

SportsField

MANAGEMENT

October 2025

Vol. 41 No. 10

The Official Publication of the Sports Field Management Association

Women in Turf Team **8** | College Baseball Field of the Year **12**
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Editor's Note



John Kmitta

Associate Publisher /
Editorial Brand Director
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763-383-4405

Joe Bean understood the assignment.

He had been approached by a young, fresh-faced reporter from the local newspaper who had been given the task of writing a profile piece about Bean, his life, his career, and his efforts to revitalize the local library – all for a special section showcasing community leaders. That reporter was me.

Bean could have been brusque or reserved or just given me the basic answers to all of my awkwardly structured questions. Instead, he gave me an hour and a half of his time. A former journalist himself, Bean knew the best anecdotes to allow me to tell his story in an interesting way. More than two decades later, that rainy fall afternoon speaking with Joe Bean over a cup of tea still resonates with me. It's because it made me realize that I love sharing other people's stories.

At that time, I was grinding away writing dozens of articles per week, spending my evenings sitting through countless village board, school board and library board meetings; heading to the county courthouse to dig for the latest scoop on local trials; and pretty much covering anything else newsworthy around town. I even wrote movie reviews for the entertainment section. But all of that paled in comparison to writing feature profiles.

That is why this issue is so special to me. For the third year in a row, I'm proud to present you with the *SportsField Management* Rising Star Awards,

sponsored by STEC Equipment. For this issue, I had the pleasure of speaking with each of this year's five Rising Stars. As in past years, after speaking with the winners, I am confident that we made the correct choices.

Each of this year's winners was overly gracious with their time, and I thoroughly enjoyed my conversations with these amazing young sports field managers. They shared with me their career journeys, their challenges and their triumphs. They understood the assignment. I just hope that I have been able to do justice to each of them in the pages that follow.

But this issue is not just about the Rising Star Award winners. It's also about the Women In Turf Team, who once again volunteered to help with the Little League Softball World Series. It's about the College Baseball FOY winner, Joe Stumpo. It's about the students from Atwater High School and Golden Valley High School who worked with the crew at the LA Memorial Coliseum. It's about those who volunteered for the Little League Baseball World Series. And it's about Rob Guthrie, who manages the fields at the Little League International Complex year round.

It's about people. It's about shining a light on their work. It's about telling their stories.

Enjoy. **SFM**

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President's Message



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Adam Thoms, Ph.D.

SFMA President

athoms@iastate.edu

As of approximately six weeks ago, Paula Sliefert officially assumed the role of SFMA CEO, and I'm pleased to report that the transition has been smooth and successful.

In the short time she has been with us Paula has brought fresh energy and a clear, strategic mindset to the organization. She has quickly immersed herself in the day-to-day operations, and is already making a positive impact. One of the key strengths she brings is a strong focus on data-driven decision making, which is helping to bring clarity and direction to our initiatives.

A particular area of emphasis has been our membership categories. Paula is leading efforts to streamline and clarify these categories, with the goal of identifying opportunities to improve retention and drive renewals. Her approach is thoughtful, targeted and grounded in actionable insights. The following are two areas in which Paula's leadership is already making a difference:

LISTENING TOUR

Paula sent almost 500 emails to solicit feedback from committee members, commercial members, past presidents, and the SFMA Board of Directors about how

SFMA is doing and what we can do better. There was also a link sent to all SFMA members for their feedback. Paula spoke with nearly 240 members as part of the listening tour, and she continues to get feedback. The goal is to present the findings to the board at the fall board meeting in mid-October, and then begin to implement some of those suggestions. We plan to share portions of the listening tour with the membership as part of the annual meeting.

STAFF RETREAT

SFMA staff had a three-day retreat to discuss some strengths and weaknesses, as well as have Paula lay out some expectations after she was able to see the organization for 75 days. I attended the last two days of the retreat to make sure the board would follow up on their end. Paula met with former SFMA CEO Kim Heck for a bit, the group met with George Toma, and we also visited several professional stadiums in the area to check in and remind them that we value their membership.

I'm excited to see more changes as we move forward and start to prepare for the SFMA Conference in Fort Worth, Texas. **SFM**

– Adam Thoms, Ph.D.



Little League Softball World Series Grounds Crew

Before the first pitch and long after the last out, a different kind of team sets the stage at Stallings Stadium at Elm Street Park (Greenville, N.C.): an all-female grounds crew that has become a signature of the Little League Softball World Series (LLSWS).

What began as a history-making experiment in 2022 is now an annual tradition that is elevating the craft of sports field management — and inspiring the next generation of girls to see the game, and the industry, in a new light.

In 2022, the LLSWS welcomed its first all-female grounds crew, 16 women from throughout the country who volunteered to prepare and maintain the championship stage. The effort was organized with the Sports Field Management Association (SFMA) and spearheaded by then-SFMA leader Sun Roesslein, CSFM, who approached tournament grounds lead Chris Ball, CSFM, to make the concept a reality.

“This is one of the first times anything like this has ever happened in the sports world,” Roesslein said at the time, reflecting on the moment’s significance.

The following year, the crew expanded and formalized planning, with Roesslein serving on a committee alongside Ball, Nina Oldenkamp, and Amy Fouty, CSFM. By 2023 the women’s crew covered all eight days of the tournament — and supported Athletes Unlimited pro games hosted in Greenville the same week — underscoring both the depth of talent and the trust placed in the team.

In 2024, the “Women In Turf Team” returned for a third consecutive year, again under Roesslein and Oldenkamp’s leadership, earning headlines for their precision and poise while managing through tropical weather to keep the event on time.

Roesslein also credits the crew, under the guidance Ball, that volunteers each year to convert the field from a grass infield baseball field to the softball field for the week. They take over the field a couple weeks ahead of the tournament and begin the transformation.

The 2025 LLSWS ran August 3–10, continuing the tradition in Greenville, and drawing national attention across ESPN platforms. Coverage highlighted how women are leading in broadcast production and on the field crews — another signal that representation is growing across the event.

Among this year’s volunteers was SFMA Education Manager Jennifer McLendon, who joined the on-field crew.

“Stepping onto the dirt at the LLSWS was absolute joy. Experiencing it up close gave me an even greater appreciation for the craftsmanship behind safe, beautiful playing surfaces — and made me prouder than ever to be part of the sports field management profession.”

For young athletes, seeing women command the craft that makes championship softball possible is powerful. It shows softball does not end when playing days do — there is a vibrant, technical and creative profession behind every safe hop and true bounce. For the industry, the LLSWS has become a high-visibility proving ground for best practices: managing moisture and clay profiles during tight TV windows, rapid turnaround between games, and communicating across operations teams with precision.

And for SFMA, the all-female crew is part of a broader commitment to mentorship, workforce development, and inclusion — opening doors and building confidence for students, career changers, and seasoned pros alike.

“Being part of something that exposes younger female athletes to an all-women’s grounds crew is critical to the future of this industry,”



said first-time LLSWS volunteer Tessa Hospod, graduate research assistant, University of Connecticut. “I want to support the next generation of young individuals that are discovering their interests for the first time.”

According to Hospod, the best part of the experience was the strong sense of mentorship that the more experienced women in turf provided to the younger members of the team.

“I learned so much from the other women about not only field management, but other career and life advice and got to know them on a personal level,” said Hospod.



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Sarah Martin, CSFM, park supervisor, City of Phoenix, has volunteered to be part of the LLSWS grounds crew for all four years that it has been available to the Women In Turf Team.

"I absolutely love this event, giving back, and showing kids that this is a profession and a way to stay in the sport," said Martin. "Working with like-minded women is amazing, and we have a blast. We have folks on the crew that have years upon years of experience, and we have those that have none. We take the time to teach and show how to do the work."

Hospod's advice to other women in turf is to challenge yourself with these types of opportunities, as they will only make you better at your job in the long term.

"Learning from these experiences, you can bring them back to your facility and maybe even incorporate what you learned into your program and share what you learned with your team," said Hospod. "Opportunities like this only make the turfgrass industry stronger, connecting us together to foster a stronger message."

Added Martin, "This is a fantastic event, held at an amazing location in Greenville. Little League and the community are fantastic to work with."

What started with a phone call and a bold idea has become a cornerstone of the LLSWS. Thanks to Roesslein's early push and the continued collaboration with Little League and a growing network of volunteers, girls in the stands — and on the field — now see women setting the standard for excellence on the world's most-watched youth softball stage. That is progress you can measure in perfectly set bases, crisp chalk lines, and faces lit with possibility.

SFMA Staff Retreat

SFMA's new CEO, Paula Sliefert, kicked off her tenure with an energizing staff retreat in Lawrence, Kansas, designed to build connection, set strategic direction, and reinforce SFMA's commitment to listening and growth.

The retreat began with a team-building challenge at a local Escape Room, setting a collaborative tone for the days ahead. The business portion launched with a discussion on Complex Change Management, providing a framework for the organization's ongoing transformation. A key highlight was the Listening Tour Discussion, where staff reviewed insights gathered from members across the country. Four guiding questions shaped the conversation: What is SFMA doing well? Where can it improve? What should it start doing? And what should it stop doing? These discussions led to actionable recommendations that will be shared at the next SFMA Board meeting in October for guidance and input.

In addition to visiting the grounds crews at several iconic Kansas City professional sports venues — including the Royals (Trevor Vance hosted), Sporting KC (Casey Montgomery hosted), Chiefs (Travis Hogan hosted) and KC Current (Mira Emma hosted), — the group had the honor of spending time with SFMA's last living founder, George Toma, whose passion at the age of 96 continues to inspire the profession. Another meaningful moment was when Sliefert connected in person with retired SFMA CEO Kim Heck, who led the organization with dedication for ~18 years. This meeting was a special opportunity to honor SFMA's legacy while looking ahead to its future. **SFM**



Accountability in Sports Field Management

Accountability is a word we hear often, but in sports field management it takes on a unique weight. We are responsible for more than just turf. Every blade of grass, every mound of clay, and every painted line plays into the experience of athletes, coaches and fans. Fields must be safe, playable and aesthetically pleasing — and accountability is the thread that holds those expectations together.

The phrase “that’s not my job” might be one of the most dangerous things a sports field management professional can say. Sports turf work is a team effort, and ownership matters. A protruding sprinkler head, a large unrepaired divot, or a poorly secured base anchor doesn’t care whose “job” it was to check it. If it fails, accountability lands on the whole crew; and, more importantly, it impacts the safety of the players.

Accountability is not about blame — it’s about ownership. It is the willingness to see what needs to be done and act on it, whether or not it is listed under your formal job description or work order. Picking up trash along the warning track (or the concourse), adjusting a crooked goal post, or repairing a hole in the protective netting may not feel like headline tasks, but they reinforce a culture where everyone takes pride in the finished product.

Accountability shows up in the details. An irrigation repair isn’t complete until every head has been tested. An infield skin repair isn’t just filling the hole; it is ensuring the repair is on grade to prevent standing water. It is brooming all grass edges post-game even though no runners made it past second base during the game. Those small steps combine to create a field that athletes can trust, and coaches can respect.

