



# Major League Baseball's "Turf Goddess"

**D**etroit Tigers head groundskeeper Heather Nabozny laughs when you mention that she has a Turf Goddess fan club. But she is very serious when it comes to the business of professional grounds keeping. Practically born into this industry, she began her journey toward making

history as Major League Baseball's first female groundskeeper in the small farming community of Milford, MI.

Heather got her first taste of grounds keeping while helping her father with his lawn care business. Working during the summers, she never imagined that her time enjoying the outdoor air would lead her down a path that

would change the face of professional grounds keeping. But it was inevitable.

During a summer seminar on turfgrass programs, Heather realized that she truly enjoyed getting her hands dirty and wanted to have a career doing something she loved. Heather embraced the art of turf maintenance and began taking classes at Michigan State

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University. Upon graduating from MSU in 1993 with a degree in Sports and Commercial Turf, Heather took her first major step toward making a name for herself and opening the door for other women interested in professional grounds keeping.

Heather credits many people with her success, including her MSU advisor, David Gilstrap, who helped her get her first professional job for the Toronto Blue Jays. She later became head groundskeeper for the West Michigan White Caps, where she had the opportunity to experiment with creative mowing patterns, some of which are highlighted in a book published by Boston Red Sox groundskeeper David Mellor.

In 1999, Frank Feneck, head groundskeeper for the Detroit Tigers announced his retirement, and Heather received a call to interview for the job. “It was an honor to be considered for the position,” said Heather. “I am follow-

ing in the footsteps of a great professional groundskeeper.”

Being the first female in a male dominated industry hasn’t intimidated Heather. “There is a great network of people I work with,” says Heather. “We are a close knit community and everyone helps everyone. I don’t feel treated any differently from my colleagues.”

During the season, Heather and her crew work an average of 65 hours a week. This leaves little time for personal recreation, especially since days begin at 9am and end close to midnight. “Preparation of the field at Comerica Park begins in March and sometimes doesn’t end until early December. This year was especially long considering the team played in the World Series,” says Heather.

Regular field maintenance includes mowing, painting the foul lines, and dragging the warning track. Heather uses Pro Mound in the pitcher’s mound and batter’s boxes and has



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Heather, second from left, and her crew at the 2005 All-Star Game.

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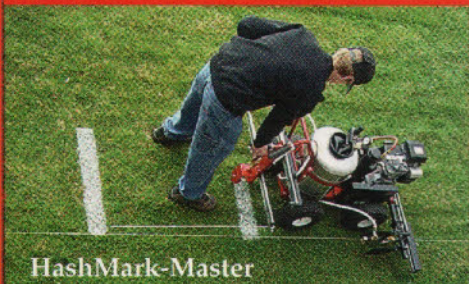


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developed her own special "toe test," to monitor the moisture in these areas. "You don't want the mound too brittle or on the other hand, slippery," says Heather. "You want your cleat to go in and come back out."

To keep on top of her game, Heather regularly consults with many of the industry's most celebrated experts. She is grateful to George Toma, NFL turf consultant and Ed Mangan, NFL Field Director, for mentoring her and allowing her the opportunity to serve as part of the grounds crew for the Super Bowl, which she has been participating in for several years.

Heather has also worked with Roger Bossard, head groundskeeper for the Chicago White Sox. Bossard led the reconstruction of the Detroit Tigers Comerica Park that was completed in 2000. While working on the field reconstruction with Heather, Roger stressed the importance of clay on the infield and offered maintenance tips for keeping the ground firm but soft.

"Roger taught me how to work the infield dirt and the importance of 'getting to know the skin,'" says Heather. "By hand dragging the nail and screen drags, you can feel the infield moisture, the texture of conditioner, and the thickness of the conditioner. That is one important tip that Roger passed on to me."

"Roger also is adamant about the importance of particle size in your soil conditioner. He uses Pro's Choice Pro Blend which I also use on my field," says Heather.

Just as others have mentored Heather, sharing and passing along knowledge is important in this business. "I've received a lot of support from my peers," says Heather. She, in turn, shares what she has learned with her grounds crew and numerous interns who come her way. "I have received lots of support and want to help others coming up in this industry."



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While Heather holds the responsibility of overseeing all field maintenance at Comerica Park, she does not do it alone. She works with a four-member full-time seasonal grounds crew, her assistant Gail DeGennaro, Charles McGee, Ryan Silva, and Riley Paquet. Her team also includes two full-time seasonal interns, Noel Brusius and Matt Gerhardt. In addition to her full time staff, Heather works with an event staff of about 20.

The 2006 World Series was an exciting time for Heather, as this was her first World Series as head groundskeeper for a competing team. "We didn't do anything especially different to the field for the World Series," says Heather. "However, the weather during the games was quite rainy. The field had to be covered more often and monitored for moisture. We had a lot of Pro's Choice soil conditioner on hand."

"We topdressed the field prior to one of the games to control the moisture," says Heather. "Between games we made sure things were moist but not slippery, we really had to monitor this because of the rain."

"When we mow during the months of September and October, we collect our clippings

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because they take longer to decompose during the fall season. Removing them helps to prevent the slime layer that can add to slickness of the turf," said Heather.

Now that the 2006 baseball season is over and the cold has settled in, Heather is looking forward to once again participating in the Super Bowl as part of the grounds crew. She also can't wait to relax for a while and hit the slopes for a few weeks with friends. But as Heather reminds, grounds keeping is year round work. "Over the winter, I'll catch up on paperwork and work the Super Bowl in January." It's then back to work in March preparing for what she hopes is another winning season for her home team.

So, whether you consider Heather a Turf Goddess or not, one thing is undeniable, she has earned her place among the few distinguished Major League Baseball professional groundskeepers. Heather's commitment to excellence and professionalism in the industry can be witnessed every time you watch the Detroit Tigers play a home game, and for Heather there is nothing better than doing what she loves.

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