


# Diamond Of The Year: Port St. Lucie Channels Talent

By Matthew Trulio



ST. LUCIE COUNTY SPORTS COMPLEX

The St. Lucie County Sports Complex, spring home of the New York Mets, is managed by T.J. White Development Corp. for St. Lucie County.

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The New York Mets tune-up there in the spring. In the summer, their single-A farm club, the St. Lucie Mets, develops young talent on its six-and-a-half high-caliber diamonds. But the success of the baseball fields at the St. Lucie County Sports Complex in Port St. Lucie, FL this year's Professional Diamond of the Year award-winner, stems from a “two-sport” team: a baseball field manager and a certified golf course superintendent.

The key to their success is a combination of focusing their individual abilities, respect, and communication.

“Rick’s golf turf knowledge and input have just been invaluable to me,” says Greg Kaufman, stadium superintendent. “He’s my boss. I tell him what I want to do, and he adds suggestions, and then tells me if we can afford to do it.”

“Greg is our baseball man,” says Rick Wise, CGCS, project manager for St. Lucie West, 4,600-acre Thomas J. White

Development Corporation project that includes the sports complex. "When you have a bright young person, with a good active mind, you just have to listen to him. It's difficult to find people like that."

The sum of the whole, as they say, is greater than its parts.

### **From Appleton To Osceola**

Kaufman got an early hands-on education under Bud Koehke, one of the most knowledgeable people in baseball diamond maintenance. At age 15, Kaufman worked for the Appleton, WI department of parks and recreation. Heading that department was Koehke, now at the Osceola Baseball Complex (last year's Diamond of the Year recipient) in Osceola, FL.

"When I was in high school, I worked on Goodland Field, the same field where I played high school baseball, and a field that the Chicago White Sox farm team used," Kaufman recalls. "Bud taught me everything I know about taking care of baseball diamonds."

Some years later, Koehke left Appleton to manage Tinker Field in Florida. Kaufman stayed with the department for awhile, but eventually left to work for Chemlawn and Leeds Landscaping as an applicator. Baseball, however, remained in his blood.

In June of 1989 he heard that Koehke was heading the baseball complex at Osceola, and he gave his former mentor a call. Koehke offered him a job and Kaufman headed down to Florida. Although he'd never lived in Florida, he had, in a sense, come home.

"I was back in baseball where I wanted to be," he recalls. "I love being close to it."

### **Wise: Setting A Course For Port St. Lucie**

Like Kaufman, Wise has worked on grass since he was young. He has 18 years of experience in golf course maintenance and construction, all in Florida, and is a Lake City Community College graduate in golf course management. In addition, at one time he managed both a private golf course and the practice facil-



Left to right: Greg Kaufman, stadium superintendent, Rick Wise, project manager.

ity for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers of the National Football League. His *forte*, he says, has been managing multi-course operations, coming to St. Lucie West in 1988 from The Meadows Country Club, a 54-hole operation in Sarasota, FL.

"That's why [golf course architect] Jim Fazio brought me here," he says. "Including the St. Lucie West Country Club, there will eventually be five golf courses in St. Lucie West. But when the economy slowed, our construction slowed."

In 1990, Wise got involved with the St. Lucie County Sports Complex, working with the existing staff on implementing turf programs. The Mets organization, he recalls, became "comfortable" with him.

"They thought it wouldn't be a bad idea if I was involved in day-to-day operations of the facility," he says.

With assistance and cooperation of Phil Buck, director of parks and recreation for St. Lucie County, Bob Fromm, vice president of J. Thomas White Development, and Al Harazin, executive director and general manager of the Mets, Wise and his developer employer became responsible for maintaining the facility. The existing crew of county employees was invited to stay on to work as employees of Thomas J. White Development. Most,

Wise says, wary of working for a private developer in unstable economic times, opted to stay with the county.

"I ended up having to hire a new staff," says Wise. "That took a year of traveling to different baseball facilities and meeting with people. I had never managed a baseball facility before. Two of the people I met, Bud Koehke of Osceola and Floyd Perry, director of operations at Boardwalk and Baseball, spent a lot of time with me. They helped me immensely."

Based on Koehke's high recommendation, Wise offered Kaufman an assistant superintendent position in March 1991. They assembled their initial grounds crew, and the contract began a month later.

"The transition was extremely smooth," says Wise. "The existing staff stayed and worked with the new staff for a couple of weeks."

