

COLLEGE DIAMOND OF THE YEAR: PRIDE PREVAILS AT SWAYZE FIELD

By Bob Tracinski



Oxford Stadium's Swayze Field, home of the University of Mississippi Rebels.

Pride and tradition — two qualities that are among the hallmarks of the University of Mississippi in Oxford, a school that most people know simply as “Ole Miss.” Those qualities are found in the university’s academics, athletics and fields of play.

Ole Miss fields “Rebel” teams, and Rebel pride runs deep, right down to the roots of the turf at Oxford University Stadium’s Swayze Field. The Rebel baseball squad is entering its fifth year of play on the field, and the facility is well-known as one of the best in the Southeastern Conference. That reputation may soon extend beyond the South, since Swayze Field has been named 1992 College Baseball Diamond of the Year.

Roots of Success

Construction of the stadium and field was completed in October 1988. Oxford residents voted to assess a 2 percent tourism tax to raise funds for the \$3.75 million facility. Over time, proceeds from the tax will provide \$2 million for the stadium. Ole Miss must pay the remaining balance.

A new on-campus location was selected for the stadium, allowing for “ground-up” construction to accommodate the

forward-thinking of planners. A major highway overlooks the stadium, so the whole community views the facility year-round.

Underneath the stadium, players have a spacious locker room and their own weight room. A unique feature on the college level, an indoor “batting tunnel,” also used for fielding and pitching drills, is large enough to accommodate a full-team practice.

Head Coach Don Kessinger and his assistants have a separate office under the stands. The office is located next to an all-purpose room, which serves as a player lounge and press interview area.

Winning Team

Maintaining every aspect of the facility, inside and out, are Head Groundskeeper Steve Horne, along with Assistant Groundskeepers Vincent Buford and Darrall Buford. Horne is assisted in all areas concerning turf by Gary Morris, sports turf manager and golf course superintendent.

Horne took the position of groundskeeper/stadium manager three years ago. He had served five years as football equipment manager while working toward his degree in education at Ole



Head Groundskeeper Steve Horne: “Always leave the field a little bit better than when you walked on it that morning.”

Miss. Following graduation, he worked as groundskeeper and football manager, moving to his current position in July 1990.

“I didn’t work on the field originally, I just kind of hung around and tried to help out the groundskeeper because I found his work to be very interesting,” says Horne. “When he decided to retire, I was lucky enough to get the position. I’m basically self-taught, and I would never claim to be an expert in agronomy. I learned about maintaining a baseball field in bits and pieces, by listening to others who had more experience in this area. I asked a lot of questions and built upon what I was told. Garry Morris has been my biggest help.”

Morris is in charge of the Ole Miss golf course and the football, baseball, and track facilities. A member of the national Sports Turf Managers Association, he credits learning opportunities and information exchanges between peers as a major factor in producing and maintaining top-level sports turf.

Prior to accepting the Ole Miss position four years ago, Morris spent 15 years in golf course maintenance and two years with the Miami Dolphins at Joe Robbie Stadium. He's no stranger to big events, having been at the stadium for Super Bowl XXIII. The opportunity to work with a variety of sports drew him to Ole Miss.

"All the credit for the award-winning Swayze Field goes to Steve Horne and his tight-knit team," Morris asserts. "These guys do a terrific job. I supply the fertilization and chemical schedules, conferring with them on special needs, and they take it from there."

Meeting High Expectations

The field itself is built on the Champion sub-surface system designed by Southern Turf Nurseries of Tifton, GA. A network of underground perforated piping lies below the entire field, covered by a geotextile fabric. Above the geotextile is 12 inches of sand with a light overlay of peat to allow for maximum percolation after rains and irrigation. The field has a Toro underground irrigation system that can be set on automatic timer or handled manually.

The playing field is comprised of a thick carpet of Tifway bermudagrass. It is overseeded with a mixture of perennial ryegrass cultivars in the fall and winter months at a rate of 12 pounds per thousand square feet. During the season, the field is mowed basically every day. Mowing before every game is done in three directions to create a striping effect. The outfield grass is mowed at 1 1/4 inches with a riding mower. The infield is mowed at one inch with a walk-behind mower. During the off season, all the turf is maintained at 1 3/4 inches, with the mowing height slowly lowered to reach in-season grass heights.

Horne must pay particular attention to diamond's skinned areas. "We really have to stay on top of things when it comes to the skinned areas because of Coach Kessinger, who played 14 years as a Major League shortstop," he reveals. "He knows what a Major League infield plays like and insists on having the

same for his players."

The infield is made up of a mixture of clay soil and white sand, with Pro's Choice Soilmaster added to help with drainage and texture of the soil. The mound is maintained with Beam Clay mound mix, along with a top layer of Pro's Choice Soilmaster.

The skinned area of the infield is nail-dragged three times a week, then raked by hand before games. A typical routine for a 7 p.m. game is to drag the area around 9 a.m. then wet it to near-saturation. Additional waterings are done around noon and 3 p.m., applying less water each time. By 7 p.m., the skinned areas are soft and workable. In the approximate 20-minute interval after pre-game warm-ups and workouts are completed, Horne and his crew move in for the finishing touches. They wet the skinned area lightly and do the final hand-raking to keep the upper one inch "soft and fluffy" and the lower surface firm.

Throughout the entire routine, care is taken to ensure that the skinned area and bordering grasses meet on a level surface. To avoid creating lips, the crew uses a push broom or rake to move away any soil or infield mix on the grass that borders the skinned areas. The borders are also washed down every day, during the early morning session. The borders of the entire infield area edged every two weeks to keep tight, sharp corners.

