Grounds tricks spice baseball

There's a place where a good, sneaky trick is still appreciated—the baseball diamond. Forget about the players and the old "hidden ball" trick. Forget about the managers and their sign-stealing stratagem. An experienced groundskeeper might be able to win more ball games for the home team than both of them put together.

Groundskeeper Jim Anglea hinted as much this winter when he moved from the Cleveland Indians to Texas. "I put 10 points on Julio Franco's (Cleveland shortstop) batting average," says Anglea just after moving south. "Bobby Bonds (Cleveland batting coach) told me to make the ground around home plate, about 15 feet out, hard, real hard. He said, 'Make it so hard the ball will bounce out of the Stadium.' Franco often chops the ball at the plate and got a lot of hits that way."

Roger Bossard— he babies Comiskey Park in Chicago—is one of baseball's masters of creative groundskeeping. "The groundskeeper is the ball player's man, the 10th man," Roger says. "A lot of new guys haven't been taught that."

Bossard is convinced an experienced groundskeeper, tailoring a park to the personality of the home team (or exposing the weaknesses of competitors), can put extra wins on the board each season. The fun of it all, he says "is being able to get away with it without the other team finding out."

When the Chisox were loaded with sinker ball pitchers, Bossard turned the area in front of home plate into a "swamp." Forget about high hoppers over the mound. His brand of "moisture control" has also slowed visiting jackrabbits on their journeys from first to second bases.

"You take this sod lifter and put it down about three inches apart and lift the soil, and you soak it real good underneath," Bossard says almost gleefully. "It looks dry, but..."

Softening the power alleys in right and left centerfields gives plodding outfielders a step or two on line drives, while the skillful drawing of the batter's box closer to the mound can give home hitters a chance to jump on a junkball pitcher before his stuff dances. Or, if the box is slyly moved back, that extra peek at a 90 mph fastball.

Subtle adjustments to the height of the pitcher's mound (both in the bullpen and on the field) has bedeviled more than a few skiddish pitchers.

"There are things done in the field that if you had false teeth, you'd drop 'em," says Bossard. "There isn't a series that goes by that something isn't done to a field to help a team."

A groundskeeper's bag of tricks is only as full as his knowledge of turf and his team, his imagination...and his cunning.