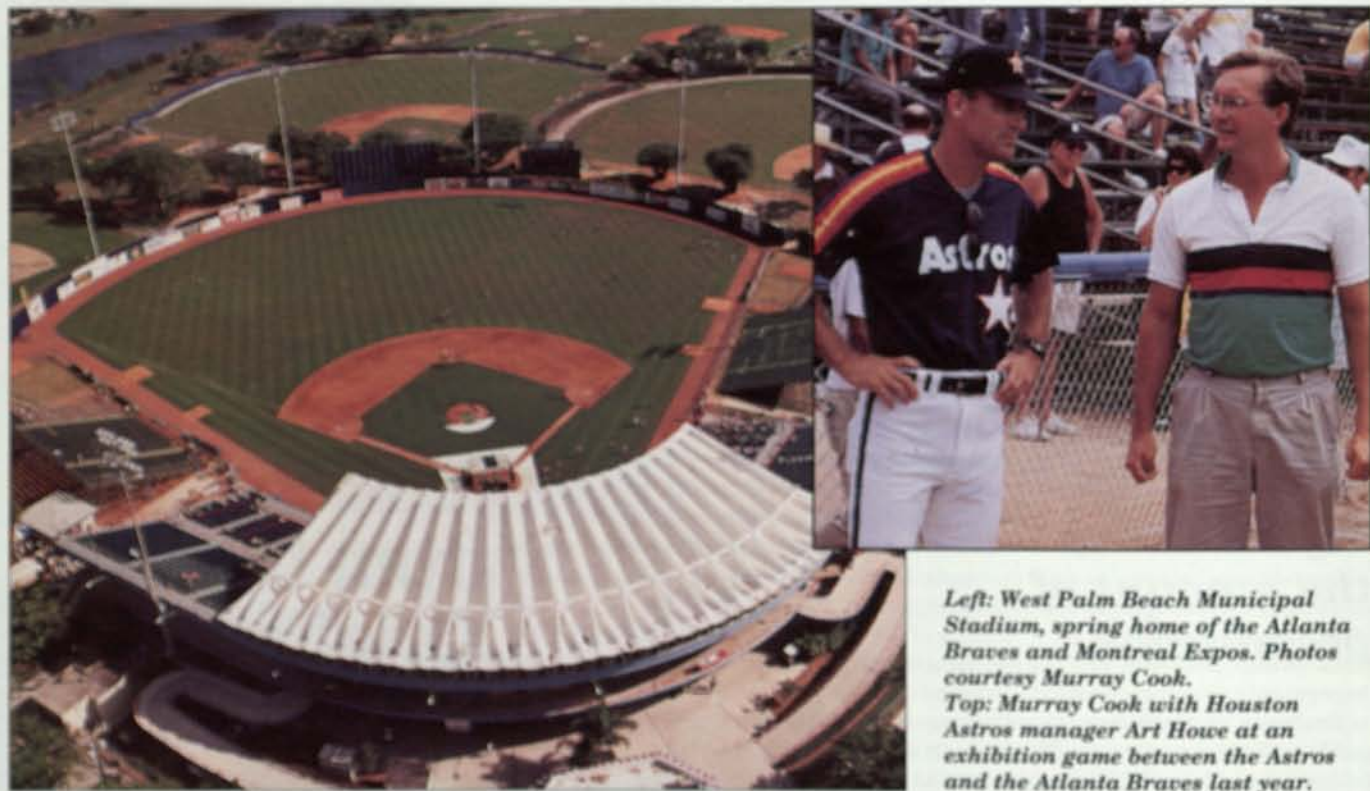


Professional Diamond Of The Year: Murray Cooks At West Palm Beach

By Steve and Suz Trusty



Left: West Palm Beach Municipal Stadium, spring home of the Atlanta Braves and Montreal Expos. Photos courtesy Murray Cook.
Top: Murray Cook with Houston Astros manager Art Howe at an exhibition game between the Astros and the Atlanta Braves last year.

Shining like a beacon in the warmth of Florida, the manicured fields of West Palm Beach Municipal Stadium, 1992 Diamond of the Year in the Professional Category, lure those reliable harbingers of spring—Major League baseball players.

