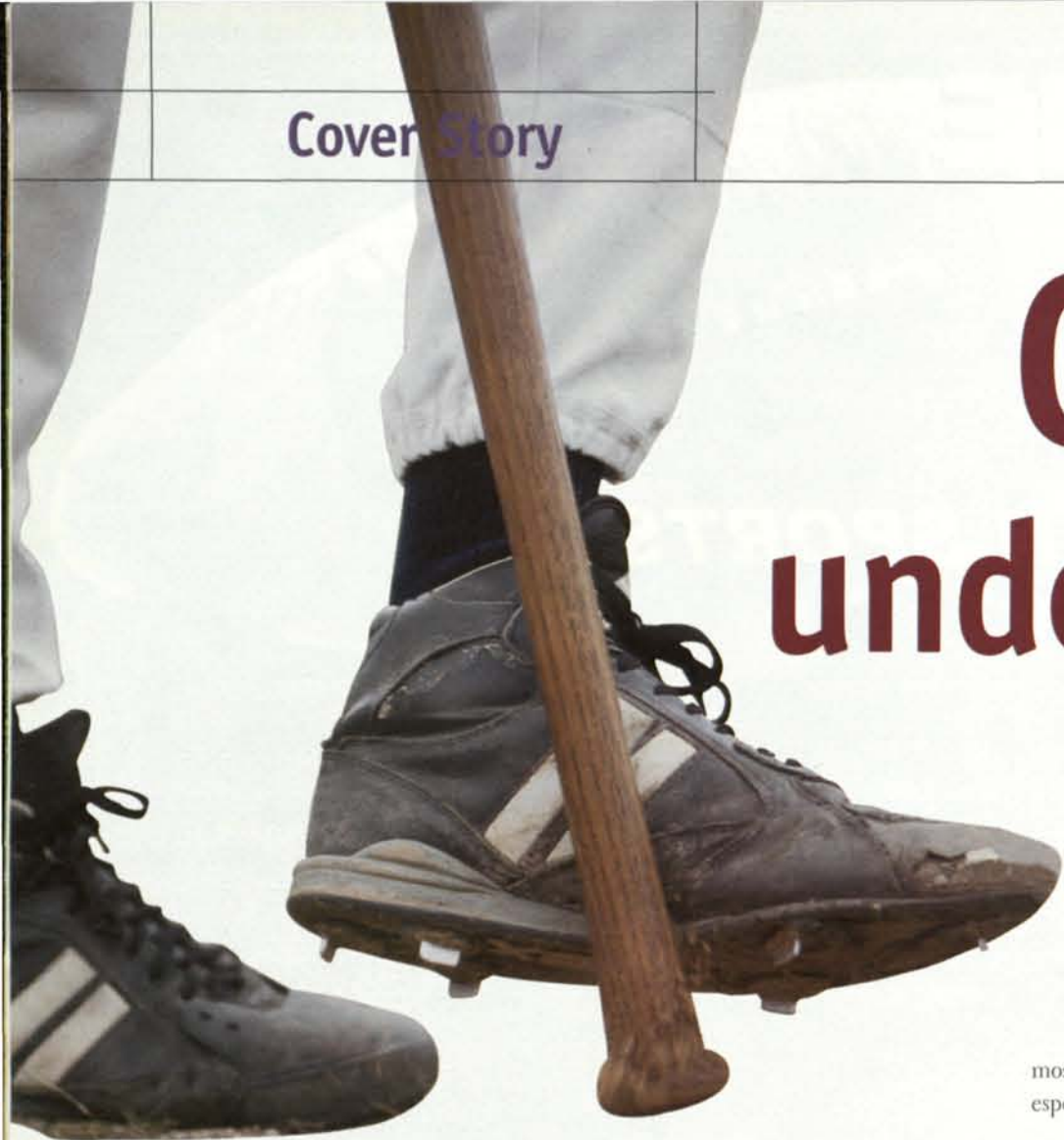


Growing under a roof in

How Bank One Ballpark survived the first November World Series



When the Arizona Diamondbacks launched their first regular season at Bank One Ballpark in Phoenix in 1998, they were the first pro baseball team to play on natural grass in a retractable-dome stadium. Now they're the best baseball team to play on natural grass under a retractable dome. Proud of his championship team and proud of his field, head groundskeeper Grant Trenbeath takes us behind the scenes for a look at the challenges and ultimate victory of growing real grass at the BOB.

"It's pretty amazing to be growing natural grass here in a roofed facility in the desert," says Trenbeath. "So it was really gratifying to be able to provide a great field for the National League Championship games and finally the World Series and survive the ultimate in wear and tear."

Grass, peanuts, and pine tar

From the start, the D-backs have offered fans the combination of an ultramodern facility—complete with a built-in swimming pool—and all the traditional sights, sounds, and smells of America's pastime. The layout of the field dates back 100 years with a dirt path between the pitcher's mound and home plate, reminiscent of those seen in very early pictures of the game. Traditional organ music and the crack of the bat take care of the sounds. As for the smells, an ad sponsored by Bank One in the team's program says it all: "Freshly mowed grass, peanuts, and pine tar, all in one whiff. If the Diamondbacks made cologne, we'd wear it to work."

