



Central Winds Park Complex of the Year

BY SUZ TRUSTY

Commitment to excellence, every day, no matter what the circumstances, is the driving force that earned Central Winds Park of the City of Winter Springs, FL, STMA's 2003 Sports Field Complex of the Year honors. Holding strong to that commitment despite the incredible onslaught of three major hurricanes demonstrates the dedication of the entire Parks and Recreation Department team to the welfare of their city.

Chuck Pula, Director of Parks and Recreation, describes Central Winds Park as "a jewel of a sports complex" and "a centerpiece of the city." Already twice selected as the recipient of the "Award of Excellence" by the Fields of Excellence Program, Central Winds Park has been pleasing the 30,000 residents of Winter Springs for 12 years.

Pula says, "The complex was built by the city with a \$3 million bond issue in 1992. It has grown right along with the city, becoming a gathering point for families throughout the area. Nearly every resident of Winter Springs has been impacted by the complex, either through the sports programs, the Fourth of July Celebration, or the numerous other special events hosted there. In addition to providing community activities, Central Winds Park is positioned adjacent to Winter Springs High School, which often uses the complex for games and team sports.

"The 72-acre complex is situated about 20 minutes north of downtown Orlando. It contains two baseball fields, two softball fields, four soccer fields, and

the parks and recreation offices. Other features include two playgrounds, a nature trail, two sand volleyball courts, two horseshoe pits, two large pavilions, two concessions stands and a 10-acre amphitheater where you can spread out a blanket and watch the bald eagles fly over or perch on a light pole. Construction, begun before the hurricanes, is now underway again on two more baseball, softball and soccer fields, as well as two new football/lacrosse fields. This will expand the complex to 100 acres," says Pula.

Excellence makes Central Winds Park a standout. The complex reflects beauty throughout the modern design and construction of the buildings and hardscape features to the immaculate appearance of the facilities, landscape and lush green fields.

The complex site was originally a combination of orange groves and a few private homes. The fields were constructed using the native sandy loam soil over a subsurface hardpan. This has been augmented over time through topdressing with a fine sand. That, in combination with annual laser leveling for precise surface drainage, has eliminated the need for a subsurface drainage system for the baseball and softball fields. Underground drainage has been added to one of the soccer fields. The fields were all sprigged with Tifway 419 Bermudagrass.

Each set of fields has their own unique characteristics.

Pula says, "The age 12 and under baseball field features an original infield cut similar to that of the Arizona Diamondbacks. Both baseball fields boast Crimson Stone warning tracks and bullpen areas. They are completely fenced and equipped with six 80-foot concrete poles mounted with a total of 32 Musco SVC-

Z, 1500-watt lamps. There are two sets of aluminum bleachers with a 180-person seating capacity. These are covered with protective shade cloth. Score is kept on new remote electronic scoreboards from modern Plexiglas score booths. Each field is equipped with two ground level concrete dugouts, each with drinking fountains.

"The softball fields have a skinned clay infield and a 300-foot outfield fence with a clay warning track. Six 80-foot concrete poles illuminate games, each with a total of 40 Musco SVC-Z 1500-watt lamps. Seating capacity is also 180 on aluminum bleachers with protective shade cloth. Each softball field is equipped with the same remote electronic scoreboards and dugouts as the baseball fields. The skinned areas of both the baseball and softball fields consist of a 70:30 clay:sand mix amended with calcined clay," says Pula.

"Three of the soccer fields are full-sized, each measuring 330 feet by 195 feet. The fourth field is 240 feet by 120 feet. Each field is lighted and equipped with portable goals, portable team and spectator benches, and with drinking fountains."

Maintenance is fine-tuned to meet the conditions and use schedules of each field. Sports Field Crew Chief Tina Kimball says, "The skinned areas are watered down daily and spike dragged with a field rake, then allowed to dry and mat dragged. Mounds, pitching circles, home plates, and base areas are hand worked



inch drill bit (concrete core drill bit). We used this to drill holes 12 inches apart in a 12-foot by 20-foot area on the soccer fields that held water. We filled the holes with a sand and Turface Pro mix and this solved the water retention problem. The transition from clay to Crimson Stone on the baseball field warning tracks not only added to the aesthetics of the fields, but also increases percolation and eliminated standing water on the tracks."

In 2003, the year the STMA award was earned, 2600 games were played at Central Winds Park, bringing in nearly 130,000 participants and spectators. The complex hosts a variety of baseball, softball and soccer programs, including Babe Ruth baseball and softball, AAU Baseball and Youth Softball Tournaments. In 2003, as in most years, Central Winds hosted several post-season youth baseball and softball tournaments. Play on the soccer fields has increased each year with half of the total field use taking place on those fields. More and more organizations are lining up to use the Central Winds Park complex because of its quality.

Alan Greene, Superintendent of Parks and Grounds, says, "The clearing, grub-

bing and grading on the 27 plus acres of fields under construction had all been completed before the hurricanes. Because of the winds and heavy rains, these fields all needed to be regraded and that will be taking place soon. We're now looking at a March completion date. There will be a four-field baseball/softball complex, two fields for each with 200-foot fences. We're also adding two soccer fields and two combination football/lacrosse fields," says Greene.