During spring training, from February 15 to April 6, all nine fields of the complex will be used every day as the Atlanta Braves and the Montreal Expos sharpen their skills for the coming season. Field consistency is vital. In order to compete successfully, players must have the opportunity to concentrate on their game without problems caused by poor field conditions.

That job goes to Murray Cook, his assistant Budgie Clark and their crack grounds crew. Working as a team, they've honed field maintenance to near-perfection.

Team-Building

Chosen as *sportsTURF* 1990 Man of the Year, Cook is a dynamo with combined skills of master technician, teacher and salesman. He began studying baseball

field maintenance at age 13. He combined his interest with a college background in horticulture, and from there steadily climbed up the groundskeeping ladder from single-A to the big leagues.

In addition to his work at West Palm Beach, Cook is a field designer and consultant. He's consulted on fields around the country. His latest consulting job was for Tulsa County, OK, converting an artificial surface to a natural field. He's even consulted on fields as far away as the former Soviet Union, where he was the groundskeeper on Eastern League All Stars' Diamond Diplomacy Tour.

Clark came to the program with an extensive field maintenance background of his own. He was instrumental at another award-winning field, and served as a catalyst for many of the improvements at West Palm Beach Municipal.

Crew members Issac Porter and John Whitehead have 32 years of combined experience at the facility. City spray technician Cindy Unger is an expert at scheduling chemical applications around games.

"Every member of the crew brings a high skill level and dedication to the job," Cook asserts.

However, even this cohesive, talented team couldn't accomplish its goals without management collaboration. Rob Rabenacker, general manager of operations for the West Palm Beach Montreal Expos, and Pete Skorput, general manager of operations for the West Palm Beach Atlanta Braves, add enthusiasm and cooperation to the year-round program.

Sizzling Pace

West Palm Beach Municipal Stadium was built in 1962 to support and showcase the Atlanta Braves' spring training program. In 1982, the Montreal Expos became another tenant of the facility. To accommodate the change, locker rooms, fields and other team amenities were expanded within the existing facility.

Between 1982 and 1989, the teams' needs outgrew the facility's capabilities. More than \$4 million has been invested in improvements since 1988. City Manager Ron Schutta and Director of

Leisure Service Tim Vanatta implemented the funding. Cook directed improvements and monitored the day-to-day progress of the projects. Those improvements included a \$150,000 automatic irrigation system in 1989.

The facility has an active year-round schedule. Fantasy Camp starts January 1, with the Braves staging two weeks—the Expos one week—of “pay for the glory” amateur-pro play. After Fantasy Camp ends, both clubs hold winter workouts with Major League spring training starts on February 15.

Beginning March 1, there's a game a day for 32 days, plus workouts and practices. Following spring training, the extended spring work begins in unison with the Florida State League's West Palm Beach Expos. When extended spring work ends on June 8, the Gulf Coast League season begins. This runs in tandem with the Florida State League until August 31. Also during the summer, the Palm Beach Post 12 Legion season and playoffs are held at the facility.

Of course, there have been a few “extras” for the crew to contend with, such as the 1991 Sunshine State Games and opening ceremonies. On September 15, the instructional league begins for both the Atlanta Braves and Montreal Expos clubs, and the New York Mets, ending in early November.

At this point, the crew takes a deep breath, then tackles renovation. In just one and a half months, the cycle begins again.

Maintenance Strategy

The stadium complex is located on the site of an old swamp. Groundwater lurks three to four feet below the field surface. Despite relatively good drainage provided by the sand profile, and a four-inch base of 90 percent medium grade sugar sand and 10 percent sphagnum peat, there's a constant battle to eliminate excess moisture. Even with swells between the added fields, sump pumps and Super Soakers come into play. The challenge has been furthered by this year's weather. Temperatures have been cooler than usual. Nine inches of rain fell in January; six inches in mid-February.

The maintenance program must be high-level, and Cook makes sure it is nothing less. Pitching mounds are packed with Beam Clay pitching mound mix. Mounds are worked daily during the 10-month season, weekly during the short off season. Home plates are packed with Beam Clay home plate mix. Again, the daily-

weekly regimen is followed to keep areas up to grade. The infield mix, an 80/20 sand and clay combo, is watered, scarified and screened daily.