On the flip side, when accountability breaks down, the results are easy to see. Corners get cut. Safety is compromised. Trust erodes. Maybe the field still looks green from the stands, but up close the inconsistencies are glaring. Sooner or later, those cracks show in the form of complaints, injuries or lost confidence from the teams we serve.

The most common way accountability is avoided is through deflection. “Nobody told me to do that.” “I did my part.” “The equipment broke, so it’s not my fault.” Each of these statements may carry truth, but they don’t carry accountability. A mower breaking down is not your fault — but how you handle that moment is your responsibility. Do you shrug it off and walk away, or do you help find the solution so the field is ready when it’s needed?

Accountability is also often confused with work ethic. The two are related, but they are not the same. A person can work long hours and still not be accountable if their results lack consistency and completeness. Another may work fewer hours but deliver work that is thorough, dependable and team centered. Work ethic reflects effort. Accountability reflects ownership. The strongest teams have both, but accountability will build a stronger, more sustainable culture every time.

Building accountability within our crews and organizations begins with clear expectations. Everyone on the team should understand not just what the tasks are, but the standard to which they are to be completed. From there, accountability grows via follow-through — doing what you say you’ll do. It grows through recognition — leadership calling out moments when accountability is shown so others see its value. And it grows through modeling — a sports field manager who quietly cuts corners will never inspire a crew to take ownership, but a manager who models daily accountability builds a crew that follows suit.

Accountability is not about perfection — it’s about intention. It is choosing to own the outcome, even when it would be easier to pass the buck.

Ask yourself: When was the last time you showed accountability, even in a small way? Did you step up, or did you step back? How did that choice impact the people who rely on the field you manage?

Leadership is not just about title or position, it’s about work ethic, accountability, and the daily choices we make in the field. **SFM**

[Editor’s note: This article is part of an ongoing series. The next article will focus on communication, because accountability without communication often falls short.]



Alpha Jones, CSFM, is an athletic field specialist at Duke University. He also serves on the SFMA Board of Directors as President-Elect. He can be reached at morthangrass@gmail.com

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J.I. CLEMENTS SHOWCASES the tireless effort our team puts in year round to produce what I believe is now one of the best playing surfaces in all of college baseball – especially with the condition this field was in upon our arrival to Georgia Southern. We installed new infield grass, got rid of all the lips and completely rebuilt the mound and plate areas that were in utter disarray. The dedication of our team made this a professional-level facility on a tight budget.

– Joe Stumpo, director of sports turf/grounds





Level and category of submission:
College Baseball

Field manager: Joe Stumpo

Title: Director of sports turf/grounds

Education: High School

Experience: Eight years with the Durham Bulls, Triple-A affiliate to the Tampa Bay Rays – four of those as the head groundskeeper of Historic Durham Athletic Park (DAP) where Bull Durham was filmed. During my tenure it was also home to North Carolina Central baseball, which was a Division I program in the MEAC. After my time in Durham, I took a position with the Toronto Blue Jays at their spring training facility in Dunedin, Florida, and spent roughly a full season there. I then took the position here at Georgia Southern University as director of sports turf/grounds in October of 2022, and oversee all athletic fields.

Original facility construction: 2004

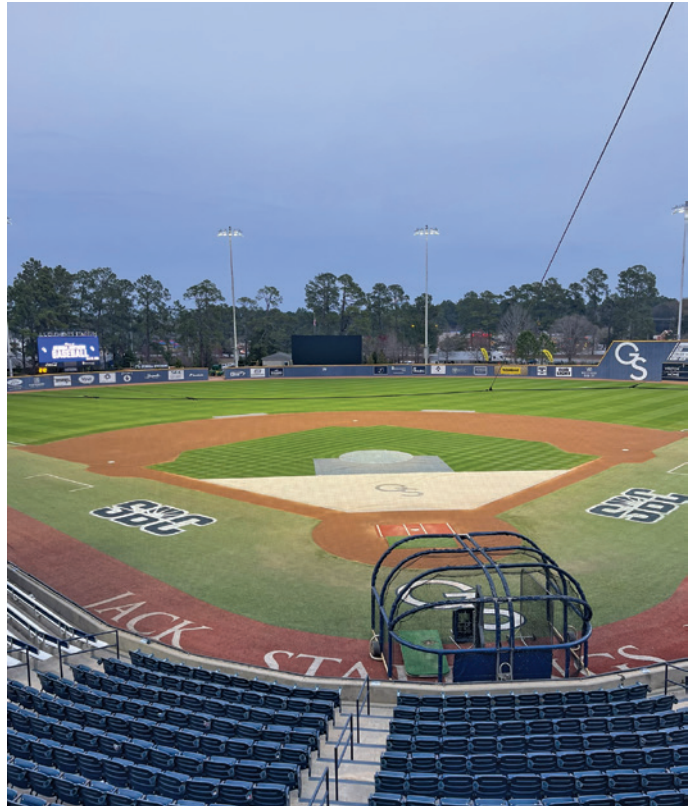
Full-time staff: Matt McCutcheon

Turfgrass: Outfield is Tifway 419 bermudagrass. Infield and back arc 20 feet off is NorthBridge bermudagrass.

Overseed: Perennial ryegrass

Rootzone: Sand

Drainage: Drain tile and severe crown





SportsField Management (SFM): Congratulations on the Field of the Year win. What are you most proud of with this win?

Joe Stumpo: I'm most proud of what we've been able to accomplish in the three seasons we've been here from where this field was upon our arrival to Georgia Southern. None of it would be possible without the dedication from my assistant, Matt McCutcheon, and what he's done; our two grad assistants we've had in that time — Javier Fleek-Quiros and Jonah Doyle — and the tireless effort from our student worker group that have been here from the beginning and have really taken off in the sports turf realm.

SFM: What were the biggest challenges you have faced with the winning field, and how have you approached those challenges?

Stumpo: The biggest challenge we face is balancing J.I. with all of the other athletic fields and sports we have here with the goal of providing the same TLC to all on a somewhat limited

budget and staffing numbers. J.I. from a playing surface standpoint is on the older side, so weather around the beginning of baseball season can be a challenge with the sporadic weather patterns we experience here in southeast Georgia.

SFM: Can you share a little about your overall management approach to the winning field and what you feel have been the most important aspects to getting this field to an award-winning level?

Stumpo: In our approach at J.I. we try our best to mimic practices that we used in the professional baseball setting and replicate that here from a field playability standpoint, but also the overall experience for our athletes and staff. Baseball means a lot here at Georgia Southern, and is rich in history and winning; so our goal is to not only provide the best playing surface in the Sun Belt Conference, but in the country. Although it may be a small part in the process, we hope that when guys are here for a visit, they see the field and say "wow."



SFM: Please tell us about your crew, and anything else you would like us to know about your organization and the fields/facilities that you manage?

Stumpo: The crew we have here is phenomenal. My assistant, Matt McCutcheon, is by far one of the best in the business. Without him and his leadership, this award would have never been possible. The two grad assistants we've had in our time here are extremely passionate about what they do and always willing to tackle any task at hand. The student workers that have been with us have really grown into the industry and the standard that we've tried to set here at Georgia Southern. I truly believe if they wanted to, they could make great sports field managers on their own in the industry. It's a small but tight-knit crew, and that makes it fun to be around and work together on a daily basis. We manage approximately 13 acres of natural turf

here with baseball, softball, soccer and our football/soccer practice facility, so we're always on the move. We also manage our football stadium and indoor practice facility, which are synthetic turf.

SFM: Can you share a bit of insight into what the Field of the Year application process was like for you, as well as any tips you might have for other sports field managers?

Stumpo: The Field of the Year application process is very well laid out on the SFMA website to follow the steps and submit what is required. It takes time to be as thorough as you need to be, so definitely start the application process early so you don't forget any key pieces of information. Throughout the year, take as many pictures as possible on the field you plan to submit from every aspect — good or bad — so you have plenty of pictures choose from. **SFM**

JOHN MASCARO'S PHOTO QUIZ

CAN YOU IDENTIFY THIS TURFGRASS PROBLEM?

PROBLEM:

Wet grass

TURFGRASS AREA:

Professional stadium field

LOCATION:

Jacksonville, Florida

TURFGRASS VARIETY:

419 bermudagrass

Answer on page 35

John Mascaro is president of Turf-Tec International



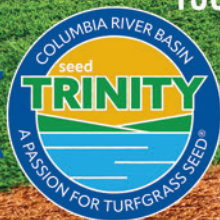
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SportsField Management magazine Rising Star Award *Winners* announced

All profile articles written by John Kmitta

Welcome to our coverage of the *SportsField Management* magazine Rising Star Awards, sponsored by STEC Equipment. The pages that follow showcase the 2025 Rising Star winners.

The awards highlight the best up-and-coming leaders in the sports field management industry. Nominees were submitted earlier this year from throughout the sports field management industry.*

Rising Star nominees had to be under the age of 40 as of January 1, 2025; or, if over the age of 40, must have been new to the sports field management industry within the last 10 years.

Candidates were evaluated based on professional accomplishments, leadership, community and industry involvement, philanthropic efforts and other exemplary qualities.

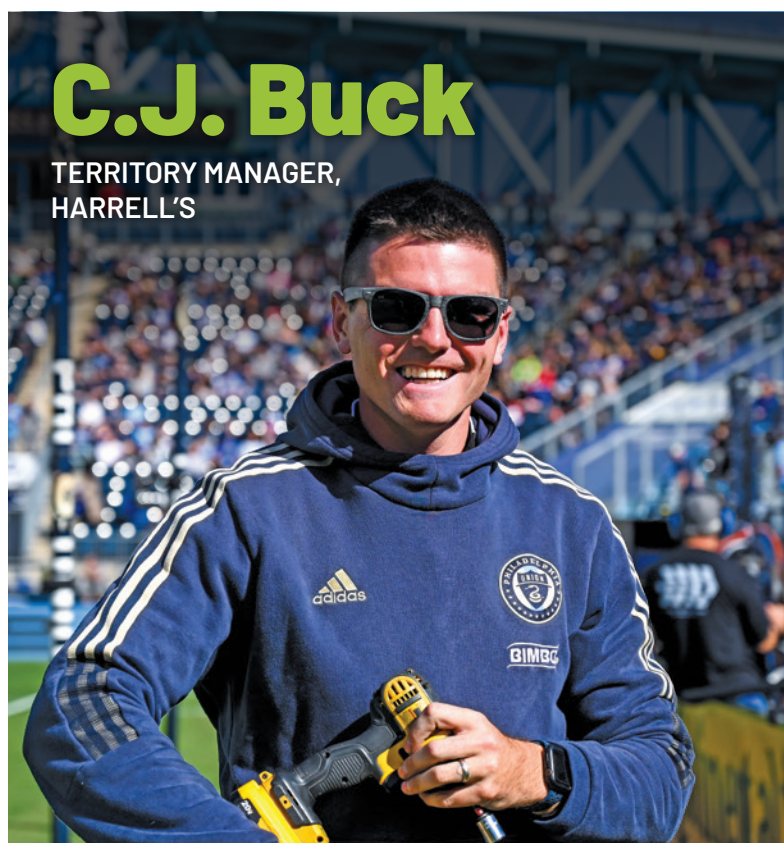
The Rising Star Awards review panel included *SportsField Management* magazine staff, as well as a panel of SFMA members from various areas of the industry. Rising Star Award winners were nominated by their peers and selected as winners by their peers.

