

# Bunnell Tackles Each Field With Enthusiasm

By Bob Tracinski

**T**he cities of sunny Southern California are oases of green nestled within a native desert. With moderate temperatures year round, this region is a mecca for those who love the outdoors. Among the region's most energetic and enthusiastic supporters is Chris Bunnell, grounds supervisor for the Escondido Union School District, 25 miles north of San Diego.

Bunnell started with the school district in December 1989. He manages the grounds program for the district's 15 elementary and four middle schools, overseeing 230 acres of service area, including the hardscape and parking lots. Of all of the playground areas and athletic fields, 132 acres of that total area are turf. The school sites are scattered throughout the city. Nine of the schools are on a year-round schedule; the remainder are on the September through June schedule.

Population growth throughout California drives the continual need for more schools and more on-site green space for physical education and sports programs. Merely keeping up with the growth was a daunting job in itself. Bunnell's goal was to move the district's existing grounds program to a more professional level. Naturally, he tackled the challenge with enthusiasm.

Bunnell brought an extensive horticultural background to the job. Transplanted from Ohio to California at the age of eight, his early love of working in the family's yard and garden led to a part-

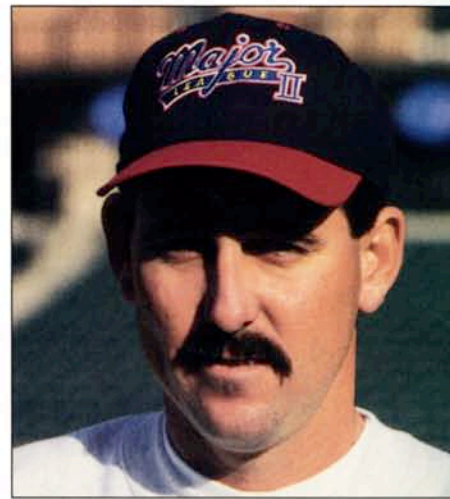
time mowing business as a teenager. A high school class on landscape construction in the Regional Occupation Program gave him the opportunity to build a landscape plot on campus. Intrigued by the scientific side of the business, he earned an associate of science degree in landscape construction from San Diego Mesa Community College. He then took a grounds position at a private K-through-12 school.

Bunnell and Mimi (Danielle) married in 1979. They had already planned his return to college when, in 1981, he broke his back in a toboggan accident. Despite the injury, he started at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo in June and worked through eight straight quarters to earn his bachelor of science degree in ornamental horticulture in 1983. He graduated from college with a lifelong commitment to learning and becoming the best he could be.

He joined Environmental Care Inc. (a division of Environmental Industries) after graduation; next he acquired a management position with a lawn-care company. He then spent four years on the retail side with The Price Club.

Bunnell says, "I've always been a big sports fan. The school district position was the opportunity for a marriage of my two major interests — horticulture and sports."

The district has eight soccer game fields, 30 soccer practice fields, three baseball game fields and 42 baseball practice fields. Because he hadn't managed athletic fields before, Bunnell began his characteristic research for



**Chris Bunnell has an extensive horticultural background and, like his mentor Steve Wightman, is always willing to share his expertise. Photo by Bill Bunnell.**

the best, up-to-date technical information on sports-turf care. He mentioned his research to his Hunter Industries sales representative, Lynda Wightman. She suggested a resource he could contact — her husband, Steve Wightman, Stadium Turf Manager of San Diego's Jack Murphy Stadium and past president of the national Sports Turf Managers Association.

"I couldn't have made a better connection," says Bunnell. "Steve is a master of field care. He's a no-excuses kind of guy, always finding a way to get the job done. And, he willingly shares his technical expertise. He invited me to bring my crew for a behind the scenes tour and one-on-one question-and-answer session. Our relationship grew from there."

