

A dream of a field

Drainage system key to successful field renovation

BY PARKER WOOD

Howard Gamble is varsity baseball coach at Skyline High School in Oakland, CA. He's held the position for eight years, and for most of that time he was a man with a problem field, built on clay soil, that never drained properly. When winter rains arrived, the field turned to mud, and it was anyone's guess as to when it would dry out. Poor field conditions put an end to routine maintenance, and forced most preseason training sessions to be held on the school's outdoor basketball courts. Early season games were often moved or rescheduled for the same reason. To make matters worse, the field had been graded to promote surface drainage, but instead the slopes and contours led to a deep depression and a large drain inlet in center field—an accident waiting to happen.

For years, Gamble dreamed of a better field. Neither the school nor the district had funds for renovation. The same was true for the team's booster group. Gamble even talked to the city's parks and recreation people, but they responded that the field was on school district property, making it ineligible for city assistance. Gamble had all but given up when, suddenly things started to go his way.

An anonymous donor approached the city wanting to contribute money for improvements to several athletic facilities, if the city would match the gift. Through lots of hard work, Art Yamashita, supervisor of park special programs, and Al Garcia, facility project analyst, confronted the problems presented and solved them.

Yamashita had remembered Gamble's request for help. He and Garcia spearheaded the work at Skyline, which took several months to complete. The scope of the project included: killing the existing turf; capping and burying the offending drain inlet; ripping, disking and regrading the field; putting in new irrigation; installing a sub-surface drainage system; erecting a new fence; adding new infield mix; and installing new sod. The City did much of the work using its own personnel and equipment and contracted out the rest.

Early on, Yamashita and Garcia realized that improved drainage would be critical to the project's overall success. As they evaluated their options, Yamashita remembered a seminar he had attended where the concept of Sand Channel drainage was discussed. He was reassured to learn that, among other places, Sand Channel drainage had been used successfully at Stanford Stadium, and as part of the renovation of the football field at Colfax High School, the Sports Turf Manager Association's 1999 High School Football Field of the Year.

Renovation work began in October 2000, and the Skyline field was finished in time for Gamble's team to play three home games before the end of the 2001 season. Coach Gamble noted a number of positive changes he attributes to the renovated field and the new drainage system:

- His outfielders' level of play improved after they quit worrying about slipping and falling.

- The players have a lot more pride in their field, which means they have a lot more pride in themselves.
- Pride in the field spurred the players to be more proactive when it comes to keeping the field in top-notch condition.
- The improvements to the field have motivated greater community involvement, which Gamble is sure will lead to increased support for the team.

Yamashita characterizes the outcome of his and Garcia's efforts as a "win-win-win" situation: The school district got improvements to two of its athletic fields, the city got improvements to one facility and an agreement that they could use the school district sites for city programs, and the kids of Oakland got better and safer facilities for both school and city-sponsored activities.

As for Coach Gamble, for the first time he can remember, he isn't worried about what his field will be like next February. He's confident he'll be able to use his field, right from the first day of practice. Where once he was a coach with dreams of a field; now he's a coach with the field of his dreams.

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Parker Wood is director of marketing for Sand Channel Greens, Inc. He can be reached at 800-379-8873.