The 2025 Rising Star Award winners are (in alphabetical order by last name):

✦ C.J. Buck ✦ Justin Danelutt ✦ Marcus Elswick ✦ Mira Emma ✦ Gage Knudson

*The *SportsField Management* magazine Rising Star Awards, sponsored by STEC Equipment, are an independent award production created and presented by *SportsField Management* magazine. Although SFMA members were involved in the nominee review process, the awards program is not an official SFMA award. As such, nominees do not need to be members of the national SFMA to be considered for a Rising Star Award.





C.J. Buck

TERRITORY MANAGER,
HARRELL'S

Soccer has always been a part of life for *SportsField Management* Rising Star Award Winner C.J. Buck.

"I started playing soccer when I was four or five and never looked back," he said. "I wasn't good enough to go anywhere with it after high school; but I always enjoyed playing, and it stuck with me. Soccer is always on the television — whether it's live games, or replays, or me playing FIFA or whatever — it's always around. I just can't get enough of it. I'm addicted to it."

Despite his passion for soccer, however, Buck did not set out with a sports field management career in mind. Originally from Suffolk, Virginia, in the southeast part of the state, Buck did not grow up on a farm, but was always surrounded by agriculture. That led to an interest in animal science and an opportunity to work with pigs at the Virginia Tech Agriculture Research and Extension Center while still in high school.

Buck's goal of being a veterinarian changed with a tour of Virginia Tech's Lane Stadium led by Nick McKenna, CSFM. He went on to take turfgrass classes led by Dr. Erik Ervin, and from then on knew he wanted to be in the turfgrass industry.

"Virginia Tech was really the only program in the state that interested me," he said. "Once I got there, Dr. Ervin had me working in the turf research labs with Dr. Zhang doing stress trials on bentgrass, cutting grass with scissors, and growth chambers."

From there, Buck worked with Chad Kropff on the Virginia Tech rec fields as Kropff's assistant for 18 months.

"That was kind of a stay-at-home internship, and then I swapped over to the D-1 facilities where I worked for Andy McReynolds," said Buck. "He meant a lot to my journey."

"I got a taste of a little bit of everything at Virginia Tech — the research, the rec fields and D-1," Buck added. "I really enjoyed my four years there. It's a second home to me, and I've always enjoyed going back."

While still at Virginia Tech, Buck interned with the Salem Red Sox. Then, following graduation, he went to Louisville to work for Tom Nielsen before returning to work with the staff at Virginia Tech.

Prior to the 2017 STMA Conference, Buck emailed every Major League Soccer (MLS) groundskeeper east of Kansas City to introduce himself and express his interest in soccer.

"I was 98% certain I was going to be in MLS for the greater part of my career," said Buck. "Half of them didn't e-mail me back, a bunch did that didn't have anything open."

However, two people emailed Buck back to express interest in meeting him. The first was Dan Bergstrom, CSFM, of the Houston Dynamo who had a position open for an assistant. The other was John Torres of the Philadelphia Union, who didn't have any openings but still wanted to talk. Buck met with both during the conference and took the job with Bergstrom for the remainder of 2017. Then, in the fall of 2017, Torres reached out regarding an open position as his assistant, which led Buck to Philadelphia.

"My girlfriend at the time, now wife, got into grad school back east, so it made sense to go to Philly," said Buck. "I spent exactly six years there, and grew from John's first assistant to head sports turf manager. I was still under John, because he's still there, but his role grew as the Union grew and expanded its footprint. I took over the day-to-day operations and became head sports turf manager while John became director of grounds."



Buck spent the next three years leading the crew as the primary person in charge of the playing surfaces for the stadium and practice fields, including handling all purchasing and hiring decisions.

“Managing non-overseeded bermudagrass in Philadelphia with no sub heat is something I’m super proud of,” he said. “I have every picture from every day throughout the year to show the good, the bad and the ugly. The team loved the surface and how well it played. That makes me happy.”

Buck added that he treats everyone he works with as he would want to be treated. “I wanted to build them up to have the confidence to do something their own way, figure out better ways to do things and then trust them to go do the job.”

But midway through 2023, seeking more work-life balance, Buck began entertaining thoughts of other career opportunities. He mentioned this to some of his sales reps, and Eric Shilling of Harrell’s suggested to Buck a career shift to sales. At the time, Harrell’s didn’t have any sales reps in the region with a sports turf background.

“They liked the sports turf background because it was different than everybody else on the crew in our region. I left the Union on December 31, 2023, and I’ve been with Harrell’s for 18 months. I’m really enjoying it.”

The initial transition from being a practitioner to being in sales was challenging for Buck because he had enjoyed growing grass for more than a decade. But now he embraces his role helping others.

“You’re going from one locked-in scenario to five to eight different scenarios a day multiplied by five days a week,” he said. “You just give them the best information you can and you know it’s all in their hands at that point. You are there to be a voice and a sounding board.”

Buck’s sales territory stretches from Central Park to Washington, D.C., and west to central Pennsylvania; and his clients include sports field and golf course managers, as well as a growing portfolio of lawn care companies.

“It’s about trying to stay ahead of the curve and looking for opportunities as well,” he said. “If you’re driving down the road and you see a lawn care business, you pull in, introduce yourself, and hand out your business cards like candy. Get your name out there, get the company’s name out there, and be a source of solutions for folks.”

One of the biggest challenges Buck has faced in his career is that he is colorblind.

“A lot of our day-to-day depends on assessing the health of turfgrass — drought stress, mower injury, disease, etc. And there are a lot of indicators that present early as different colors. It’s frustrating because I physically can’t see it,” he said. “I’m the first one to say that I am terrible at spotting drought stress because I just can’t see the turf turning. A lot of it is leaning on the crew, having people around me, and explaining what they need to look for and how we can best prepare for things like that.”

As a sports field manager, Buck enjoyed the peacefulness of quiet days — especially during the summer months when he would arrive early on a Saturday morning to mow with no one else around.

“And I’m a big soccer fan, so every aspect of being in and around soccer every day — that’s what I live and breathe,” he said. “Just being around the game was a high point for me.”

Buck’s favorite part of his new role is sharing advice that worked for him.

“Every situation is different, so you don’t know if it will translate 100% to what they’re doing,” he said. “But

whenever you give good advice and you get pictures back or clients reach out to say that your recommendations worked is what makes it all worth it."

In addition to helping his clients, Buck enjoys helping others in the industry through service to the Keystone Athletic Field Managers Organization (KAFMO) and national SFMA (Buck currently serves on the SFMA Editorial Committee).

"I want to be useful to the industry that's given me a whole career," said Buck. "It means something to be able to help out, be with like-minded people and talk shop. We all want to see this industry get better."

Buck's advice to others, especially students, is to move around — either through internships or jobs — to find best place, best sport, best level of play or best facility for you. Then, once you get your foot in the door, give 100% effort.

"It's a hard job. It's not fun to work outside when it's pouring rain and you have to pull a tarp, or when it's 5 degrees outside snowing sideways and you're the only person at the facility," he said. "But then there are those days where it's just the best. It's a labor of love, but the industry accepts and rewards people who show up every day and give 100% effort."

When he's not at work, and not playing or watching soccer, C.J. Buck is busy being husband to his high school sweetheart, Brittany, and father to his daughter, June, who was born in February of 2024.

"She's walking and talking and able to start playing around and have a good time," he said. "We also have three dalmatians — Tyson, Rebel and Cora.

We don't like a calm house. I enjoy fishing, running and being outdoors. And I enjoy a nice nap on the couch with soccer on in the background."

Being selected as a *SportsField Management* Rising Star "means everything" to Buck.

"There are lonely tasks, lonely days on the job, but it always comes back to being part of a grounds crew," he said. "It's a crew of people, so it's not any one person who has ever truly earned the spotlight on their own. It's always the effort of multiple people. Now it's a bit



WHAT THEIR NOMINATOR HAD TO SAY:

C.J. has worked tremendously hard to serve this industry and move it forward. He has mentored students and serves his local chapter and SFMA. He has shown strong leadership while creating new opportunities for himself and the sports field managers in his region. He's not one to seek attention, but is deserving of this award because of his passion for the industry.

different for me being in sales, but still being thought of in this regard by folks who are doing the same thing I was doing fills me with more pride than I can express."

Buck added that he never won a Field of the Year award or other accolades, but takes pride in seeing his former interns and assistants go on to achieve bigger roles in the sports field management industry. He has had former assistants or interns go on to head groundskeeping jobs in Saint Louis, Orlando and Nebraska, as well as a former assistant now running his own landscaping company.

Said Buck, "That is better than any award I could receive, and it really makes me proud." **SFM**



Justin Danelutt

DIRECTOR OF GROUNDS AND ATHLETIC
FIELDS, CITY OF OXFORD, ALABAMA

Born and raised in Sylacauga, Alabama, Rising Star Award Winner Justin Danelutt studied Criminal Justice at Jacksonville State University; but a job at Cider Ridge Golf Club in Oxford, Alabama led him to an unexpected career in the green industry.

Later, when Choccolocco Park, a 360-acre multi-use facility, was being built in Oxford in 2015, Danelutt seized the opportunity to become assistant superintendent at the park, and has been there since.

Now, as director of grounds and athletic fields for the City of Oxford, Danelutt oversees Choccolocco Park, which includes a stadium baseball field, a stadium softball field, seven auxiliary softball fields, two auxiliary baseball fields, collegiate track and field, four soccer fields, a 40-acre multi-purpose cross country track, a 15-acre disc golf course, as well as approximately 40 acres of common areas that he and his crew maintain.

They also spray and fertilize grounds around the city, such as City Hall; perform landscape renovations in the downtown area; and help out with their sister facility, Oxford Lake.

The crew includes Danelutt, two assistants, a full-time mechanic and mechanic's assistant, a housekeeping coordinator and housekeeper, 10 groundskeepers, and six to seven part-time workers during the summer months.

The fields at Choccolocco Park receive a heavy event load, starting in February with Oxford High School sports, including baseball, softball, and track and field.

"We host a spring break tournament that sees approximately 60 teams come in and out over three weeks in March," said Danelutt. "We host several collegiate championships. We have hosted the Ohio Valley Conference, Gulf South Conference softball and baseball, Atlantic Sun softball, the Junior College Softball World Series, and state championships in softball and baseball."





May is a busy time for us. And in June, we have three straight week-ends of state tournaments for travel ball, and then rec league.”

The park director at Choccolocco Park handles the event scheduling, and works with Danelutt to identify windows of opportunity for cultural practices.

“We’re all natural grass,” said Danelutt. “The only synthetic we have are the hips on our stadium softball and baseball fields. The biggest challenge is trying to fit our cultural practices in that busy schedule.”