But by mid-season of the team's second year, it looked like freshly mowed grass at the BOB would be just another field of dreams. Two tough, shade-tolerant grasses, zoysia and a blue-rye mix, had shown promise but ultimately couldn't handle the extreme weather conditions and large amounts of shade. In a single day, the grass could experience searing 100-degree desert heat then 78-degree air conditioning that lulls it to sleep, resulting in slower growth and further inability to handle stress. And even though the turf received natural sunlight and incandescent growth lights at every opportunity,

most games at the BOB are played with the retractable roof closed, spelling trouble especially during a homestand.

"During a home stand, the rightfield corner (which typically gets the most shade from the dome) gets only about 2 hours of sun a day," says Trenbeath. "Even with the dome open all day, the outfield corners receive only 4 hours of sunlight. In winter, two-fifths of the field is in constant shade."

Desperate for a solution, Trenbeath visited West Coast Turf, a large sod grower and installer with farms throughout the Southwest. He wanted to check out the grower's new hybrid bermuda called Bull's-Eye.

"We wanted a grass with great playability, one that's firm yet soft for safe footing and a predictable bounce," said Trenbeath. "We wanted durability and recuperative ability plus a warm-season grass that would overseed well and establish quickly in early spring for our pre-season games beginning late March."

Introduced in 1999, Bull's-Eye is an improved hybrid with a dense upright growth and tightly packed leaves near the soil surface, leading to better footing, greater durability and quicker recovery, according to the grower. Bull's-Eye also shows a more aggressive and complete spring green-up than other bermudas.

"What I saw during my visit was very appealing," says Trenbeath. "Compared to other bermudas, Bull's-Eye is darker and more bluish, definitely something different. I knew I wanted a bermudagrass for toughness and heat tolerance and Bull's-Eye's improved shade tolerance certainly sounded great. So we went for it on the entire field."

During the All-Star break in July of 1999, West Coast Turf's crews installed about 100,000 sq. ft. of sod. Trenbeath had ordered it thick-cut and with a 2-in. soil base for better anchorage and immediate playability. He also specified "big rolls," which are 3-1/2 ft. wide by 30-ft. long (105 sq. ft.). These large rolls cut installation time and create a more immediate finished look with fewer seams.

Seasons later, the Diamondbacks boast the grass as one of the stadium's state-of-the-art amenities and have named Bull's-Eye the official turf of the BOB. Bull's-Eye has become so popular in Arizona that West Coast Turf sells it to consumers under "BOBSod" and it has been specified for the Kansas City Royals/Texas Rangers new spring training facility opening in the Phoenix area this spring, according to the company.



Tony Womack strokes a game-winning hit against the Yankees.

grass the desert

BY PATRICIA AND DAVID FLETCHER

"Even with prolonged shade and extreme heat, Bull's-Eye has remained durable and recovers quickly," says Trenbeath. "Its dark-green color has held up even with our roof closed and the players love how the ball bounces off it."

Every February, the field is resodded with Bull's-Eye and overseeded with West Coast Turf's Chaparral perennial ryegrass. Bull's-Eye begins to overtake the ryegrass during the first month of the season, according to Trenbeath.

"Our transition from ryegrass to Bull's-Eye has been excellent, which means our grass looks and plays great early in the season when we need it," he says.

Exciting 2001 postseason

By September 2001, the D-Backs were winding up for an exciting postseason. Bull's-Eye was still growing well and looking green, but Trenbeath knew the grass would receive more stress with increased shade and traffic as fall and the playoffs approached. By the World Series, 75 percent of the infield would be in complete shade all day.

To give the grass a boost for cover and color during the post-season, Trenbeath

overseeded with 3,000 lbs. of ryegrass over the whole field during a couple breaks in September and October.

"We didn't use classic overseeding techniques because there wasn't time between homestands and our growing conditions are slower by fall," he says. "We didn't scalp and we can't aerify, topdress, and verticut as hard as others do because growth isn't as fast. We pregerminated the seed, put it down, watered, fertilized, kept the roof open and kept the heck off it."

By the time the National League Championship Series arrived in October, the infield was about 90/10 rye/Bull's-Eye and the outfield 60/40 rye/Bull's-Eye. For World Series games, Trenbeath and his crews resodded some areas with Bull's-Eye, painted logos, fertilized, watered, and again stayed off.

"The biggest challenge was when both World Series teams practiced here during the week leading up to Game 1," he says. "Practices are worse than games for wear and tear, especially when you're talking about high-intensity batting practice on an infield that basically is in total shade. Add more foot traffic from media and security on horseback and you've got a lot of stress."

Games 1, 2, 6 and 7 were played in Arizona and Trenbeath and his crew spent 18-hour days mowing, washing wall pads, fertilizing, watering, edging, painting lines, and more, to prep the field. By the time Games 6 and 7 arrived, with 5 resting days before, the field had visibly recuperated—but the groundskeeper was worse for the wear.

"I was like a zombie going into Game 7, exhausted from the physical and emotional roller coaster," says Trenbeath. "As a groundskeeper, you find yourself watching the games and hoping a bad hop doesn't determine the outcome."

"Then just before Game 7, I received a great phone call from the Giants groundskeeper, Scot MacVicar, an old friend of mine. He emphasized what a once-in-a-lifetime experience this was and told me to relax and soak it in. We'd done the preparation and the year had been our field's best. It looked great and played great."

"So, in the bottom of the ninth, Gonzo drives home the game-winning run. The fans go nuts and I run out on my field for a huge celebration. It was tremendous." **ST**

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