## Safety is Priority

The first priority of the district's grounds care program is physical education. Bunnell stresses safety as the prime concern of the field-care program; playability is a close second. He says, "Our playgrounds and fields are outdoor classrooms, vital in shaping the physical and athletic development of the students. The fields also are used by the school's athletic programs and the community's youth and adult leagues. Soccer, our most popular sport, begins on August 1 and runs through mid-February. Baseball and softball begin in March. Football and track overlap with those schedules.

"There's always someone involved in pick-up games of soccer and softball, or playing on the playground equipment," he continues. "PE classes and some

sports events even take place during short breaks in the winter rainy season."

The school fields are the focus of the adult community. Adults not only assist with and watch their youngsters' school and league athletic practices and games, they participate in their own organized sports practices and games and in casual recreation activities. Bunnell says, "It's not unusual to have 500 people on the middle-school field."

Bunnell points out that no element of horticulture, including sports turf care, is ever static. Conditions change from day to day, and sometimes, hour to hour. The more turf is used, the more intense the maintenance program must be to compensate for that use. With the heavy use schedule of the district's fields and no seasonal downtime, it's tough to fit in maintenance procedures. In addition, Bunnell schedules fertilizer and pesticide applications during periods when students are off campus — on weekends, vacation breaks or teacher in-service days.

"We even plan core aeration and eliminate the plugs, either by mowing over them or dragging them back into the soil,

before the youngsters discover them," Bunnell says. "Those plugs become ammunition for human target practice if we don't break them down."

Sunny California isn't problem-free. That green oasis is dependent on irrigation. Water is a high-cost, closely monitored resource. Bunnell is a Certified Landscape Irrigation Auditor. (Certification is achieved through the Irrigation Association.) Some of the school sites were originally citrus or olive groves or grape vineyards and have decent soil. Other sites are essentially the subsoil left from construction excavation. Some sites hold water; others drink it. Some fields have a combination of soils, with areas of both water-holding and water-using characteristics. The irrigation program must be constantly adjusted to fit weather patterns and turf needs.

**Water Conservation Practices**

During the drought of 1990, wise use of water came to the forefront. Bunnell worked with David Tiglio of HydroScape Products Inc. to upgrade the district's irrigation program. Bunnell says, "By

conducting audits, making necessary replacements, and monitoring irrigation efficiency even more closely, we saved around 40 million gallons of water from previous historical patterns. Our crew did an excellent job of monitoring and providing the feedback to fine-tune the system. It saved the district approximately \$40,000 in 1990."

Bunnell serves on the city's reclaimed water advisory board. Because the school district will be an end-user for reclaimed water, all new irrigation installations and retrofits must be planned to accommodate it. Bunnell oversees the design and installation of new irrigation as schools are added to the district. Replacement of outdated and inefficient portions of the district's irrigation system is an ongoing task. They have replaced the entire irrigation systems on three campuses and retrofitted the systems within the field area on several others. He praises his crew's skill in this area, too. "We've had no problems with any of the systems our crews have installed or repaired."

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Since Bunnell joined the staff, three new schools have been added to the system and an elementary school was converted to a middle school, bringing more athletic fields on board. He works with the landscape architects and building contractors to eliminate as many grounds-care problems as possible up-front.

No school district has unlimited funds. In Escondido, a year-round growing season and a growing population create greater needs. Bunnell must allocate equipment, supplies and crew time to make the most of available resources. The full-time grounds crew is 12 people, including Bunnell. One person handles the large-area mowing and two are irrigation specialists. There are two crew leaders who essentially split the district in half. One landscape maintenance crew member works with each crew leader. The other four people work on renovation, general maintenance and fill in where needed. The hiring of seasonal personnel is determined by the availability of funds.

### Balancing a Daunting Maintenance Schedule

Bunnell credits the work ethic and dedication of the crew with much of the program's success. "Though there are definite assignments, this is a flexible group. Everyone is willing to put out the extra effort it takes to get the job done," he says. "Once we passed the stage of just putting out fires, I was able to implement some long-range planning. I buy most supplies for the year to take advantage of quantity pricing. I consider the 'transportability' of equipment that must be moved from site to site. I don't want a tractor on the public roads. Units that can be loaded onto or pulled behind a truck for on-road travel are safer and get to their destinations faster."