According to Danelutt, weather is always a challenge as well. And, until two years ago, staffing had been an issue. That was remedied when Choccolocco Park began utilizing high school graduates for seasonal help.

His message to his younger workers, and young people in general, is that if you work hard, opportunities will come your way.

“If I would have known that this was a career when I was in college, I would have gone for the turf degree,” he added. “It’s a great career path. It’s a lot of hard work, but it’s very gratifying. You are a part of these kids’ memories — they are winning state championships on the

WHAT THEIR NOMINATOR HAD TO SAY:

I believe credit is due where credit is due. Justin loves to take a backseat to everyone; but when it’s all said and done, no one is more deserving. He has some of the best all-natural fields around, and it’s hands down because of his leadership. He puts his facility in a position to succeed. That’s what you want in a star.

field that you maintain. They don't know who you are personally, but they will remember that they won a state championship at Choccolocco Park when they were 12 years old. That's pretty gratifying."

Danelutt credits the City of Oxford with the support needed to make Choccolocco Park a success.

"The mayor and the city council understand what kind of economic impact this facility makes on the community, and they don't give us any flack if we need anything," he said.

During his tenure at Choccolocco, Danelutt has learned how to manage people.

"You have to be able to manage people differently," he said. "People have different temperaments, and can handle things differently. You just have to

adapt and learn and grow and try to learn your employees' temperaments."

Danelutt is also active in the industry and is a resource for others. For example, Talladega Superspeedway reached out to him last year because they were having issues with their infield. Danelutt consulted with Talladega, identified a drainage problem and suggested solutions. He and his crew also help Cider Ridge Golf Club.

"This is an industry where, at the end of the day, everybody has the same goal and you want to help your peers," he said. "You want them to succeed."

For Danelutt, the best part of the job is his workplace.

"You just can't beat walking out onto a baseball field, and that's your office."

Outside of work, Danelutt and his wife, Amber, have a 6-year-old daughter named Lillian. They enjoy time at the beach, in the mountains, and especially trips to Disney World.

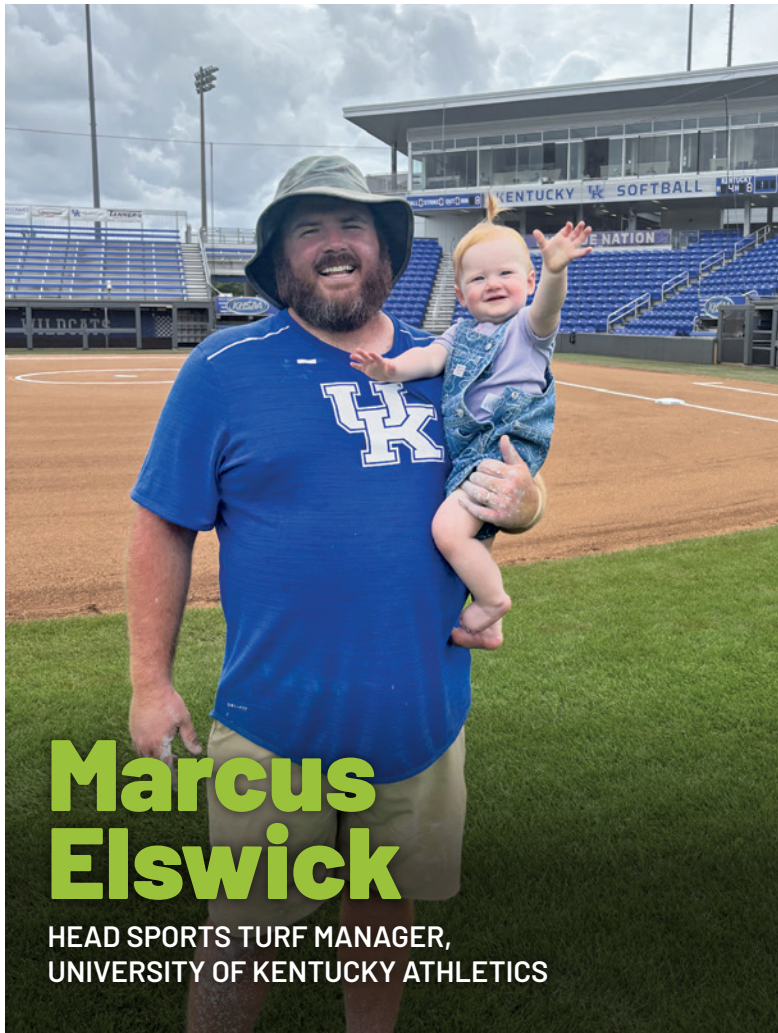
"We go to Disney World three or four times a year," he said. "In the past five years we've probably been close to 30 times."

Danelutt also enjoys building Legos and has a substantial Lego collection.

As for the recognition as a *SportsField Management Rising Star*, Danelutt feels a sense of accomplishment at being chosen for the award.

"My peers in this industry know the blood, the sweat, the tears, the hard times that it takes to have a facility like this," he said. "It's an honor to receive this award and for my peers to nominate me; but also this is just not an award for myself — this is an award for my staff. This facility would not be the way it is without the staff that I have. I'm probably a little biased, but I think I have the best staff in the country." **SFM**





Marcus Elswick

HEAD SPORTS TURF MANAGER,
UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY ATHLETICS

Maintaining sports fields at the University of Kentucky (UK) started early for Rising Star Award Winner Marcus Elswick — very early. When Elswick was only 11, his older brother was already working as a sports turf student for Donnie Mefford at the University of Kentucky. Elswick, who grew up an hour from UK, would visit his brother on weekends, and would hang out with his brother and help with the soccer and softball fields.

After high school, Elswick was hired by Marcus Dean, CSFM, to work as a sports turf student at UK — a role which he held for three years.

"I put in a lot of hours, and a lot of hard work with Marcus, and then he offered me a full-time job," said Elswick. "I worked with Marcus full-time for three years, moved around a little bit, helped at soccer and softball, went to baseball, then back to soccer and softball."

During that time, Dean left to pursue a sales position and was replaced by Sam Cahill, who left three years later to take a job as a golf course superintendent. Elswick applied for the open position, and has

been the head sports turf manager at University of Kentucky Athletics since.

"I was a huge UK fan growing up, so coming here and making it my own has been really fun," said Elswick. "I love being able to work with my hands and being outside every day. There's always something new and challenging."

Elswick added that he enjoys being part of the UK team, and being in the transition zone.

"Our softball field is 365ss bluegrass with a little bit of artificial turf around the outside," he said. "Game soccer is Ironcutter bermudagrass and practice soccer is NorthBridge bermudagrass. Baseball is synthetic turf with dirt mounds. Practice football has 4 acres that are Latitude 36 and NorthBridge, and we have an indoor facility that's synthetic turf. Our stadium field is synthetic turf, and our track and field complex is Ironcutter."

According to Elswick, a typical day begins with a 7:30 a.m. meeting with his crew,



which includes four other full-time staff beside him (one for football, one for baseball, one for soccer/softball and one who floats around where needed). The full-time staff is supplemented by 12 to 15 students who arrive after 8 a.m.

“We plan out their schedule, and what we’re going to do for that day,” said Elswick. “After the morning meeting, the full-time staff will go out with students, get their tasks done, then we’ll have lunch, we’ll talk again about what we need to accomplish in the afternoon, get that accomplished, and then it’s time to go home.”

Elswick spends his days checking every field and facility, as well as the 45-plus acres of common areas and campus landscape for which he is responsible. A big part of his role is



managing expectations, managing staff and balancing when to scale back or push harder.

“When dealing with students and being a mentor, you try to lead by example,” he added. “I pride myself on teaching students how to do stuff in this field. I tell them to lock in on the details and make sure that we’re doing a good job, because our number-one goal is player safety. Following directions, showing up on time, and communicating will translate to any job or career.”

Elswick also takes pride in putting a plan in place, seeing the plan executed and then seeing the results.

“I’m proud of going from starting as a student worker, and being at the very bottom to working my way to being the head guy here at UK in about 10 years,” he said. “I’m very for-

fortunate, but I've put in a lot of hours and a lot of work. But I'm still growing. I still have so much more to learn. I learn stuff from my students every day. There's always a chance to soak in whatever other people are telling you."

Elswick credits several people with guiding him thus far — most notably his father, who passed away six months after Elswick landed the position as head sports turf manager at UK.

"My dad is a big reason I do what I do," said Elswick. "He worked in a factory his whole life, but he had a green thumb for landscaping and turning nothing into something beautiful. He was hard working, and would give you the shirt off his back. I would like to think a lot of who I am comes from him."

Others who impacted Elswick's career journey include Marcus Dean, who, Elswick says, took a chance on him not once, but twice, and pushed him to be better and do more; Josh Barnes, who "was the best teacher" and let Elswick embrace his creative side; Tommy Davis, Dave Thomas and Chuck Stivers, who were full of wisdom and taught Elswick many important life lessons; and Eric Haub who "took a student with no interest and showed him how to take pride in everything and go the extra step, work hand in hand with everything and don't be above any job."

Elswick has worked hard to get where he is professionally, but he also works hard to maintain work-life balance.

"My wife is awesome, and we have a 16-month-old baby girl — they are my world," he said. "Once I get home, it's playtime."

In addition to enjoying life with his wife and daughter, Elswick plays basketball and likes just hanging out and spending time with his brother and friends.

He also stays busy outside of work through industry volunteerism, which currently includes helping to restart the Kentucky chapter of SFMA.

"We are trying to get the recognition that there are jobs and careers in this state for people who don't want to work in an office or who want to work outside and be around sports," he said. "There are a lot of people who don't know that this is a profession or that there is a science and a process behind it. The biggest challenge is trying to get people to learn what we do, and why we do it."

As for being recognized by his peers with a Rising Star Award, Elswick said it means a lot to him.

"I feel like I'm far away from being my best self," he said. "It's very much appreciated." **SFM**



WHAT THEIR NOMINATOR HAD TO SAY:

Marcus embodies the qualities celebrated by *SportsField Management* magazine's Rising Star Awards. Year after year, he has advanced the Kentucky sports turf program — not just from a playability standard, but also by inspiring many student workers and assistants turf managers. He consistently demonstrates leadership and innovation in maintaining top-tier athletic fields. He shares his knowledge at industry conferences, fosters a strong crew culture, and mentors emerging professionals. His dedication to both the craft and community exemplifies the spirit of a rising star.



Mira Emma

MANAGER OF SPORTS TURF AND GROUNDS,
KC CURRENT

Hard work has always paid off for Rising Star Award Winner Mira Emma. A native of Wheaton, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago situated 30 miles west of the city, Emma and her brother started their own landscaping business before Emma was even in high school.

"We would walk up and down the streets," said Emma. "We had nine to 10 regular customers, and we would just mow the grass. We were kids, and we didn't want to ask mom or dad for money — we wanted to earn it ourselves. We had two push mowers; one of us would take the front yard, and the other would take the back yard. That was the foundation of what I wanted to do as a sports field manager."

