Every late winter, the storied "Boys of Summer" hop onto their stretch of highway (or jetstream) and follow it south. There, they find a climate conducive to reviving their stamina, remembering their signals, and relocating the strike zone.

And a few major league baseball teams find something more when they go to spring training—close friends, even surrogate families, in a community that embraces them and acts as a home away from home for a couple months.

One of those fortunate teams is the Detroit Tigers, which has been following I-75 South all the way to Lakeland, Fla., for 34 straight Februaries. And for all of those 34 years, they've felt comfortable leaving their grounds crew back in the Motor City cold.

"We consider it a symbiotic relationship," says Bill Tinsley, Lakeland's assistant director of Parks and Recreation and point man for the city's maintenance of Tigertown, the Tigers' spring training facility. "The Tigers get a community that cares for them and a Grade A training facility, and Lakeland gets a tourist attraction, some great entertainment and a great bunch of friends."

The larger municipality/franchise relationship has thrived on a series of personal relationships. Jim Campbell, president of the Tigers, and Joker Marchant, director of Parks and Recreation in Lakeland for three decades until 1978, developed a mutually supportive relationship.

After Marchant's retirement, with the endorsement of both the Tigers and the City of Lakeland, Tigertown's 5,500-seat stadium was re-named Joker Marchant Stadium. However, relationships are more the fringe ben-

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effit than the selling point for Lakeland. When you have one of the finest defenses up the middle in the American League, as the Tigers do (second baseman Lou Whitaker, shortstop Alan Trammell, and center fielder Chet Lemon), you demand a near-perfect playing field on which to tune up these stars' considerable talents.

No bad bounces

For the length of their relationship with Lakeland, the Tigers have demanded, and received, just that. "You don't get a bad bounce in Lakeland," Tinsley says proudly.

And the rest of Florida's spring training hosts apparently agree, because Tinsley and his three-man crew (seven more during the season) are often invited to "have a look" at other facilities around the state. "It has to be a year-round program, that's the key," Tinsley says, and refers to his mental calendar, readily available thanks to 11 years of spring training experience.

Play starts in Marchant Stadium in February, with a couple college games to lead into the Tigers' spring training season, which begins in early March and goes for 15 games into early April. The Lakeland Tigers, Detroit's Triple-A minor league club, will occupy the stadium through early September.

"Some time in mid-April, during the Lakeland Tigers first long road trip, we'll begin stressing out the overseeded perennial rye and start re-es-

Bill Tinsley (right) and Robert Fletcher, head groundskeeper at the Tigertown complex, inspect the playing surface from the pitcher's mound.

establishing the Bermuda," Tinsley begins. Because of the warm weather at this time of year, the process is fairly simple, consisting of reducing watering, mowing closer, and finally verti-cutting.

Tinsley's Bermuda-of-choice is a hybrid, Tifway 419. "It's extremely tolerant to the kind of abuse baseball cleats can administer over time." Then, in early May, Tinsley has his staff apply a preventive insecticide treatment. "We apply Oftanol. It goes down and gets those mole crickets waiting to scramble out in the summer," he says.

The preventive application is usually "all it takes," he explains, except during particularly warm winters, when a follow-up fall application may be necessary. "The mole crickets get their schedules all off if we don't have a freeze until January, so they're up there scooting around," he explains. At eight different points in the calendar year, for the past six years, Tinsley and his team have aerated the field, pulling three-inch plugs heavy in loam material and replacing them with straight No. 50 sieve white D.O.T. sand. They're starting to pull up white plugs now, he says, and the transition is almost complete.

"We're noticing a vast improvement in our drainage percolation, and we've pushed the root structure down to some eight-to-10 inches," he says. "Previously, too much of the moisture and nutrients were being trapped at the top, inhibiting our root structure."

Tinsley points out that a healthy root system is particularly vital on a baseball field. "It directly determines how much abuse the top part of the plant is going to take," he explains. "We can actually take a worn-out piece of the field and, with an intensive fertilization and watering program, bring it back in 10 to 20 days."

The other half

But turf is only half of the maintenance story for a baseball groundskeeper. The other half is the clay and sand of the basepaths and pitcher's mound. "The biggest maintenance headaches on a baseball field are the buildup of lips along the edges of your basepaths," Tinsley says. "They can lose a ball game for you with a bad bounce."

The basepaths and pitcher's mound at Marchant have a clay base topped with a black sand mixed with an aggregate. This topping gives a good background for sighting a baseball and also provides a cushion to
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