Kaufman, who took over for Budgie Clark, is now superintendent. His talent-laden crew includes Mike Mangano, his assistant superintendent, who previously worked for Essex County, NJ; Joe Skrabak, who worked for the Montreal Expos facility in Lantana, FL; and Brian Brady, who has a substantial golf course maintenance background.

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## St. Lucie County Sports Complex Maintenance Scorecard

**History:** Completed March 5, 1986. Developer was Thomas J. White Development Corp. Approximate total cost was \$12 million.

**Number of Fields:** Six-and-a-half.

**Maintenance Budget:** \$304,000 per year.

**Number of Crew Members:** Seven full-time, three seasonal, golf course mechanics, and golf course spray technicians.

**Turf-Type:** Tifway 419 Bermuda

**Skinned Areas:** Basepaths, warning tracks—Morie Mix from Pebble Junction, 80 percent sand, 20 percent red clay. Mounds (all fields except stadium)—Morie Mix, 80 percent clay, 20 percent sand. Stadium field mound is made of Beam Clay mound mix. All skinned areas (mounds excluded) are scarified prior to each game.

**Usage:** Approximately 200 games and limited concert use.

**Mowing:** Infield and outfield, every day or every other day (depending on season) at 11/16-inch with Jacobsen triplex.

**Irrigation:** Rain Bird controller operating Hunter I-20 and I-40 heads. Summer watering cycles for all fields are 20 to 30 minutes in the morning and evening. Winter watering cycle for all fields is 20 minutes in the morning.

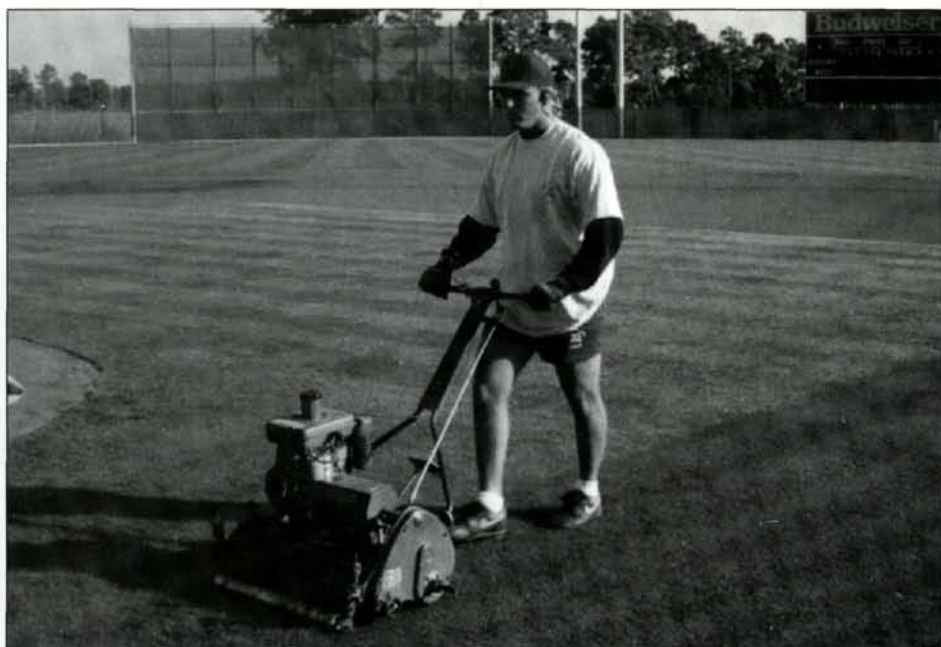
**Overseeding:** In November, with Fiesta II dwarf-type perennial ryegrass, at approximately 10 pounds per 1,000 square feet.

**Fertilization:** Lykes, supplied by Golf Ventures, Inc., 15-5-15 at one pound per 1,000 square feet, every six weeks.

**Insect Control:** Orthene sprayed as needed for Mole Crickets, Army Worm, and Sod Web Worm, nematocidal application for nematodes applied in fall by Nematode Controllers, Inc., Brandon, FL.

**Lighting:** Stadium field only.

**Future Plans:** Mets-Dodgers summer league.



**Brian Brady, mowing the infield with John Deere greens mower. Infields are mowed every other day. On game days they are mowed before every game.**

### Diamond Of The Year

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“Without these guys,” Kaufman insists, “nothing we did would have been possible.”

#### Aiming Higher

The situation Kaufman and his crew inherited was far from disastrous. The fields, one in the stadium, another outside the stadium with an artificial infield surface, another a “bunt and fundamentals” half-field, and the other four in a “clover” arrangement, were in decent shape. However, all of their skinned areas needed improvement.