A three-sport athlete growing up, Emma loved being outside and the competitive edge of sports. With her sights set on playing Division I soccer, Emma let horticulture and sports turf management guide her college decision. Iowa State University met the criteria for both academics and athletics, and Emma was grateful for the opportunity.

"My goal walking into that program was to be an MLB head groundskeeper for the Chicago Cubs," she said. "So Barb Clawson and Adam Thoms were like, 'How do we get you there?'"

As a result, Emma interned with the Chicago Cubs for a summer after being at Iowa State for three years; an experience Emma says was amazing having grown up as a Cubs fan.

"What a great group of guys — Dan Kiermaier is the head there, and it's such an incredible crew with a bunch of different personalities. They made me feel welcome the day that I stepped foot on campus."

While at Iowa State, Emma also participated in the SFMA Student Challenge.

"Salt Lake City was the first conference that I was able to attend, and I was able to compete with the guys on my squad," she said. "It is a cool environment to see the perspectives of other individuals. Everyone specializes in their own ways — some people might be better at math or identification or the business side of things. I'm someone who loves the identification piece to it. I'm a very organized individual — making sure we're on schedule and on time."

When it came time to narrow her career path, Emma chose soccer. The internship with the Cubs showed her that 81 games of baseball is a very different proposition from soccer. Also, having played soccer for five years at Iowa State, Emma wanted to stay close to the game. So her next journey was to Louisville to work at Lynn Family Stadium (Louisville City FC and Racing Louisville FC) with Aaron Fink and his crew.

"I got to see the men's and women's professional side of soccer," said

Emma. “I fell in love with it. I wanted to stay around it.”

Following graduation, Emma seized the opportunity in early 2024 to be a part of big things in Kansas City with the KC Current of the National Women's Soccer League.

“I wanted to be part of the first ever professional women's stadium built specifically for women,” she said. “It was their stadium building from the ground up. They have a training facility just for them.”

The team has two natural grass pitches and five artificial turf pitches. In addition, they recently built four more new fields and are building another stadium.

The biggest challenge for Emma was transitioning to the new job and taking on a bigger responsibility. But she embraced that challenge knowing this is something she had dreamed about for a long time.

Her goal? “Be the best that you can be every single day — even if that's getting 1% better every day,” she said. “Be an inspiration and make the people around you better.”

Now, as Manager of Sports Turf and Grounds for the KC Current, Emma enjoys that every day is different.

“Day-to-day it's figuring out what we need, prepping for events,” Emma said of her role. “What does match week look like? Making sure you know the patterns to be put in. We have match-day-minus-1 training on Friday; so, prepping the field, striping, painting, setting up goals, spraying to promote recovery, and being as proactive as possible. It can be a lot of different things — especially going from 115 heat index to 65 degrees.”

Emma's advice to others is to ask why things are done and truly understand the day-to-day tasks.

“We're in the women's sports world and we're part of a movement right now,” she added. “So it's about putting our best foot



KC Current President Raven Jemison and grounds crew. (Left to right: Trina Strayer, Jerad Minnick, Jemison, Mira Emma and Ben Ervie)



WHAT THEIR NOMINATOR HAD TO SAY:

When I see Mira, I see the future of our industry. She's an extremely knowledgeable groundskeeper with an incredible attitude and work ethic that will inspire others to join this industry. Her facility has been top notch each of her years in Kansas City due to her attention to detail and care for the integrity of the game of soccer. Her work off the field is just as strong as her work on the field. So, when I say I see the future of the industry, it's because I see someone with all the attributes to be a future president of SFMA.



Fourth of July weekend after hosting WLL & PLL with (left to right) Trina Strayer, Mira Emma, Julie Kessler, Ava Veith and Jerad Minnick.



forward, representing women's sports, and representing who we want to be."

At the end of the day, however, Emma does not seek the spotlight, and would rather shine that light on someone else.

"We're all a team, we're all grinding, we're all working," she said. "Sometimes no news is good news in this industry. I'm just doing the behind-the-scenes work and grateful for having a job that's not inside and I get to mow grass for a living."

According to Emma, it's about having a strong work ethic.

"What better way than to be an impact on the field?" she said. "How cool is it to provide a safe and elite playing surface for the athletes?"

Outside of work, Emma said the key is finding a work-life balance.

"We have a job to do; but it's okay to take a weekend to relax and truly escape from what we're doing," she said. "Sometimes we get so caught up and overwhelmed, and that adds stress. Grass grows 24/7, but that's why we have a team. So, trust in your team."

Emma is grateful for her team, her mentors, and the people who have supported her journey thus far. She is also grateful to be nominated and selected as a *SportsField Management* Rising Star Award winner.

"I was shocked," she said. "My jaw was on the ground to know the support behind me. The biggest thing is to be valued for what you do. When you're good at it, you don't look for the spotlight, you just continue to put your head down and grind. But what a cool opportunity ahead? And there's a lot to be done. I'm young, I've got a lot to learn, and I'm not perfect by any means. But it gives me a little more encouragement moving forward." **SFM**



Gage Knudson

SENIOR MANAGER, TURF AND GROUNDS
LOS ANGELES FOOTBALL CLUB

Rising Star Award Winner Gage Knudson oversees one of the busiest multi-use venues in the country as senior manager, turf and grounds, for BMO Stadium — home of Los Angeles Football Club (LAFC).

“When the club started in 2018, the original vision for the stadium was to be a multi-sport venue that hosted soccer, rugby and lacrosse with the occasional concert,” said Knudson. “The following year (2019), when I arrived, we had three or four concerts on the books with the hope of another show or two the next year — and then COVID happened.

“Coming out of COVID there was a shift in focus of what we wanted to do from a business perspective, and that drove the concert business for us at LAFC,” Knudson added. “We hit it hard and had eight concerts; the following year we added four more onto that.

We also added another tenant in 2022, when it was announced that Angel City Football Club, a professional women’s team playing in NWSL, would be playing at BMO Stadium.”

The event load at BMO Stadium now includes wide range of concerts and events on top of the full Major

League Soccer (MLS) schedule for LAFC and the NWSL schedule for Angel City FC. In the last year, for example, BMO Stadium hosted 62 games, as well as 32 miscellaneous field events, including 16 different concerts, and 10 commercials or other film projects at the stadium. According to Knudson, that has become the sweet spot for BMO Stadium.

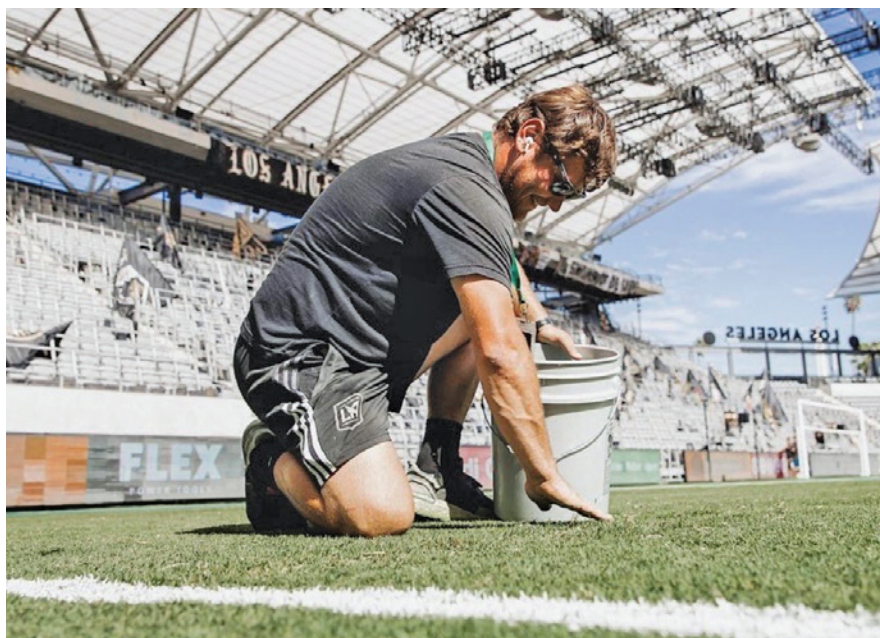
“We average somewhere between 2-1/2 and 3-1/2 days between field events over the last couple of years,” he said. “So a big part of my career is just trying to figure out how do you solve this Rubik’s Cube of high use.”

But Knudson is eager to solve problems and figure out how things work.

“I’m very driven and curious in what I do,” he said. “When I found out that I could do a job like this, that drove me and influenced my career. I had no idea that you could even get into this industry and that there were people who manage fields as a career.”

Originally from Junction City, Kansas, Knudson played football and baseball, and also wrestled. And although he grew up in the city, he helped on his grandparents’ farm by milking cows and mowing pastures. That led him





crew is split into two separate staffs — each with their own equipment.

“We only have one training field for our first team, so it’s a high-use field,” he said. “Our training facility is located on a college campus (Cal State LA), so we share some property. We maintain two additional grass fields from an agronomic and maintenance perspective, which allows our second team and academy teams to train on them on an everyday basis.”

There are two fields at the Cal State LA site, and the usage schedule is broken down into two-hour windows. From 8 to 10 a.m. is the Cal State women’s team window, 10 a.m. to noon is

to Kansas State University (K-State), where he earned his bachelor’s degree in Agriculture, with a focus on turfgrass management.

While at K-State, Knudson worked at the K-State research facility, and also worked with K-State Athletics, helping out with soccer.

In 2018, he interned with the New York Red Bulls — the same year they won the SFMA Field of the Year Award. The work that Dan Shemesh and Neal Sitzman did in New York influenced Knudson in his career journey, and, following graduation from K-State, he took a job with LAFC in 2019, working at the team’s training facility.

“I did that for about a year and a half, and then took over the stadium in 2021,” he said. “I oversee pitch recovery, and long-term maintenance recovery of internal, external events. We have five full-time staff; I have two assistants — one at BMO Stadium and the other at our LAFC training facility.”

The LAFC training facility is located approximately 20 minutes from BMO Stadium, so Knudson’s



the only dedicated maintenance window, noon to 2 p.m. is LAFC second team or a Cal State men's team window, and then from 2:30 to 7 p.m. anywhere from three to five LAFC Academy teams train there.

"LAFC is a very well-oiled machine," said Knudson. "We want to be number one on the field, and number one in the business. So that really drives the event load. Our goal is always to put out the most visually appealing and best field we possibly can. We understand that player safety is our number-one objective. Conditions are paramount and then aesthetics come 1B to us. If we can get it as a 1A, awesome, we're happy; but for us it's always about playability and safety."

The MLS season runs from February to November — possibly even into December. And Southern California is usually the first or last stop on a tour for concerts and other events.

"We're very fortunate to be in a big market that allows us to tap into an employee force here out in Southern California to mobilize if we have to flip the field over in 48 hours," said Knudson. "We have the resources to be able to do that. By improving our infrastructure and equipment, increasing grow lights and staffing budgets, we've been able to condense that window."

Knudson estimates that he has handled approximately 50 concerts since he has been at LAFC, and each one is different. But he is constantly learning from the process.