"All of the new fields will have a higher sand soil profile than the original fields, and all will have underground drainage. They will be sprigged with Seashore Paspalum. These fields will be used as practice fields initially as there is a shortage of practice facilities in our area, so we're anticipating extremely packed use schedules."

The demand for field time escalates each year. Kimball says, "Weather generally would allow year round field use, but we schedule downtime between seasons to preserve field quality. Even that is adjusted to accommodate as much play as possible. The Babe Ruth play starts in early February and runs into June. We take advantage of that transition period, as participants reregister for the extended season league play, for field renovation. It's about 18 days and, depending on scheduling, the starting and ending dates may vary for each field.

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daily. The warning tracks are dragged with the field rake and the area near the fences is hand raked. Batters boxes, circles and sidelines are dry line marked for games as needed. The grass bordering the skinned areas is edged monthly. We string level the clay areas as needed during the playing season to ensure proper drainage, which helps eliminate rainouts.

"We're always looking for innovative and cost-effective solutions to field problems. For example, we modified our gas-powered auger with an 18-inch long, two-

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"The period from just before Thanksgiving to just after New Years Day is our prime time for repair and renovation. We oversee all the fields. The process starts with aeration as play winds down so it's not too close to overseeding. We'll make a pre-overseeding application of Transit to hold down the poa annua, and then mow shorter in two directions. We apply approximately 300 pounds of a perennial ryegrass blend per acre along with a starter fertilizer. Irrigation is critical. Our irrigation system is controlled by an Irritrol computerized control system that allows for adjusted water pressure per zone. Two-inch Rain Bird scrubber valves operate each zone.

"The recent addition of a new pump system allows us to fine tune water placement and timing more precisely. We run frequent light cycles to encourage germination and give the young seedlings a good start, then switch to longer, less frequent cycles. Because we have so much late season play, we've been hitting the Thanksgiving weekend for the actual overseeding, which is pushing the zone for germination temperatures. But so far it's been successful. We'll keep nitrogen levels lower, and add iron to light up the green of the rye," says Kimball.

"For the transition back to Bermudagrass, we'll cut back on the water, maybe stopping irrigation for a short period once we hit temperatures into the 80s. Then we'll boost the nitrogen and adjust the irrigation program to wake up the Bermuda."

The commitment to quality at the complex has brought praise from around the country. John Deere selected Central Winds Park as the featured complex in an issue of its JD Sidelines magazine. Floyd Perry of GMS Sports Field Maintenance

"MY STAFF AND I AREN'T MAGICIANS; WE NEED . . . THE COMBINATION OF FINANCIAL BACKING AND GENUINE RESPECT FOR EXCELLENCE." TINA KIMBALL, SPORTS FIELD CREW CHIEF

Services was very impressed during his tour of the facility noting, "There aren't too many parks and recreational fields like yours." Perry brought a group of athletic facility managers from throughout the United States to see the park late last year.

Michael Hurd, from City of Winter Haven, home of the Cleveland Indians spring training complex, was also extremely impressed: "In my years in the sports turf industry, having been to complexes all over the United States and Canada, your complex stands out as one of the best, if not THE best."

All of this praise is not easily earned. An incredible amount of work goes into the upkeep and maintenance of these fields.

Greene says, "We're all on the same page here, focused on excellence. We know that we have one of the finest complexes in the nation and are always trying

to make it better. The staff, headed up by Tina Kimball, has the knowledge and the dedication it takes to make it all work. They go over every inch of this ground every day and take pride in making constant improvements. The City is committed to providing the equipment and resources necessary to support this level program and the community respects and appreciates it."

Kimball says, "We have tremendous support from the entire City administration, backing us financially and by their actions. They understand that you get what you pay for in a turf program. My staff and I aren't magicians; we need the resources to accomplish our goals. The combination of financial backing and genuine respect for excellence in the maintenance of the facilities makes this a total team effort."

Then there's the weather factor. While Florida may be the ideal vacation spot for many, the subtropical climate is filled with challenges. Pula says, "Winter brings sudden freezes and months of very dry weather.

Central Winds Park Maintenance Programs

Mowing: Fields are mowed every Monday, Wednesday and Friday weather permitting at a 1-inch height of cut using a five-gang reel mower. Baseball infields are mowed with a walk-behind reel mower. Mowing direction is changed at each mowing.

Fertilization: Soil testing is conducted on all fields in June and October. Testing results are analyzed to establish fertilization programs adjusted to the climatic variables of the region, turf growth rate, and the field use schedules. Applications are scheduled every 4 to 6 weeks at 200 to 300 pounds per acre with the rate and timing adjusted according to the fertilizer product used.

Aeration: Full field aeration in two directions at a depth of 4 to 6-inches takes place a minimum of four times per year (March, June, September, November). Highly compacted areas receive additional aeration as needed.

Insect, Weed and Disease Control: Conditions are monitored daily. Applications of control products are made as needed for turf and park user protection following established IPM procedures.