Following each game, the crews use a push broom on the front of the mound and lip areas to remove any soil or mix, prior to morning wash down.

Horne adopted two procedures to cut down on the wear around the grass in front of the mound. First, the circular cutout in front is extended about 14 inches toward home plate. This keeps the grass stronger and helps it stand up to the punishment of pitchers' spikes. The distance of the rubber to the plate, of course, is regulation — only the circular cutout.

"The pitcher rarely walks out much further than 14 inches when he steps down off the mound," Horne explains "So many mounds at the college level are not kept up. There is usually just a rubber and some dirt and that's about it. We take our mound to the next level. It is repaired immediately following each game. The mound is shaped (sloped on the sides and flat on top) and ready to go whenever our players walk out on the field."

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OXFORD STADIUM/SWAYZE FIELD SUPPLIERS AND MANUFACTURERS

The following is a list of manufacturers and suppliers used at Oxford Stadium's Swayze Field:

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- Terra International Inc.
600 4th St, Sioux City, IA 51101
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- Toro
5825 Jasmine Street, Riverside, CA 92504
(909) 688-9221
- World Class Athletics Surfaces
200 Washington Ave., Greenville, MS 38701
(800) 748-9649

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The second procedure happens at midseason, when Horne makes a light application of pregerminated perennial ryegrass seed every 10 games or so. It's a spot treatment for any weak areas, which are usually centered in the front part of the infield, such as around home plate and the fungo circle areas.

For creating lines on the field, Horne uses paint from World Class Athletic Surfaces. "The paint is terrific," he asserts. "I only have to apply it once a week."

Brutal Schedule

Swayze Field hosts more than 300 games and practices, both day and night, per year. The field is hosts Ole Miss baseball team games and practices, and is shared in the summer months with Oxford Park Commission. Youth camps and tournaments are held on the field, as are special events hosted by the commission. In effect, the week after the college baseball season ends, the commission's events begin.

To keep the grass growing at an optimum rate to recover quickly from all this activity, Morris has developed a fertil-

ization schedule that requires light applications of granular fertilizer approximately every two to three weeks before February and September. Horne and Morris adjust this as needed according to the look and wear of the field, as well as weather conditions. Approximately 3/4-pound of nitrogen is included in each application. Occasional applications of liquid fertilizer are used to augment this program. Any quick-release products are followed by slow-release products. Milorganite is used frequently to maintain the rich turf color. Soil tests are taken twice a year to provide feedback on necessary adjustments in the fertilization schedule. Liquid iron applications are made twice a year, and a lime application usually once a season as necessary to adjust pH. The winter fertilization program is adapted annually to meet field and weather conditions.

Insect problems are usually minimal, especially when harsh winters cut down on populations. A preventative fungicide program is used throughout the season.

The field is aerated four to five times a year, and the resulting plugs are collected. Topdressing is done twice a year,

following two of the aeration treatments.

In the past three years since Horne has been head groundskeeper, the field has seen major additions. They include the installation of a 12-foot dugout track, walkways to home plate, fungo circle cut-outs, and cut-out boxes for the coaches. Horne and his crew had help with the dugout track, but handled the other additions themselves. These improvements were not included in Swayze Field's original plan — they came from Horne and his desire to make the field among the best in the nation.

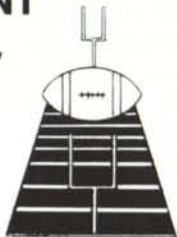
"The field always had the makings of a beautiful facility, but it needed a few fine tuning adjustments to bring out its maximum beauty," says Horne. "We are currently working on changing the color of the outfield fence from green to blue (one of the Rebel colors) and adding a blue windscreen to the chain link fence that surrounds the field in order to promote an 'encased' look. Due to a limited budget, things must be done slowly."

As for most college fields, funding is tight. During the season, Horne usually puts in 70-hour weeks to keep the facility in mint condition. With the heavy-use schedule of the field, its limited budget

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An advertisement for Pro's Choice soil conditioners. It features a large bag of product with a circular logo that says "PRO'S CHOICE PRODUCTS FOR SPORTS FIELDS". The bag also has a banner that says "CHOICE OF THE OLE MISS REBELS". Below the bag, there is text describing the product and a list of benefits for two types of soil conditioners: SOILMASTER and RAPID DRY.

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and short two-month off-season, an organized plan, he says, is essential to keep ahead of things.

Horne learned of the Diamond of the Year Award from Morris. It became one of Horne's professional goals.

"I wanted to win this award for our school as well as for myself and my grounds crew," he says. "To have our field designated as the best collegiate field in the nation makes me feel as good as a national championship-winning baseball coach.

"My philosophy is simple — I always give 100 percent every day and expect my crew to do the same. I am always open to learning better ways to do things. You can't be set in your ways in this type of work. And always, always leave the field a little bit better than when you walked on it that morning." □

Editor's note: Bob Tracinski is the manager of public relations for the John Deere Company in Raleigh, NC, and public relations chairman for the Sports Turf Managers Association. The Diamond of the Year Awards are sponsored by Beam Clay, the national Sports Turf Managers Association and sportsTURF Magazine.

WEST PALM BEACH MUNICIPAL STADIUM SUPPLIERS AND MANUFACTURERS

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Editor's Note: This list was inadvertently omitted from last month's feature on West Palm Beach Municipal Stadium, 1992 Professional Diamond of the Year.

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