



HIGH SCHOOL DIAMOND OF THE YEAR:

By
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Apache Junction is a small town east of Phoenix, AZ shadowed by the mysterious Superstition Mountains. Deep in those peaks and far back in history, the “Lost Dutchman’s” mine remains, if it exists. The Dutchman’s legend is famous in Arizona; an old Dutch miner claimed to find a vast gold mine, but died before revealing where it was.

Many have gone into the hills seeking this elusive treasure, yet none have found it. But the town of Apache Junction has a treasure of its own—Prospector Field at the Apache Junction High School, Diamond of the Year in the High School/Park Division.

The high school has approximately 900 students. In addition to the award-winning diamond, there are two baseball fields, a softball field, a practice football field and a game football field.

It’s a lot to care for, especially when the athletic grounds department consists of two men, head baseball coach Mark Cisterna and grounds crewman Chad Mulholland, a native of Ohio, who moved to Apache Junction with his family when he was 12. An avid hockey player in his native state, he considered baseball “a past-time in the summer.”

When Mulholland arrived in Arizona, he quickly found that hockey players were not in big demand, so he joined the baseball team. Cisterna, his coach and industrial arts teacher, recalls the young

man enjoyed working on the field.

“His work ethic in school was very good and he had a bunch of pride for the field,” Cisterna says. “When the school wanted to hire a groundskeeper, I had Chad in mind.”

Mulholland was hired in the fall of 1990. “I took a liking to the field,” he says. “I graduated from high school and took a year to go to college. I thought I wanted to be a probation officer. But the field drew me back.”

Mulholland did not finish college. His formal turfgrass education lies in a few seminars, and through watching, learning, and doing.

“It came by trial-and-error,” Mulholland explains. “Mark and I tried different things.”

Cisterna has been caring for the field since he was hired as head baseball coach in 1984. For advice or information, or even to borrow equipment, he turns to Chuck Manning, golf course superintendent at the Gold Canyon Golf Course outside the city.

“The field has been a hobby of mine,” says Cisterna.

When it comes to the field and its care, Mulholland’s philosophy is straightforward: “If something isn’t right, make it right.”

Excellence On A Budget

Although there are six fields to care for, the annual budget Mulholland and Cisterna work with is \$5,000.

“When it comes to money, you have to pace yourself,” says Mulholland.

Apache Junction’s budget doesn’t permit many “high-tech” ventures, but one experiment that did pay off was a soil test done four years ago at the suggestion of Manning. They discovered that the pH balance in the soil was too high. A fertilizer was prescribed to reduce the pH in the soil and for the past three years, the school has had a set fertilizer program. Pure-Gro granular fertilizer has been applied once a month to the sand-based field.

The school does not have a variety of equipment to supply the grounds department. They have one mower—a Toro 216 riding triplex.

“We like to cut the short grass, at 5/8 inch, because it makes the practice enjoyable and it keeps the injuries low,” Mulholland continues.

When time and season permits, Mulholland mows all six fields himself. Every few weeks, he changes the pattern of striping on the field.

“Whenever we get sick of looking at the pattern, we change it to what we think will look good,” Mulholland says. “It’s pretty easy. We have three basic ways of changing the pattern and after mowing it for a few weeks, a new pattern emerges.”

When he is not mowing, he is weeding or edging. If the school can afford it, he overseeds. Hunter I-40 heads with



PROSPECTOR FIELD STRIKES GOLD

Each player helps care for his own position, in addition to Cisterna and Mulholland changing the diamond's mowing pattern every few weeks.

stainless-steel risers make up the irrigation system, but with the recent rain, irrigation hasn't been a big issue, notes Mulholland.

The rest of their equipment stock consists of a McClane edger, a weed eater and a three-wheel all-terrain vehicle to drag the infield. The edges of the infield grass are also power sprayed periodically so a lip does not form.

Game Preparation

Approximately 50 games are played on the diamond during the seven months it is used. Along with their own high school games, the summer baseball league practices there. The field has also seen play by the Men's Over 30 Senior World Series.

When it comes to game time, the whole team pitches in to help. They drag the infield, paint new foul lines, and chalk the base lines. Each player also takes care of his own position.

After the game, the field is spruced up, the foul lines and base lines are raked again and the clay on the pitcher's mound is packed.

Long Distance Compliments

Comments about the diamond from school officials and faculty are positive. "The school administrators let us know we are appreciated," says Mulholland. "We also get word from other students if someone is 'messing around' when they shouldn't be out there."

Opposing teams have also expressed their admiration concerning the field, but in a different way. Teams from all corners of the state have requested to play on Prospector Field, even if it means giving up a home-field advantage.

"Other teams have requested just to play in our park, especially the northern teams," Cisterna says. "We only play about six or seven games on the road a year."

Sometimes the school receives requests from teams, on their way to another game, to practice on their field.

"Some of the eastern teams have to travel a long way to games," Mulholland explains. "It is easier for them to stop here and practice."

Even rivals from Glendale High School appreciate the field. The Glendale players read an article in *USA Today* about the playing field of their rival. They knew the field was well cared for, and, when they played their game against Apache Junction, they complimented the grounds staff and players on the field.

Mutual Respect

Cisterna has seen many students over the years who became interested in field maintenance. None, he says, were as enthusiastic as Mulholland, who is considering enrollment in Mesa Community College in Mesa AZ. The school offers a two-year horticulture and management program.

"I know I'll lose him someday to a

better position because he's that good," Cisterna acknowledges. "But, it will probably be one of the happiest days of my life."

Mulholland has known Cisterna since he was 15 years old. The respect and admiration are mutual.

"Whatever he knows, he has tried to pass it on to me," says Mulholland.

Future Goals

Despite a tiny budget, Mulholland and Cisterna have big plans for the immediate and distant future. They reached one goal when they began a special work study program for students interested in turf care management. Juniors and seniors gain experience working on the field. After graduation, Cisterna and Mulholland try to place students in sports field work.

Other goals may be *very* far in the future. Cisterna would like to buy a tarp for the field. The soil drains well, but recent rains have made it more difficult. Mulholland would like to landscape the outside of the field and install a warning track.

One purchase the school may never make is lights for night games. For 16 years, night games played on the field have relied on moonlight.

"Lighting is not even *close* to the budget," Mulholland laughs. "It would be nice if we had lights, but it's okay without them too. It reminds me of old-time baseball." □