered the standards he set over the years. "We are elated about the condition of the fields," remarks Bobby Cox, manager of the

Braves. "Workouts are much better. Our players are not afraid to take a ground ball now."

"The infield dirt is not as hard since he's



The field at Harrisburg's Riverfront Stadium after being repaired by Cook.

changed the mix," adds Dave Dombrowski, vice president of the Expos. "It was like playing on concrete. The grass too is in much better shape. There aren't so many bad hops on the field now. Players are in a much better frame of mind and are developing better fielding habits."

"I've heard nothing but glowing reports," states Hank Aaron, director of player development of the Braves. "The fields are in better shape this year than ever in the past 14 years." Spike Owen, Expos shortstop, has gained confidence during spring training since Cook took over. "Before, spring training had been tough because of the condition of the fields."

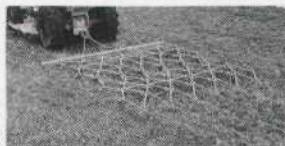
Even though West Palm Beach Stadium is busy year-round, Cook finds the time to provide assistance to others when asked. The Expos also use a four-field complex at a high school in Lantana, FL. Cook has helped upgrade those fields in his spare time. In the past two years he has also helped teams in the Eastern and Carolina Leagues.

His Eastern League contacts have rewarded Cook in a number of ways since he's been at West Palm Beach. In 1989, Harrisburg owner Limeur organized a three-city exposition and tour of the U.S.S.R. for the Eastern League Allstars called the Diamond Diplomacy Tour. It was a good will tour to help introduce baseball to Russia before it be-

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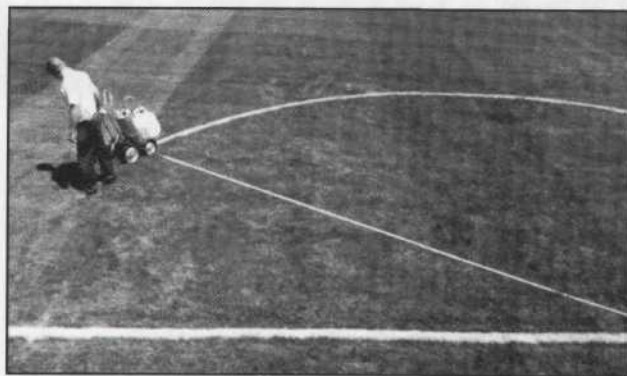
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comes an Olympic sport this decade.

The American delegation included the players, coaches, trainers, team doctor, and a groundskeeper, Cook. A portable mound shipped by Cook to Russia never made it through customs, so Cook received the honor of building the first pitcher's mound in that country. Eastern League President Eshbach made the formal first pitch in the series off Cook's mound.

"The Russians were very interested in details about groundskeeping," reports Cook. "I tried to explain through an interpreter how to set up a baseball field on soccer fields in Moscow, Tallinn, and Kiev. I think they will be a factor in Olympic baseball by the next century."

One of the pleasures of the trip for Cook was getting to know Eshbach and describing his ideas for a groundskeeping seminar for the Eastern League. On the plane ride back to the States, Cook spelled out the format for a mandatory clinic to be held at Riverfront Stadium in Harrisburg. Eshbach expanded the idea to include general managers, municipal stadium personnel, and team groundskeepers. After discussing the

idea with the league owners, Eshbach sought approval from NAPBL President Sal Artiaga. He not only approved the concept, but agreed to participate in the first one in Harrisburg in September 1990.

Cook received the honor of building the first pitcher's mound in Russia.

All eight Eastern League teams were represented in Harrisburg. Chalmers, along with Don Waddington from Penn State, covered turf management for the group. Joe Mooney, groundskeeper of the Boston Red Sox, and Cook demonstrated field maintenance techniques and described how field condition impacts players. Eshbach, Carter, and Chuck Lamar, the Braves director of player/personnel, covered the business aspects of leasing, player

development, and promotions.

"I sincerely hope that the NAPBL will encourage the other leagues to organize this type of training," states Eshbach. "The new contract with the Major Leagues sets a four-year deadline for establishing and maintaining field standards. Holding seminars like the one in Harrisburg is the place to start. I'm proud the Eastern League has led the way."

"Better field conditions present an opportunity for hundreds of groundskeepers," claims Cook. "Major League Expansion is going to increase the importance of the field quality in the farm system. Teams that develop their players at good facilities will have a competitive edge on the field and their farm teams will have a lead at the box office. As a groundskeeper, it makes me feel good that we are finally being recognized as an important part of professional baseball."

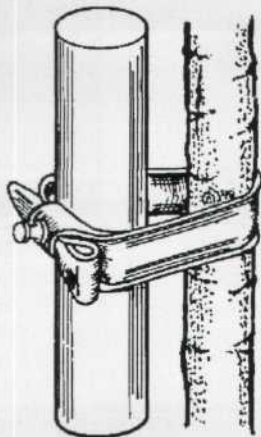
Cook looks forward to many more years of teaching the art of groundskeeping as baseball grows as a professional and Olympic sport. He urges others to join him on the mound with rake in hand. Golf & sportsTURF salutes Murray Cook as its 1991 Man of the Year. ☺

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