"Dealing with a living plant is always challenging and no conditions are ever the same," he said.

As part of that effort, Knudson relies on technology and data.

"I try to use as much data as possible to make the best decisions possible," he said. "Rather than hoping we are making the right decision, there are pieces of equipment we can use to help guide us in the right direction. Like everything with technology and data, it's trying to sift through that so you're not getting bogged down in it."

Foremost, however, Knudson relies on his team.

"We are very fortunate to have the staff that's come along over the last couple of years," he said. "We look for people who are hardworking, passionate about what they do, and dedicated. We have

WHAT THEIR NOMINATOR HAD TO SAY:

Gage Knudson exemplifies what it means to be a rising star in sports field management. He has proven that elite field conditions and a heavy event schedule can coexist through data-driven management and innovative turf strategies. Gage's commitment to his staff, and ability to adapt under pressure make him an invaluable asset to the profession. His dedication, leadership and impact on the industry make him a deserving recipient of the Rising Star Award.

found success by hiring people who have those qualities and then we teach them the turfgrass side of things.

"I've been at LAFC, and I've risen up from groundsman to assistant manager to senior manager," he added. "So I put myself in their position and I try to show them that if you are passionate about it and willing to put in the work, good things will come to you."

Knudson learned some of those lessons from Shemesh and Sitzman, and also credits Jerad Minnick with helping to guide him on the data and analytics side of the business. He also recognizes the impact of Andre Bruce, a consultant at K-State Athletics, as well as that of his father-in-law, David Stuhlsatz, who was field manager at K-State.

He also credits advice he received from his cousin, who told him to "find the Google of your industry, and get them on your resume."

"He said, 'You'll look back on your career and you'll be really proud of what you've built.' That's what led me to the Red Bulls, and that's what led me here to LAFC."

The people of the industry — and the people he works with — are Knudson's favorite part of the job.

"It's like a family and those are values that are very important to me and my wife, Erica," he said. "At a busy facility, how do you balance a busy life? Luckily, I have a very good staff who are rock stars and we're able to split up the work. If we have work we need to get it done, let's get the work done. If we don't need to be here, let's not be here."

Despite the challenges of the heavy event load and balancing work and life, Knudson and his wife — who are expecting their first child — enjoy spending time together at the beach or going hiking or just slow days together taking time to relax and not always be on the go.

Added Knudson, "I'm very fortunate to have my wife, she keeps me grounded." **SFM**

Invest in Your Future: Join SFMA Today

The Sports Field Management Association (SFMA) is the recognized leader in championing the sports field industry and its professionals.



SPORTS FIELD
MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION

MEMBERSHIP CATEGORIES

SFMA has specific membership categories for every professional in the sports field management industry.

■ **Sports field manager:** If you are primarily responsible for managing or maintaining sports fields.

■ **Sports field manager associate:** If you are primarily responsible for managing or maintaining a sports field(s) and your organization already has an SFMA sports field manager member employed.

■ **Affiliate:** If you are indirectly or on a part-time basis involved in the maintenance/management of sports fields (coaches, athletic directors, volunteers, etc.).

■ **Academic:** If you are in teaching, extension or research.

■ **Student:** If you are a full-time student.

■ **Commercial:** If you work for a company engaged in a commercial enterprise providing services and/or products to the sports field management profession (consultants, architects, designers, contractors, management companies, distributors and manufacturers, etc.).

■ **Commercial associate:** If you are the second person (or more) from a commercial company (must first have an SFMA commercial member at their company before this lower-dues category can be selected).

■ **Retired:** If you are retired and no longer seeking full-time employment within the scope of activities of any SFMA membership category, and have been a member for a minimum of five years, you may become a non-voting member of SFMA and are not eligible to hold elective office.

THE THREE MOST IMPORTANT REASONS TO JOIN SFMA

1. **Job security:** SFMA's programs and services proactively enhance your value to your employer.

2. **Career success:** SFMA's education and information help prepare you to take that next step in your career.

3. **Recognition of your professionalism:** In addition to the individual recognition you receive because of your good



work, SFMA's advocacy with groups such as athletic directors, parks and recreation directors, coaches and parents enhances the image of the entire profession.

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■ A network of peers who share their best practices.

■ Opportunities for education.

■ Quick access to information and resources.

■ A monthly electronic newsletter that communicates association and industry information.

■ Access to the Member's Only section of *sportsfieldmanagement.org*, which has a real-time membership directory and hundreds of technical educational resources.

■ Access to Michigan State's Turfgrass Information File, a resource for up-to-date technical information.

■ Ability to enter your field in the nationally recognized Field of the Year awards program.

■ Opportunity to become a Certified Sports Field Manager (CSFM) and to have your facility certified as environmentally responsible.

■ Significant savings on registration to SFMA's annual and regional conferences, and discounts to other organizations' education.

■ Opportunity to participate in volunteer leadership positions.

■ Opportunity to join one of SFMA's affiliated chapters for a strong local network. (Each chapter sets its own local dues.)

■ Purchase SFMA branded apparel.

■ *SportsField Management Magazine* each month.

■ The ability to apply for scholarships (students only).

■ Discounted exhibitor booth at the annual conference (commercial members only). **SFM**

For more information, visit:

<https://www.sportsfieldmanagement.org/why-join-stma/>

JOHN MASCARO'S PHOTO QUIZ

ANSWER

From page 17

Early in the Atlantic Hurricane season last year at the end of July, Tropical Storm Debby hit the Jacksonville area and deposited more than 3.5 inches of rain on the stadium field before the winds hit the area. This occurred on the same day as the Premier League hosted a game on the field. This caused a four-hour rain delay. The field is constructed with Prescription Athletic Turf, so the field has an impermeable liner, gravel, drain lines and suction pumps, as well as a sand-based rootzone. The sports field manager sprayed a penetrant to aid in the drainage before the game as this is usually a wet time of year. The suction pumps come on automatically 30 minutes after a rainfall event and remove all the water quickly. The crew had to roller squeegee the area where the artificial turf meets the natural grass on the perimeter of the field on both sides of the field to remove standing water. The game started 30 minutes after the rain stopped, and the field played fine. Overall, from July 27 through Tropical Storm Debby, the area received a total of 11 inches of rainfall.

Photo submitted by Mark Clay, SR sports field and grounds manager for ASM Global and EverBank Stadium, Jacksonville, Florida.

John Mascaro is president of Turf-Tec International

If you would like to submit a photograph for John Mascaro's Photo Quiz, please send a high-resolution digital photo to John Mascaro via email at john@turf-tec.com. If your photograph is selected, you will receive full credit. All photos submitted will become property of SportsField Management magazine and the Sports Field Management Association.



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Little League BASEBALL World Series

By John Kmitta

Photo by
Matt Duncan

The 2025 Little League Baseball World Series (LLBWS) was held in South Williamsport, Pennsylvania, August 13-24. The event featured 10 teams from the United States and 10 teams from other countries.

Rob Guthrie, head of turf and groundskeeping for Little League, maintains both Howard J. Lamade Stadium and Volunteer Stadium. Both are Kentucky bluegrass and have full irrigation and drainage.

"On property we have three additional practice fields — two full-sized Little League fields and one that is just an infield with no outfield," said Guthrie. "We have a pitching station and an indoor batting cage on site. Across the street, in a local park, we also maintain two municipal baseball fields."

Guthrie receives help from a full-time employee during the year. In mid-May he is joined by two interns for the summer (usually through the conclusion of the LLBWS). Then, three days prior to the first LLBWS game, volunteers arrive to help with the tournament.

"They come in from throughout the country, and some have been doing it for almost 30 years," said Guthrie. "The volunteers are a great group, and the fact that so many have been doing this for a long time is nice for me because they already know what to do."

The volunteers are organized by former Penn State University Senior Extension Educator (retired), Jeff Fowler, on behalf of the Keystone Athletic Field Managers Organization (KAFMO).

"Rob Guthrie does a phenomenal job of preparing those fields year round," said Fowler. "All of us as volunteers are there to do one thing, and that's to help him shine for the 36 games of the series."

Said Guthrie, "I'd like to think I have a pretty good feel for how the fields are going to act. The big thing is knowing what you're getting into, knowing when to do things at certain times, and knowing what to have done prior to anybody showing up for the World Series. I think I have a pretty good routine now."

During the tournament, Guthrie posts a job board each day and conducts a morning meeting to go over everything with the volunteers and assign sections and roles.

"I get them 95% there, and they come in and put the finishing touch on everything," he said. "Once they come in, it takes a little bit of stress off me. I don't have to worry quite as much about doing everything myself.

Leading up to this year's LLBWS, Guthrie faced some challenges in the form of dry weather in late July and early August, as well as a last-minute well pump replacement.

"I was scrambling a little bit just to get everything put back to how it should be," he said. "But by the time the kids showed up, everything was good. It was nice baseball weather. I think this was a record low number of tarp pulls — two per field — which everybody appreciates. Overall, it was a really good series."

Said Fowler, "A lot of people say to me, 'Nothing ever changes. It's the same every year.' There are a lot of things that are similar every year; but the one thing that changes is the kids who are playing on the fields. It's special for me to be able to help prepare those fields for the event, trying to ensure they are as safe and playable as we can possibly make them."

The other thing that keeps Fowler coming back and involved with the volunteer effort is the bond he has formed with Little League Baseball and with the people who have worked on the crew throughout the years.

"It's like a family reunion every year that we get together to do this," he said. "We bring in new people every year; and we have some who have been returning for as many years as I've been there, or longer. The camaraderie and passion for sports field management is so prevalent in the group that it's just a fun time to be around those people."

In addition to Fowler, this year's volunteers included (in alphabetical order by last name) Warren Albert; Wayne Barrs; Mark Berry; William Boll; Gerard Cannata; Scott Chambers;



Photo by
Jess Tobias



Photo by
Matt Duncan



Photo by
Matt Duncan



Photos by
Matt Duncan

Peter Cipolla; Lee Clinton, CSFM; James Dellomo; Michael Deibert; Matt Duncan, CSFM; John Fowler; Noel Harryman, CSFM; Chris Lessig; Greg Martin; Dan Miller; Kyle Rase; Walter Simpson; David Talhelm and Jim Welshans.

Guthrie added that he relies heavily on his interns each year. This year's interns were Luke Stuhlsatz from Kansas State University and Jill Uloza from Delaware Valley University.

Said Duncan, "The best part of the experience is seeing the Little League players when they first see these fields and the first time they get to be out on them. Giving the kids a world-class playing surface is the best part of it. That is followed closely by the camaraderie of being part of the crew and sharing the experience."

Duncan was born and raised in Williamsport, so he grew up very familiar with the event. The 2025 LLBWS was his twelfth time volunteering to be part of the grounds crew.

"I've been in this industry for 30 years, and the best part about it is the people," he said. "So many people have helped me along the way that I feel it's my duty to help others."

This was the first year at LLBWS for Noel Harryman, CSFM, who wanted to not only give back to the Williamsport community, but also gain experience that he could bring back to his team and to the students and community of Jeffco Public Schools.