He adds, "Mowing is a continual task, with each site on a weekly schedule. Maintenance procedures are prioritized according to field use and the specific needs of each field. At times, because of limited time or funds, we may have to focus on the hot spots. For example, we might just aerate between the hash marks of a football field, or at the center circle and goal areas of a soccer field. Game fields get premium treatment to ensure the safest possible surface for the competitive athlete."

Bunnell plans two periods of downtime each season, during February and July, to repair areas damaged from overuse. These months coincide with the year-round schools' schedules. Football field renovation is planned for the Easter break. Soccer field renovation takes place in June, at the end of the traditional school year. The game fields are pulled out of play during these periods. Use is shifted to designated practice fields.

Renovation practices vary per field, but generally include dethatching by verticutting; aeration with core, shatter or slice aeration; topdressing with sand or quality soil; fertility adjustments based on soil test results; and pest control as necessary for weed, insect, or disease problems.

Bunnell follows IPM practices, citing both the environmental and cost-saving benefits. He holds a Qualified Applicator's License and an Agricultural Pest Control Advisor's License in the state of California.

Bunnell says, "Communication is essential with so many different groups using our facilities. The district's physical education instructors and coaches all understand the importance of good field conditions and are extremely supportive of our program. The outside user groups are cooperative, too. I've found most people are willing to accept and respect limitations, if they understand the reasons for them and if the results lead to better playing conditions."

### Expanding Horizons

Bunnell seizes every opportunity to expand his horizons. For the past 11 or 12 years, he's observed the area's baseball spring training. He plays on the men's senior baseball league. "Competing on different fields gives me another perspective," he says. "As a player, you 'feel' the quality level on both a conscious and subconscious level. You're obviously aware of the surface and gauge your play accordingly."

He adds, "Last year, special arrangements were made to give our senior league teams the opportunity to play a triple header at 'The Murph' (Jack Murphy Stadium.) Being out on that field is an athlete's dream come true. It reinforced my understanding of Wightman's drive for perfection. Ideal field conditions allow players to concentrate solely on the game, elevating their performance levels one more notch."

Enthusiasm for sports runs in the family. Daughters Carmina (12) and Minette (10) participate in several sports programs. Carmina has already played soccer for seven years. Bunnell coached Minette's Little League hardball team last year, finding that a learning experience, too.

Along with the personal "mentoring," Wightman encouraged Bunnell to get involved with STMA. This put him in touch with other people in the area with similar turf management programs — and solutions. Bunnell says, "It's the ideal forum for asking questions and bouncing around ideas. It's also instrumental in establishing a higher degree of professionalism throughout the industry. To earn the respect, and the dollars, that the industry should generate, we have to perform at that level," he explains. "STMA can help spread the message that the athletic field should at least be considered in the same light as a piece of equipment. But where a coach or athletic director wouldn't consider putting a player into the game with a broken bat, a flattened ball or shoes that were coming apart, field conditions are often ignored."

The STMA connection also led to lots of volunteer activity, because Bunnell's enthusiasm extends to everything he does. He got his feet wet at the national meeting in 1991, and helped host the Regional Institutes held at Jack Murphy Stadium in 1993 and at UCLA in 1994. He helped organize the Southern California Chapter, has been active in organizing and running numerous chapter events, and is the chapter's current president. He's also the co-chair of the 1996 national STMA Annual Meeting.

Besides giving back to the industry through his involvement with STMA, Bunnell has made presentations on sports turf at several regional turfgrass seminars. He'll begin teaching a course on golf course and sports turf management at Mira Costa College this spring. The evening classes and weekend labs are designed to assist others in raising the professionalism of their grounds care programs. With Bunnell as the instructor, they're sure to get a boost in their enthusiasm level as well. □

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