“In these areas, we had problems with lips, clay, and drainage,” Kaufman explains. “The problem was with the infield mix—it was about 80 percent clay. It was like concrete. Water could stay there for two weeks if you didn’t remove it.”

The superintendent and his crew removed three to four inches of the original infield dirt and then tilled these areas. They replaced the clay with a Morie Mix from a company called Pebble Junction in Alabama. It consists of 80 percent sand and 20 percent red clay, which Kaufman says creates a sharp contrast for the fields’ Tifway 419 bermudagrass.

“I’m still adding to the infield dirt,” he remarks. “So far, I’ve gone through about 200 tons of the mix.

“To take care of the lips, we brought

the clay up to the level of the grass,” he continues. “We edge the fields every two weeks. First, we’ll shoot a string out and edge along it. I also usually spray Roundup along the edges, carefully, because the bermuda will grow right into the clay if I don’t.”

Drainage, says the superintendent, is no longer a problem, but to keep the skinned areas at their best he instituted a rigorous scarification program. Not surprisingly, he learned it from his mentor Koehke.

The scarification routine is completed before each game. Kaufman’s primary tool in the program is a Toro Sand Pro with a sand drag, provided by Hector Turf, Inc., in Deerfield Beach, FL. The drag, he explains, has approximately eight-inch teeth, and used in combination with machine’s hydraulics, can scarify deeply.

He makes two scarification passes. The first is deepest—as deep as three inches—and done in straight lines along the basepaths. The area is then rolled with a one-ton roller and watered.

When the clay is almost dry, the second scarification is made. It is more of a grooming pass.

“I attach a three-by-six-drag behind the Sand Pro and scarify one to two inches deep,” Kaufman reveals. “But I do it in a circular pattern I learned from Bud. What this does is give you a two-inch play-

ing surface, where you can still get a good hop on the ball, but at the same time the players can still plant and throw without losing their footing."

The stadium field mound is built with a Beam Clay mix, which Kaufman explains "is the same kind they have at Shea." On the back fields, however, the superintendent and his crew recently finished rebuilding all the mounds with a Morie mound mix of 80 percent clay.

"We started out with the rubber and the platform," he says. "You have to make the mound 10 inches high. You start with the foundation, and then build the front and back slopes. To get our front slopes, we dropped one inch per foot for six feet. We put the clay down and raked it into shape. You can wet it lightly if you have to, but you don't want to get it too wet.

"After that we tamped the mounds," he continues. "I usually tie a towel onto the tamp or use a tamp mat so it doesn't stick, which is what we did. Then we watered the mounds and let them bake in the sun."

The crew's primary prescription for turf improvement has been a combination of aeration and verticutting. They first aerated the turf in two directions, to a depth of four inches, using a rolling aerator towed behind a Ford tractor. A few days later, they verticut in two directions with a Jacobsen triplex mower using a verticutting attachment. They used a Turf Sweeper to remove the displaced thatch.

"We had a lot of thatch build-up—I don't know if the fields had ever been verticut before," Kaufman says.

Ironically, he notes, the area that is often most difficult to maintain in the entire complex is the artificial infield grass of Field Two.

"That's really hard to maintain," he admits. "The big thing there is to keep the clay level with the artificial surface. We usually run a board over it and the clay at the same time, then bring in the roller. Keeping it clean is another problem. The artificial turf can get mold and mildew around the edges where it comes into contact with the water. We pressure cleaned it last summer, and it took about two weeks. We're trying to get a soil extractor for it now—that should help."

#### Cooperative Coaching

Kaufman and Wise both agree that they balance one another. From Wise, Kaufman has learned more about turf,

personnel and administrative management. Wise, in turn, has learned about the art of preparing baseball fields. "The coaches talk to us and tell us how they want the fields to play," Wise explains. "It's kind of like being the superintendent at a private country club, where the golfers tell you how they want the course to play. Your job is to make it the way they want it."

The result of the unique chemistry between Kaufman and Wise, combined with the efforts of everyone involved,

earned the Professional Diamond of the Year Award for the St. Lucie County Sports Complex.

"So many people think that when they get a job 95 percent done, they're finished," Wise asserts. "It's that last 5 percent that separates the amateurs from the professionals."

Adds Kaufman, "We learn something new about the fields everyday—there's a lot of satisfaction in making something great. Plus, I'm outdoors. You can't beat being outdoors in Florida." □

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