

## MOBILE TURF MANAGER MASTERS MOLE CRICKETS AND FIRE ANTS

BY DEBBIE CLAYTON

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Pat White learned the basics of turf maintenance from working on municipal athletic fields and golf courses, but he's applying the same principles to sports stadium maintenance. As assistant general manager of the Mobile BayBears baseball stadium in Mobile, AL, White supervises grounds operations as well as stadium operations for the seven-year-old, 419 Bermudagrass Hank Aaron Stadium.

"I wouldn't be here if the stadium had synthetic turf; I like to grow grass, not push a vacuum cleaner," says White, who also managed maintenance operations for the Birmingham Barons, the BayBears' main rival. "I was hired before the stadium was built and sat in on all construction meetings. It was great because I had input on just about every aspect, from the type of clay used on the infield to where the sprinkler heads are placed."

His intimate knowledge of the stadium infrastructure comes in handy when he needs to locate leaking irrigation valves or pinpoint compaction. The Mobile BayBears facility covers 2.2 acres or 96,000 square feet. The AA team, part of the Southern League, plays 70 regularly scheduled home games between early April and late August.

"If we make the playoffs, the season goes even longer," says White. "We also host high school tournaments and several college games between February and April. Our stadium actually gets a lot of use."

The intense playing schedule leads to one of White's major challenges in maintaining the stadium turf: foot traffic. On any given summer night, some 150 spectators gather in the infield before the game or tramp around on the field during pre-game activities. Combined with the rigors of almost-daily play, foot traffic creates significant compaction.

White's other major challenge is the weather. One of the rainiest cities in the nation, Mobile usually vies with Seattle for most yearly rainfall received. "The rain really hurt us last year," he adds. "It kept the field pretty saturated and we lost quite a bit of turf. When it stays wet like that, the roots don't develop and go deep."

While he can't control the weather, White does try to alleviate compaction. He stepped up his aeration program last summer, aerifying 12 times between April and August.



Other problems White contends with are small but persistent: fire ants and mole crickets. Left uncontrolled, fire ants build mounds on the playing field as well as the berms where spectators gather. "Anyone who lives in the South knows what a nuisance and hazard fire ants are," adds White. "We had to control them or not play ball."

Two years ago, White's Lesco representative suggested he try Chipco's TopChoice insecticide for fire ant control. A granular product based on the active ingredient fipronil, TopChoice is designed to provide control of fire ants for up to one year. He applied the product with a granular spreader and had immediate results.

TopChoice also provided a solution to White's other main insect problem, mole crickets. Present in the area before the field was built, mole crickets started flying as soon as the stadium turned the lights on. Mole crickets are attracted to lights and begin looking for food as soon as they land. They tunnel rapidly just below the soil surface and make trails of pushed-up soil similar to that of a mole, only much smaller.

"Mobile seems to be a hot spot for mole crickets," says White. "Before we got them under control, they tunneled through the turf so much that they weakened the root system. The ground actually crumbled at times when the players ran across it. The situation was potentially hazardous if the players couldn't get their footing."

White was treating up to eight times a year to control mole crickets, using both liquids and baits. He could control the insects for a few weeks, but they kept coming back again. "I was pretty frustrated because nothing worked very well," he says.

"I tried to put it down before the spring hatching," he adds. "It worked so well I didn't see any mole crickets until August. It was highly unusual. Even then, they were just flying in from other areas because of the lights."

Last year, White used TopChoice on the playing field, two berms and the picnic areas, a total of six acres. For the first time, he didn't have to treat again for fire ants and mole crickets the rest of the season. "I definitely will be putting it out every year from now on," says White. "It works so well, I can just relax and not worry about insect problems for a change."

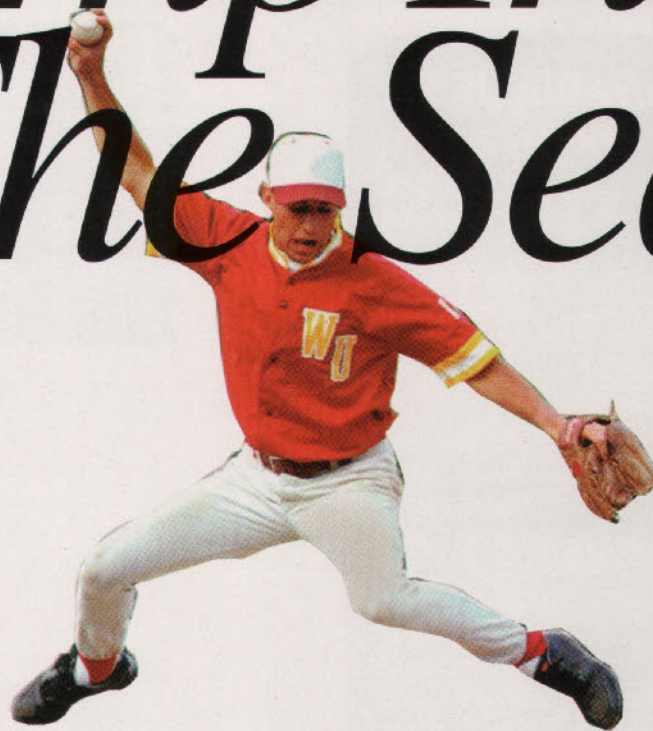
"The problem with baseball is there are too many games," says White. "Bermudagrass needs the summer months to grow, but we're using the field so much that it really gets beaten down. So I try to let it grow and get healthy in the fall, but there's really not enough time. Once I overseed it, there's no telling what will come out in the spring after the ryegrass goes away."

In general, White keeps his

Bermudagrass healthy through regular aeration, fertilization, mowing, and pest control. In seven years of use, the playing field has not been renovated, but White plans to accomplish that within the next few years. **ST**

*Debbie Clayton is a free lance writer from Pennsylvania and a board member of the Turf & Ornamental Communicators Association.*

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