Manicuring the mound and home plate area of each field takes 45 minutes of hard labor. Holes are swept to show bare clay, then watered and left to soak for 10 to 15 minutes. The clay is then hand-raked and the holes packed tightly.

The mound landing areas, which extend 45 inches on both sides of the pitching rubber, are packed tightly for a solid footing. The plateaus on the mounds

are also packed to keep the mound in correct form and to ensure level “falling back” areas. After being packed, the mounds are stiff-matted, then thoroughly soaked and allowed to set for approximately 30 minutes before being covered with tarps.

The four-by-six-foot batters' boxes on both sides of each field's plate are also packed tightly for firm footing. Home plates are stiff-matted and soaked, then allowed to set for about 30 minutes prior to tarping.

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Fine Terragreen red is used for drying the field during rains. Crews also incorporate stabilizer mix into the infield for improved drainage. For mounds, the crew uses course Terragreen red because it is easier to clean.

Base areas and baselines are watered and hand-raked to remove ridges. After the water has soaked in, these areas are stiff-matted to keep the clay level. The infield clay also is watered, then scarified with an A-frame or another ripping device to remove the ridges and humps created during the game. After the water has soaked in, the clay is flex-matted to keep it smooth and level. Before game time, the infield clay, mound and home plate are cocoa-matted and watered.

Infield turf is cut daily on game days. After mowing, the turf is hand-watered for 45 to 60 minutes. Outfield turf is usually cut every other day, and also watered after cutting. A greensmower is used for the infield, a triplex for the outfield. Because of heavy use, a one-inch fairway cut is used.

For the past three years, Double Eagle perennial ryegrass has been overseeded at the rate of five pounds per 1,000 square feet between late November and mid-December, as dictated by temperature changes. The base turf is Tifway 419 bermudagrass that, with the Deep South location of the field, stays green year-round. The perennial ryegrass helps

ease some of the wear caused by 60 consecutive days of play on the main diamond.

As the prime growing season for bermudagrass approaches, Curb is applied to cut back the perennial ryegrass. This eliminates the transition period and minimizes fungus problems.

The \$60,000 annual chemical budget also covers all fertilizer needs. The base fertilizer is Granular 15-5-15, applied at the rate of six to eight pounds per 1,000 square feet annually. This program is augmented with liquid nitrogen sources, applied bi-monthly through a chemigation system. For liquid application, 32-0-0 and 16-4-8, with a barrage of micronutrients, are alternated.

Mole crickets and fire ants are the facility's major pest problems. Crickets are controlled with Triumph, Orthene, and a bait mix called Consume. Cook notes that a Dursban product specifically designed for mole cricket control was extremely successful in 1991.

Team Effort

The City of West Palm Beach maintains the entire stadium complex and parking lots. The total annual operating budget is \$1.2 million. As with cities around the country, budget restraints are a constant. Far from a drain on city funds, however, the facility's "economic impact" for the community is estimated at \$25 million.

During the past three years, the stadium and complex have been used for several groundskeeping demonstrations

for neighboring county and recreation departments. The year-round use enables participants to observe programs and renovation projects in progress. As an additional service, minor league baseball franchises are allowed to send their new groundskeepers to the facility to work with the top-notch ground crews during game situations.

Cook and his crew are continually fine-tuning maintenance practices. "If anyone has new products or a new piece of equipment that they'd like to have tested, send it to us," he says. "Our philosophy is to learn as much as we can about what there is by using it in our complex."

Success seems to follow Cook, not mention the teams who call the complex home, at least in the spring. The Atlanta Braves were National League Champions in 1991 and 1992. The West Palm Beach Expos were Florida State League Champions in 1991 and Division Champions in 1989 and 1990. Palm Beach Post 12 has been American Legion Post 12 champs three years in a row.

The crew members of West Palm Beach Municipal Stadium are champions themselves. As 1992 Professional Diamond of the Year recipients, they know what it takes to win. □

Editor's note: The Diamond of the Year Awards are jointly sponsored by Beam Clay, sportsTURF Magazine and the Sports Turf Managers Association. Look for the College Division winner and profiles of the Major League judges next month.

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