

STMA Profile:

Stephen Guise Keeps Santa Anita On Track

Top: Although horses' hooves strike the turf with incredible force, superior rooting and Netlon minimize divots. **Bottom:** Santa Anita Park overview. Photos courtesy: Stephen Guise.



By Bob Tracinski

Million-dollar animals move with grace and speed along the emerald green track. Their hooves pound the turf ferociously—the noise can be heard over the swelling grandstand din. At the finish, the winner is often decided by less than a stride.

As the victorious horse is led to the winner's circle, and the remaining horses are led to the paddock, Stephen Guise and his crew inspect the track for damage. Even the slightest blemish that could potentially cause a footing problem for these magnificent animals is repaired.

It's all in a day's work for Guise, turf course superintendent for the Los Angeles Turf Club and Santa Anita Park in Arcadia, CA.

Given the pounding dealt by the horses to the turf track, Guise faces tough odds. The racing schedule is grueling. Races are held six days a week during

the Oaktree Meeting, from October 7 through November 9, and the Santa Anita Meeting, from December 26 to end of April. Seven of every nine races are on the dirt tracks, which must also be kept in superb conditions. Horses are on the tracks from dawn to 10 a.m. Races start at noon. Even during the off season, 1,500 horses are in training at the park.

While the infield generally holds concessions and betting windows, special events are also common. A two-day beach volleyball tournament has been included, which required Guise's crew to cover a segment of the turf with geotextile fabric, tongue-and-groove plywood and two feet of sand. (After a lot of cleanup and a light application of liquid iron, the turf was back in top shape.)

During an annual car show, 100 Rolls Royce and Bentley vehicles are displayed on the turf. Fiesta Day, another annual happening, requires construction of a stage on the turf.

Yet Guise rises above these and other considerable challenges to beat the odds, making the track conditions at Santa Anita consistently among the finest in the country.

A Formidable Challenge

At the main Santa Anita course, a 10-acre oval of turf encircles a dirt training track and is surrounded by a dirt racing track. The turf track is separated from one dirt track by two and a half feet, the other by 10 feet. The 7/8 mile turf track is 80 feet wide at the stretch, 90 feet wide at the turns. Turns are crowned 15 feet off the outside wall. There is a two percent grade on the home stretch and a six percent grade on the turns.

The track is constructed much like a USGA golf green with 90 percent medium-to-coarse sand and 10 percent Dakota Peat. Netlon provides the soil profile with needed stability. The track's hybrid bermudagrass is overseeded with perennial ryegrass as weather dictates to provide year-long cushioning and color.

A second, six-acre Hillside turf course was renovated in 1990. Guise thoroughly researched the plan for the course. It was constructed under his supervision.

To maintain the sight line from the grandstand, so that every patron can see horses all the way around the track, construction in the 40-acre infield is below grade. For example, when the *Plaza de la Fiesta* was added to the infield, contractors dug down eight feet

and removed all the existing soil. The lowered section then was reconstructed with the same sand and mesh system that was used for the turf course.

An extensive irrigation system enables Guise to control water delivery to the turf track—meeting its need without unfavorably altering the surface for the horses. A daily computer readout, combined with temperature sensors sunk into the soil at a six-inch depth, provide detailed information. Guise can adjust watering precisely according to CIMIS (California Irrigation Management Information Service) feedback on evapotranspiration (ET) conditions.

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An injection system is used to supply general fertilizer and minor nutrients to the turf course and infield areas. Matt Matkin of Soil and Plant Labs monitors the turf course every two weeks with soil tests and plant tissue analysis. Dry fertilizer is applied to compensate for any deficiencies.

Because of the soil profile, aeration is needed on the infield only once or twice a year; once a year in the paddock area. The turf course was aerated for the first time last year, after clay had infiltrated the sand/peat profile. The cores were vacuumed immediately after aeration. Topdressing is performed when necessary in the once heavily contaminated area.

The 16 acres of turf course are mowed twice a week. The procedure takes about three and a half hours. Sixteen acres may seem like a substantial area, but for Guise they're a drop in the 300-acre "bucket" under his care.

Detours To The Sport Of Kings

Santa Anita is a Southern California institution. The original Santa Anita dates back to 1934. Guise doesn't go

back quite so far. He was hired in November 1989 following a \$3 million renovation of the turf oval in June of that year. He was brought on, primarily, to keep the turf alive and he came prepared.

Guise graduated from the University of Rhode Island in 1980 with a degree in soils and turf management. Originally a sociology major, he found a soils course intriguing.

"Soils was the first class I could see, smell and feel," he recalls. "It was something I could really dig into and understand. When I did my first soil profile, with dirt on my boots and under my fingernails, I knew I had to switch majors."

Following graduation, Guise took the government exam and became a licensed soil scientist. His goal was to perform soil profiles for the U.S. soil service. However, President Reagan's 1980 hiring freeze put a kink in his plans.

Guise headed to North Carolina to be closer to his girlfriend, where he found a position with Lawn Medic. After seven months with the company, he was sent to northern New York to train personnel at other branches to use liquid fertilizer programs. Guise returned to North Carolina, only to head back north to Rhode Island, where he accepted a position with ChemLawn. Four months later he was working in Southern California, in Rancho Cucamonga, as the first ChemLawn specialist in the area. There, Guise developed a strong commercial and residential market. He steadily advanced within the company, moving from branch manager, to commercial regional manager, to opening a branch office in San Diego by 1985.

Changes within the company and rapidly escalating environmental concerns prompted another detour. While considering his options, Guise applied for the opening at Santa Anita. After "four weeks of interviews and eight hours with a psychiatrist," he was hired.

His predecessor had been a mechanical engineer. "He had done a good job of holding things together, but soils, turf and plants weren't his major interest," says Guise.