"I'd like to express my sincere appreciation to the entire volunteer team for sharing their time, talents and camaraderie with me. It was an honor to be a part of such a dedicated group," said Harryman.

Clinton, who just wrapped his tenth year as a LLBWS volunteer, added, "It is a great experience working with Rob Guthrie





Photo by
Jeff Fowler

and Jeff Fowler and the rest of the crew to help maintain the fields during the series. Rob does a great job throughout the year with the fields before the LLBWS starts. I always learn new skills at the series from the other volunteers, and hopefully someone learns something from me."

Duncan pointed out that volunteers from KAFMO cook meals for the grounds crew, a role that often goes unnoticed or unappreciated.

"We're very grateful for the sponsors that help us. It's just a great experience all the way around."

Event sponsors include Aqua Aid, DuraEdge Products, Finch Turf, Fisher & Son, Harrell's LLC, Helena Agri, Hummer Turf, JAMCO, Lawn & Golf Supply Co. Inc., Martin Stone Quarries, New Enterprise Stone & Lime Co. Inc., Syngenta, Turf Equipment & Supply, Turf Trade, Walker Supply, and Windview Athletic Fields.

"I would highly encourage sports field managers to give back wherever and whenever they can," said Harryman. "Opportunities like this not only strengthen our industry but also provide a rewarding way to support the next generation of athletes and communities."

Sports field managers interested in volunteering for the 2026 LLBWS can contact Fowler



Photo provided by
Little League

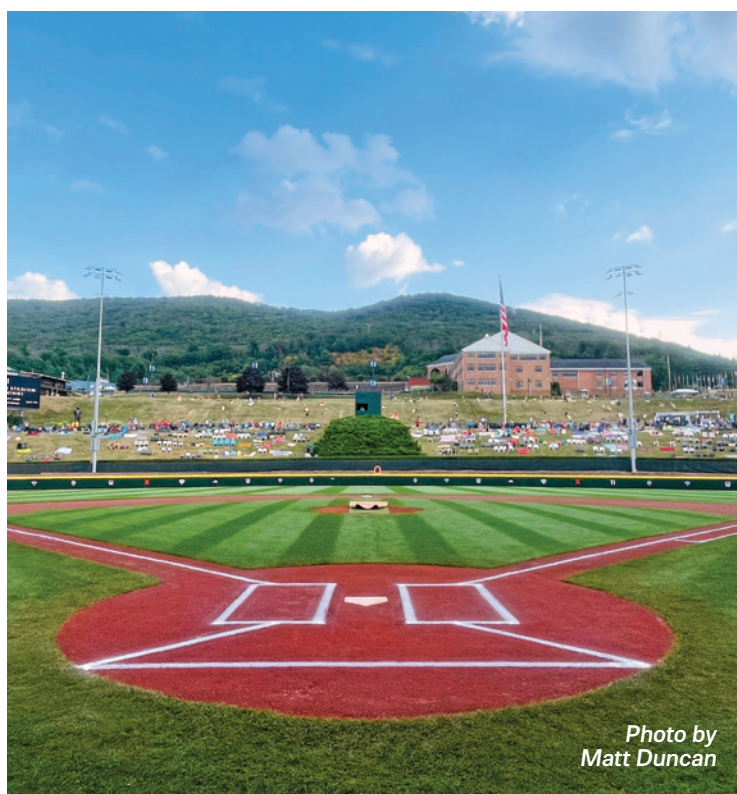


Photo by
Matt Duncan

through KAFMO (<https://kafmo.org>). Those interested in interning for Guthrie in the future should look to the SFMA job board for the annual posting.

"We have been blessed to be able to go out and take care of athletic fields," said Fowler. "It's nice to give back. It's nice to volunteer. It's nice to feel needed, and to hear people say 'wow.'" **SFM**



Classroom to *Coliseum*

A Hands-On Sports Turf Experience

When the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum prepared for the USC Football Season home opener against Missouri State on August 30, the stadium's Athletic Turf & Grounds crew featured six special guests.

Decked out in a full cardinal-and-gold wardrobe, four high school students and two teachers joined in on the fun, bringing enthusiasm and excitement while learning firsthand how to care for, maintain, paint and otherwise prepare the natural grass playing surface for game day. The students and teachers traveled to Los Angeles from the Central Valley, leaving their Atwater and Golden Valley High School turf and field classrooms behind for three days to experience this opportunity of a lifetime.

BEHIND THE SCENES

The students and their agriculture instructors were invited by the LA Memorial Coliseum's Director of Sports Turf, Scott Lupold, to work alongside his

hand-selected crew. The group was immersed in the demanding competition field preparation process under Lupold's direction and leadership. On Thursday, the focus was on white paint; football yard lines, hash marks, numbers, and sponsor logos were outlined. On Friday, paint in the machines changed to cardinal, gold and blue, and the students and instructors assisted with filling in end zones, sponsor logos, and the center "SC" interlock. And on Saturday — game day — tarps were laid, the field was detailed, the warning track was swept and

evened, and the group helped ensure the field was ready for football, down to the last detail.

“The LA Coliseum provided our students with a VIP experience,” said Dave Gossman, Atwater High School’s turf/field instructor. “They weren’t just watching on the sidelines — they were welcomed as part of the team and given hands-on opportunities to learn skills associated with the profession at the highest level.”

The LA Coliseum has played host to USC Football since its inception in 1923, and is the only stadium worldwide to host two Olympics (a third in 2028), two Super Bowls, and an MLB World Series.

“This place is pretty cool, when you really think about it,” said Lupold. “My favorite time and place in this stadium is the field early in the morning on a game day, when all is still quiet. There’s just a feeling, an energy in here that’s tough to describe or understand until you experience it.”

GROWING A NEW PATHWAY

This collaboration with the LA Coliseum places strong emphasis on the growing role of turf and sports field management in high school agricultural education. Atwater High School launched its Turfgrass and Sports Field Management course after Gossman attended the annual Sports Field Management Association (SFMA) Conference in 2019. The idea quickly took root, and within three years, Golden Valley High School’s instructor, Kevin Magill, expanded the program to his campus, which now offers two sections of the course.

Today, more than 100 students across the Merced Union High School District are enrolled in the program, which falls under the Agriculture sector’s Ornamental Horticulture pathway in Career Technical Education (CTE).

“Irrigation, soil, and turfgrass are core components of agriculture,” said Magill. “But what’s exciting is how this course has attracted students from non-agriculture backgrounds. Their love of sports creates a natural connection, and through this program they’re discovering agriculture in a new way.”



LESSONS BEYOND THE GRASS

For students, the educational trip to the LA Coliseum was about more than just painting lines, holding hoses, and rolling tarps. It was a lesson in teamwork, responsibility, discipline and professional standards. Each student went home with a new level of appreciation and respect for the industry.

“When you see a field on national television, you don’t realize the time, effort and resources that go into preparing it,” said Atwater High School Student Jose Perez. “The experience reinforced my interest in pursuing this as a career.”

Through high school program partnerships, the turf management industry asserts its investment in, and commitment to, the next generation. The goal is not only to inspire students in the short term, but to build relationships through a pipeline of future professionals who will bring heart, skills, knowledge and expertise to fields across the nation.

“The return on investment,” as SFMA leaders see it, “is cultivating a new generation of skilled professionals and leaders who will keep fields everywhere thriving.”



CULTIVATING CAREERS, ONE FIELD AT A TIME

Much like grass itself, what began as an idea planted at the SFMA Conference bloomed into an innovative pathway for students in California’s Central Valley, and an invaluable opportunity for LA Coliseum professionals to teach and give back.

Students saw an example of how industry leaders keep playing surfaces safe, healthy and green as could be. And for students who had never before attended a Division I College Football game and had only ever seen the LA Coliseum’s field on TV, tending to its playing surface was nothing short of unforgettable.

– Article provided by Dave Gossman



2025

OCTOBER 13-15

SYNTHETIC TURF COUNCIL ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Palm Beach Gardens, Florida
www.syntheticurfCouncil.org

OCTOBER 22-24

EQUIP EXPO

Louisville, Kentucky
www.equipexposition.com

OCTOBER 22-24

PGMS SCHOOL OF GROUNDS MANAGEMENT

Louisville, Kentucky
www.pgms.org/page/AnnualConference

OCTOBER 23

NOR-CAL SFMA EMERGING TECHNOLOGY EXPO

Mountain View, California
www.ncsfma.wildapricot.org/event-6171083/Registration

NOVEMBER 2-5

ELEVATE (NALP)

Phoenix, Arizona
www.landscapeprofessionals.org/ELEVATE

NOVEMBER 12-13

SALTEX 2025

Birmingham, UK
www.saltex.org.uk

DECEMBER 1-5

AMERICAN SPORTS BUILDERS ASSOCIATION TECHNICAL MEETING

San Antonio, Texas
www.sportsbuilders.org/page/UpcomingEvents

DECEMBER 8

PROJECT EVERGREEN VOLUNTEER FIELD REBUILD

Fort Worth, Texas
www.projectevergreen.org

DECEMBER 8-11

IRRIGATION SHOW AND EDUCATION WEEK

New Orleans, Louisiana
www.irrigation.org/IA

2026

JANUARY 18-22

SFMA CONFERENCE AND EXHIBITION

Fort Worth, Texas
www.sportsfieldmanagement.org/conference

FEBRUARY 16-19

TPI 2026 INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION CONFERENCE AND FIELD DAY

Tucson, Arizona
www.turfgrasssod.org/event/tpi-2026-international-education-conference/