Overseeding: Overseeding is conducted in mid to late November with a three-way blend of perennial ryegrasses at the rate of 300 pounds per acre. A 5-15-20 fertilization at the rate of 300 pounds per acre accom-

panies overseeding. As early summer temperatures warm consistently, irrigation is reduced and may be stopped completely to facilitate the transition back to Bermudagrass.

Resodding: Resodding of high traffic wear areas takes place as needed during the June and November downtimes.

Topdressing: Fine sand topdressing is applied following aeration in late June during the fields' summer downtime. The rate varies from 1/4 to 1/2 inch depending on field conditions.

Field Marking: Soccer fields are painted weekly. Baseball and softball fields are dry lined for games as needed. The 20-foot by 40-foot "Fields of Excellence" logo is painted with aerosol marking in three colors (blue, white and yellow) for the opening of the fall and spring seasons and for special tournaments.

Laser Leveling: The fields are laser leveled annually to insure proper drainage and help eliminate rainouts.

Infield Clay: The softball field skinned infields, the skinned areas of the baseball fields, the mounds, pitching circles, home plates and base areas and the warning tracks are worked daily during the playing season.

Spring and summer are known for their sudden violent thunderstorms and local flooding. In addition, Florida averages temperatures in the mid to upper 90s for half of the year. Central Florida is known as "The Lightning Capital of the World" which wrecks havoc with electrical, computerized, and time systems. On top of all of these variables, Florida is in a prime tropical storm and hurricane zone."

The hurricanes of 2004 hit hard in Winter Springs. Charley came first, with the eye of the hurricane right over Central Winds Park. Charley featured sustained winds of 120 miles per hour and gusts ranging from 135 to 140 miles per hour. The scoreboards came down and the light fixtures were damaged. The exteriors of the buildings sustained significant damage. A brick wall came down in the dumpster area. Clay from the ball fields washed onto walkways and into the turf.

"Hurricane winds keep changing directions," says Pula. "That's what caused the greatest damage. Trees were twisted and pulled completely from the ground."

Armed with chain saws, Kimball and crew were joined by Greene and Pula and every available department member to attack the damage. They learned the meaning of hangers (a limb ready to fall) and leaners (a tree leaning a certain percentage from the root base). And they dealt with debris, branches, treetops, and entire trees pulled from the ground with root masses of 14 feet and greater on top of the turf. Buildings were checked for structural damage. Electrical power was out throughout the city. The concession stand, run by generators, became a food station for the masses of workers from the police and fire departments, the parks and recreation staff, and the public.

"Public safety was our primary concern," says Greene. "People sought Central Winds Park as a place of refuge. With massive damage and power out at their own homes, our staff was on the job committed to opening community parks as a place to seek respite in recreation. While other communities were using their athletic fields as open space to pile debris, the City of Winter Springs opted to preserve that resource to serve the community."

Then Frances came and lingered. For two days the force of this hurricane pelted the city with winds and pounding rain. Hangers that hadn't yet been cleared fell; leaners toppled; trees undamaged by Charley were uprooted. Power, finally restored, was gone again. And the crews, still fighting the aftermath of the first storm, attacked the debris even harder.

Unthinkable, but very real, Jeanne came next. Once again the winds and rains attacked. Greene says, "With the already saturated conditions, this storm posed threats of residential flooding. The City offered the location in front of our park as a site for filling sandbags. The initial plan was to dump the sand, drop off the bags, and let people fill what they needed. By 7:00 am, with the first 3000 bags dropped off and the sand yet to appear, Tina was already facing a lineup of cars and lots of concerned and anxious people. We rallied the staff and, once the sand appeared, started filling bags for organized pickup. Between 7:30 AM and 6:00 PM, we'd handed out 12,000 sand bags."

Hurricane Ivan, though initially threatening, took an altered route, sparing the city. The cleanup work continued. Tired, facing the damages and outages at home, the staff was on the job. Plagued by heat and swarms of mosquitoes, they systematically tackled the cleanup. Their first concern was removal of debris that might endanger park visitors. They then moved additional debris away from public zones. This debris was stacked and hauled away to a dedicated mulching site. In addition, they tackled the regular workload and general operations to keep the park open and the fields in playable conditions.

Pula and Greene focused on the mounds of paperwork, the precise tracking and reporting of cleanup efforts necessary for the financial reimbursement to help offset the incredible outlay of resources. With three separate hurricanes, the details as related to each must be recorded down to the GPS position of the fallen trees, the record of precisely how each cleanup worker's time was spent, the engine cc



and horsepower as well as the type of each piece of equipment used, what it was used for, and for what period, and even the cubic yardage of the debris.

In the end, over 90 trees were lost in Central Winds Park, with a total of 200 trees lost throughout the park system. That doesn't include the leaners, or the 300 or so trees with significant hangers. Just clearing the debris from the fields and other grass areas throughout the parks so the turf could be mowed was a massive task.

"Our incredible staff pulled together throughout it all," says Pula. "It was through their commitment and dedication that we were able to keep the park open and safe in spite of the humbling experience of the forces of the storms. Central Winds Park is truly a place for the community as a whole to come together. Through the top-notch sports programs and events at Central Winds Park, the City of Winter Springs is able to stay a close-knit community."

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