Morale was not particularly high at the time Guise came on board. Thirty gardeners on his new crew had seen their jobs "enriched" with tasks no else would tackle, such as litter collection and cleaning kitchen grease traps. The "spirit of

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professionalism," Guise recalls, had been allowed to slide.

"The thing is, this crew is filled with great workers," he asserts. "Nobody had taken the time to acknowledge that and set up systems to put it to good use."

An immediate upgrade of the gardeners' work, locker and lunchroom areas was made. Guise also moved the superintendent's office—his office—from the front office complex to the gardeners' headquarters. He had the equipment room inventoried and set up an organized, locked tool room. The gardeners were issued uniforms and a dress code was established.

"With our new image, our gardeners began to be acknowledged for the level of work they were accomplishing," he says. "We still tackled many cleanup tasks, including trash and sink traps, but someone has to do them, and our crews do them *right*."

The number of gardeners now stands at 25. In September 1992, Guise also took over the management of laborers, bringing his current crew to 48, including five foremen.

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He emphasizes that the competence and cooperation of his crew make it possible to handle the extensive workload on the 300-acre facility, including the 24-hour-a-day watering regime using a system that has been upgraded, bit by bit, since 1934. Although Guise is quick to credit his entire crew, he singles out

Leif Dickinson, his assistant who came with him from ChemLawn, and Joe Martinez, for special praise.

Beyond The Track

Santa Anita is billed as "the park with a million flowers, and racing, too." Part of Guise's job is making Santa Anita live up to its flowery reputation. That's been a learning experience, he admits.

"I had a strong background in soils and turf and a pretty good understand of shrubs and trees," he says. "And no experience with flowers."

That didn't stop him from learning. Guise knows that beauty sells. Aesthetics—the psychological responses to beauty—are not only based on the look of the turf, but of the surrounding features and the overall "statement" made by the facility as well. A facility's aesthetics not only increase on-site attendance, but they also involve television viewers in the action, which is crucial. In addition to on-site wagering, a significant portion of horse racing revenue is raised through "simulcasting," projecting racing action as it happens, via satellite to legal, off-track betting venues.

Guise is well-aware of the role land-

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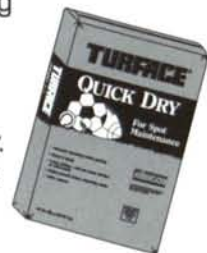
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scaping plays in aesthetics. He has made major upgrades in this area.

Striking, mature plantings, worked into the plan by Santa Anita's early designers, existed on the property before Guise arrived. For example, the hill that serves as the backdrop for the Hillside Course is graced with 200-year-old oak trees. Guise has enhanced this view by hydroseeding white and purple alyssum and California poppies. Thirty stately olive trees stand nearly 50 feet tall. Guise "laces them out" every year to enhance their shape and health. The 220 *Washingtonia* palm trees, stretching to heights of more than 80 feet, must be trimmed two to three times a year. Eight miles of hedges, some extending eight feet wide and 10 feet tall, snake through the property. They require trimming two or three times a year. To provide "feeder plant material in various growing stages," Guise has established a two-and-a-half-acre nursery. These are used to fill in gaps when plants are lost.

Guise selects plants personally, from 30-foot olive trees to puny packs of pansies. He seeks out the best growers and will search through 200-acre nursery fields to find exactly the right plant to com-

plete or restore the symmetry of a setting. Once that plant is found, he'll have it prepared slowly for moving, and bring it back to the nursery so its care will approximate that of the existing plants. This assures that the symmetry will continue and the plant will be ready when the need arises. Plants in the nursery range from five-gallon containers to 60-inch-diameter tree boxes. Plants may also be placed elsewhere on the grounds to enhance a landscape scene until they are needed in a prime location. He also took over the selection and maintenance of the interior plantings with the 300-acre complex.

Remember those million flowers? Guise has taken the ho-hum, one-color, one-variety flowers beds to an ever-changing kaleidoscope of striking beauty. The winner's circle area turns to a blaze of color with mums, daisies and primroses. The traditional yellow pansies of the Oaktree Meet have been augmented with begonias, snapdragons, dusty miller, cyclamen and impatiens. For the Christmas Meeting, red, pink and white cyclamen in full bloom turn the clubhouse into a wonderland. Plantings are checked daily and those with declining blossoms

are immediately replaced.

How does Guise squeeze it all in? Hard work is the main ingredient—60 to 80 hours a week of it. He's built an excellent crew. ("Great guys," he notes.) He's also a master of networking. He reaches out to other professionals through organizations such as the national Sports Turf Managers Association. He currently serves on the STMA board and hosted the California regional meeting in September 1992.

And then there's his "personal" crew, namely is patient wife Teresa, four-year-old Kelley, and two-year-old Megan. "They make it wonderful to come home," says Guise.

But when he's not at home, you can bet Guise is at the track, maintaining the high-quality surfaces and grounds horses owners, jockeys and races fans have come to expect from Santa Anita. Given his professionalism and no-nonsense work ethic—and that of his fine crew—the odds for success are well in his favor.

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.

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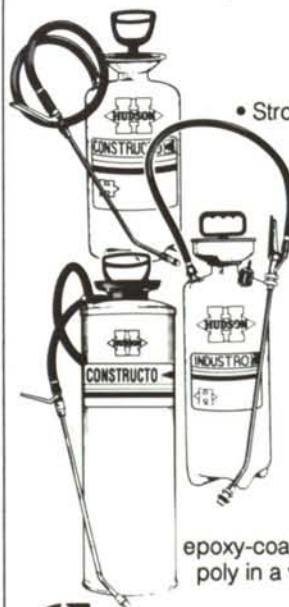
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