JUNE 23-25

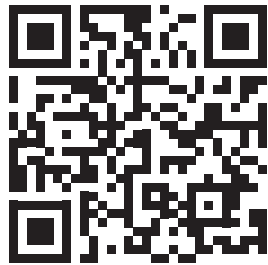
NATIONAL SPORTS SAFETY AND SECURITY CONFERENCE & EXHIBITION

Palm Desert, California
www.ncs4.usm.edu/events/annual-conference/ **SFM**

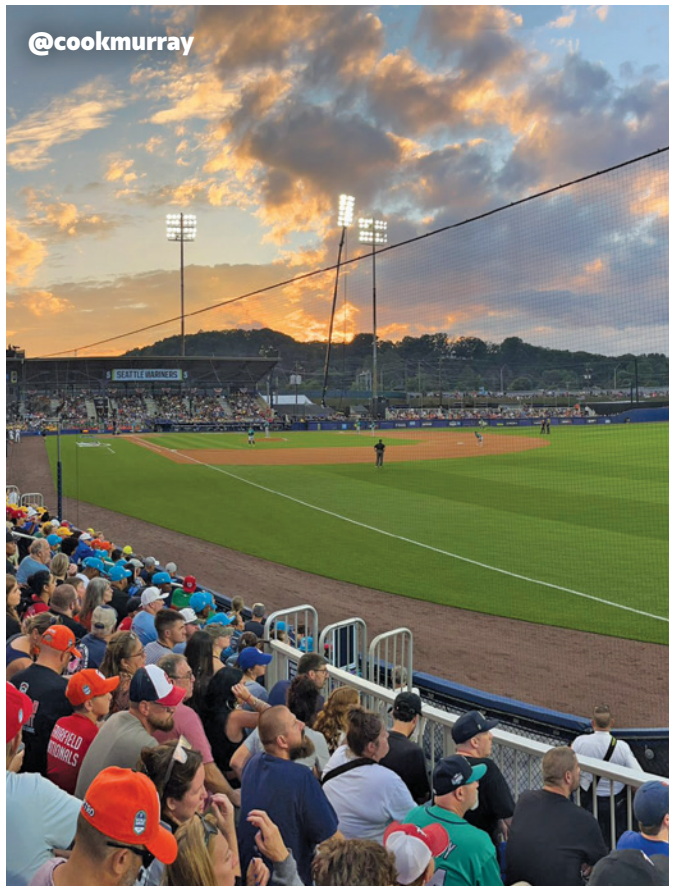
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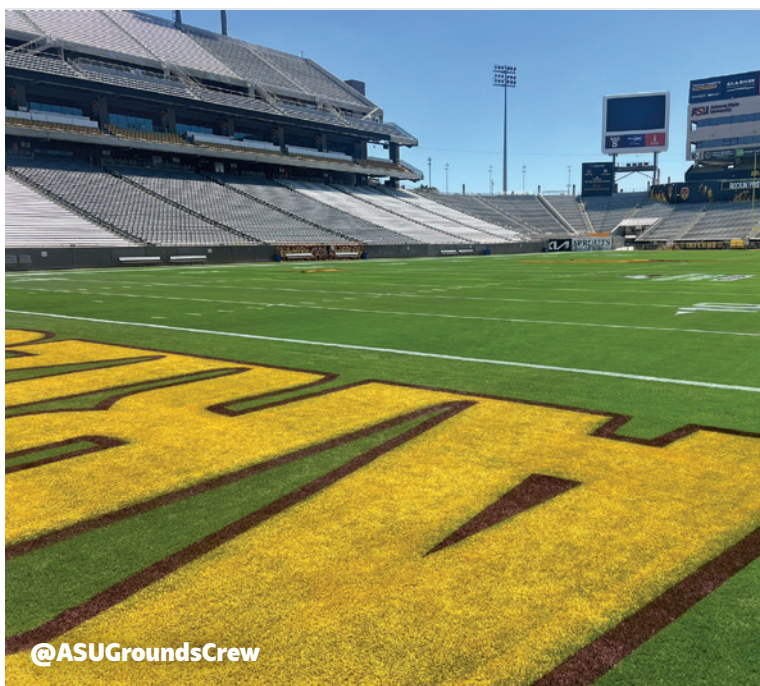
The following are photos and posts pulled from industry social media feeds during the past month.

Scan the QR code for links to all of our feeds and connect with us.











12 things to see and do at Equip Expo 2025

Equip Exposition will feature fresh experiences designed to inspire, educate and energize.

Here are 12 highlights at Equip, October 21–24, Kentucky Exposition Center (KEC), Louisville, Ky:

1. Keynote: Jesse Cole — Sponsored by Kress, hear the Savannah Bananas founder share game-changing lessons.

2. Outdoor Demo Yard — Visit the 30 acres outside at the KEC, which allows for hands-on testing: drive, mow, chop, dig, trench, and more with the latest outdoor power equipment. An expanded layout means easier navigation and more equipment.

3. Expanded UTV Test Track — Be sure to check out the new UTV Corral on the South Wing Porch, and visit the ever-popular UTV Test Track, now larger and relocated to Lot B (across from the South Wing Lobby) for convenience.

4. Tree Care Arena — Sponsored by Altec, visit the new zone in Freedom Hall that features live arborist demos, bucket trucks, instruction, giveaways, and a product showcase focused on tree care.

5. Welcome Reception at Churchill Downs — Sponsored by Caterpillar, meet peers and be welcomed to Louisville at the kick-off party for Equip at the legendary home of the Kentucky Derby.

6. Pro Talk Series — Access quick-hit, TED Talk-style education sessions including a Q&A with the experts. Free for registered attendees.

7. Wednesday Night Block Party — 4th Street Live concert in downtown Louisville returns! Meet old friends and find new ones at this popular concert, featuring the Crashers. Sponsored by the Propane Education & Research Council.

8. New Product Showcase — See all the latest innovations, technology and products in one spot in the KEC West Wing.

9. Mulligan's 5K Fun Run & Walk and Mutt Madness — Sponsored by Active Dynamics and Mulligan's Mutt Madness, run or walk the Big Four Bridge early Wednesday morning to help raise funds for the Kentucky Humane Society (KHS). On Thursday, adopt a rescue dog from the KHS and meet CBS Lucky Dog host Brandon McMillan at Mutt Madness in the South Wing Lobby.

10. Taste Equip Reserve 42: Backyard Blend Bourbon — Louisville-brewed, and named by an attendee, Sam Meagher, owner of Sam I Am Outdoor Services, Equip's inaugural bourbon has already won two awards: a Silver Medal from the American Distilling Institute's 2025 competition and a triple gold award in the Major Liquor Spirit Awards' (MLSA) competition. Get a tasting at the Louisville Tourism booth, Wednesday from 3 to 5 p.m.

11. Big & Rich with Gretchen Wilson Concert — Sponsored by Gravely and free for attendees, rock out at this Thursday night show at the Kentucky International Convention Center.

12. Creator Space — At the Echo Social Media Patio and PodRow, meet influencers and join live podcasts. Expand your vision for your business at Energize, sponsored by Exmark, or be part of a live podcast during the Morning Show at Expo, sponsored by Rehlko.

Plan your visit with the Equip Expo app, sponsored by CASE Construction Equipment, available on Apple and Google. **SFM**

SFMA Affiliated Chapters Contact Information

Arizona SFMA: www.azsfma.org

Colorado SFMA: www.csfma.org

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John Mascaro (john@turf-tec.com)

Florida #3 (Central Florida STMA):
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illinoisstma@gmail.com

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(dan@rafttriversod.com)

Iowa SFMA: www.iowastma.org

Keystone Athletic Field Managers Org.
(KAFMO): www.kafmo.org

Mid-Atlantic SFMA: www.masfma.org

Michigan SFMA: www.misfma.org

Minnesota Park and Sports Field Management
Association: www.mpsfma.org

Mo-Kan STMA: <https://mokansfma.org/>

Nebraska SFMA:
<https://nebraskaturfgrass.com/about-nesfma>

New England STMA: www.nestma.org

North Carolina SFMA: <https://ncsfma.org/>

Northern California SFMA: www.norcalstma.org

Ohio Turfgrass Foundation: www.ohioturfgrass.org

Oklahoma STMA: oksfmasecretary@gmail.com

Oregon STMA: www.oregonsportsturfmanagers.org
or oregonstma@gmail.com

Ozarks STMA: Derek Edwards
(dedwards@springfieldcardinals.com)

Sports Field Managers Association of New Jersey:
www.sfmanj.org

Southern California SFMA: www.socalsfma.com

South Carolina SFMA: www.scsfma.org

Tennessee Valley SFMA: www.tvstma.org

Texas SFMA: www.txstma.org

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To find the chapter near you, visit <https://www.sportsfieldmanagement.org/interactive-chapter-map/>



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Photo courtesy of
Bristol Motor Speedway

MLB Speedway Classic

The Major League Baseball (MLB) Speedway Classic was held August 2-3 between the Atlanta Braves and the Cincinnati Reds at Bristol Motor Speedway in Bristol, Tenn. Although the game was delayed from Saturday into Sunday due to rain, it showcased its unique setting and an amazing feat of field engineering and construction.

The NASCAR racetrack, with a seating capacity of more than 150,000, had its asphalt track and infield pit lane converted to AstroTurf and infield dirt. BrightView, alongside partners BaAM and Populous, successfully installed the regulation-sized field for the first MLB game to be held in Tennessee.

According to AstroTurf, more than 15 tractor trailers of materials were staged into the stadium.

"We're coming down a nearly 30 percent incline with heavy equipment," said Joey Alexander, general manager of AstroTurf's Southeast Region. "Tight quarters. Limited access. It's one of the most complex installs we've ever tackled."

The process began on June 23, immediately after NASCAR events wrapped up. More than 15,000 tons of granite and fill were brought in to flatten the field for the foundation. Layer by layer, a sub-base was constructed from scratch, complete with drainage infrastructure.

"Converting a high-banked oval racetrack into a world-class baseball field isn't something you do every day," said Murray Cook, president of BrightView Sports Turf. "But it's exactly the kind of challenge we love. This project pushed us to get a little creative, while maintaining Bristol Motor Speedway's iconic charm."

To accommodate the dimensions and safety requirements of a professional baseball field, numerous modifications had to be made.

Crews temporarily removed pit walls, select signage and lights, the Sunoco fuel tanks, and even half of the Goodyear building.

The field was constructed of AstroTurf's Diamond Series — which is the same type of surface used at the Rogers Centre, home of the Toronto Blue Jays. In total, 124,000 square feet of turf was installed. According to AstroTurf, The turf's Root-Zone technology adds a textured layer of crimped fibers that reduces rubber splash, improves shock absorption, and limits infill movement. Beneath the turf, AstroTurf integrated Brock shock pads as a lightweight layer engineered specifically for use under synthetic fields.

BrightView provided quality control oversight for additional field elements, including fencing, padding, foul poles, netting, and wall protection — all designed and installed to MLB specifications.

"I'm incredibly proud of our Sports Turf team who brought this vision to life," said Dale Asplund, BrightView's president and CEO. "Projects like this prove that BrightView is so much more than beautiful landscapes — we're problem solvers, innovators, and trusted collaborators on some of the most complex and creative builds, including sports. Congratulations to everyone involved in turning Bristol Motor Speedway into a world-class ballpark." **SFM**

— Content provided by BrightView and AstroTurf

MLB Speedway Classic Facts

- Removed pit walls, some signs and lights, Sunoco fuel pumps, and half the Goodyear building
- 17,500 tons of gravel to level surface
- 340 tons of clay was used
- 124,000 square feet of AstroTurf was installed
- Field dimensions: 400 feet to center, 330 feet down baselines, and 375 feet right field alley and 385 feet to left field alley
- 4,000 linear feet of drainage pipe, 60-foot foul poles, 275 new light fixtures, and 40-by-80 batter's eye

SportsField

MANAGEMENT

BEYOND *the* FIELD

Introducing Beyond the Field, the monthly facilities management newsletter brought to you by *SportsField Management* magazine.



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Beyond the Field includes the latest news and information on:

- Stadium/venue security
- Synthetic turf
- Sport courts and surfaces, including pickleball, tennis and track surfaces
- Stadium design and construction
- Events management
- Stadium/field lighting
- Concessions and amenities
- Locker rooms and other facilities
- Sports business news and trends

Beyond the Field will be distributed monthly on the final Friday of the month. The regular *SportsField Management* Insider newsletter will continue to be deployed weekly, and will continue to focus on sports field management news and products, SFMA updates, turfgrass science and research, industry education, grounds management, outdoor power equipment, irrigation, and more.

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