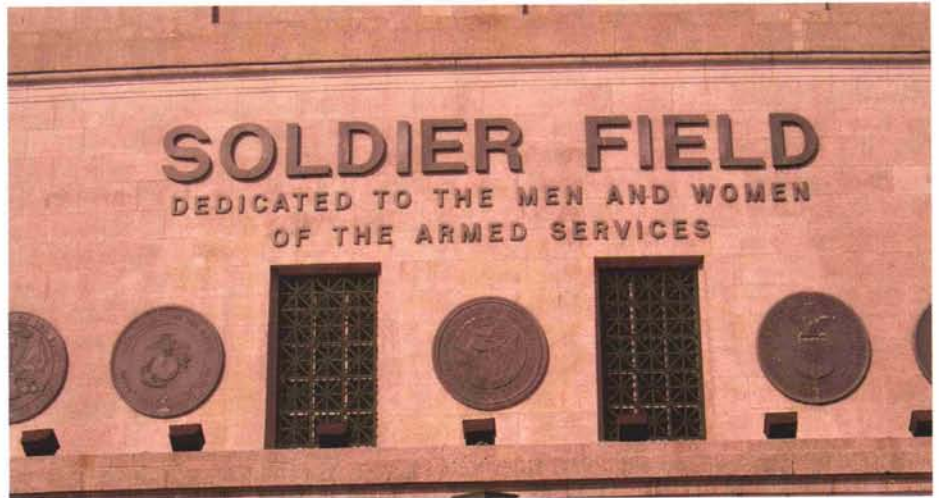


Ken Mrock, John Nolan -N-



Ken Mrock (L) and John Nolan.



Ken Mrock and John Nolan: they are the one-two punch responsible for conditions at Soldier Field, the Payton Center, Halas Hall and the Bourbonnais practice facility. With all this on their plate, I can see why there is a need for TWO head groundskeepers.



The spirit of the American Doughboy. Originally on display in Garfield Park, this newly restored statue from the 1930s has a place of honor at the new Soldier Field.

Since 1988, Ken and John have been working behind the scenes to provide the best possible conditions for countless players and fans to enjoy. The true breadth of these two men's accomplishments over the last 17 years is staggering when you consider how many people have stepped into and out of Soldier Field. The depth of Soldier Field knowledge that Ken Mrock and John Nolan have is readily apparent.

Ken started out in 1970 as superintendent for the Chicago Park District golf courses. Throughout the '70s, during his off-season, Ken used to work on the "tarp crew" at Soldier Field. He made the big switch in 1987 when he became a head groundskeeper at Soldier Field. Ken's office is at the Payton Center in Lake Forest. He resides in Gurnee with his wife of 30 years, Debbie. Ken has three children: Jennifer, 28; Tim, 25; and Tina, 22. Ken is especially proud of his granddaughter, Megan.

John started working part-time for Soldier Field in 1976. After five years of hard labor, in 1981 he earned a full-time position with the landscape department of the Chicago Park District. In 1988, he made the transition to a head groundskeeper at Soldier Field. John's office is at Soldier Field, and he resides on Chicago's southwest side with his wife, Susan. John has two stepdaughters: Sharon, 24, and Lindsey, 21.

So who is responsible for what?

John's primary responsibility is overseeing the playing field and the outside grounds maintenance for every event held at the historic Soldier Field site. During the 2005 season, John will oversee approximately 46 events. This includes NFL games, college and high school football games, soccer games, concerts and, believe it or not, a Girl Scout sleepover! Other types of events also require his attention, such as black-tie charity dinners where it is necessary to place an interlocking plastic material called "Terraplas" over the field. Terraplas is a special ribbed material that is designed to breathe so it does not smother the field. After hosting an event like this, John and his crew work throughout the night to pull the 80 pallets of material off the field as soon as possible. The field also hosts corporate outings, a 10K run finish line, the Special Olympics opening ceremony and anything else the marketing offices

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can dream up. John has no real off-season anymore. During the winter months, he makes snow for the sledding hill on the grounds. His crew also plows snow outside the building, starting at the end of the NFL season through the beginning of the soccer season.

Ken's primary responsibility is overseeing the Payton Center Practice Facility and Halas Hall, the Bourbonnais practice fields at Olivet Nazarene University, and any day-to-day and game-day issues concerning the Bears. Ken actually lives in Bourbonnais during "training camp" so that he can make sure everything is in perfect condition for practices. Ken is busy this off-season as he is preparing for a Payton Center renovation that will include a new artificial surface for the indoor facility, as well as a new roof for the building.

So, are there any parallels between the life of sports field superintendent and golf course superintendent? Not surprisingly, there are. When I asked Ken and John what

some of their greatest challenges were, they both agreed on one thing. It was the daunting task of maintaining "perfect playing conditions every day." Ken even used the term "Augusta quality" on a day-to-day basis. Expectations are very high, whether it's game-day field conditions or practice-field conditions. Unfortunately, just as we experience, the only time you hear **anything** is when there is a problem.

When I asked John about his biggest challenges, he replied, "Just



Ken Mrock (L) with Jim Duggan (head groundskeeper, 1962-71) and the general manager, 1988-94.

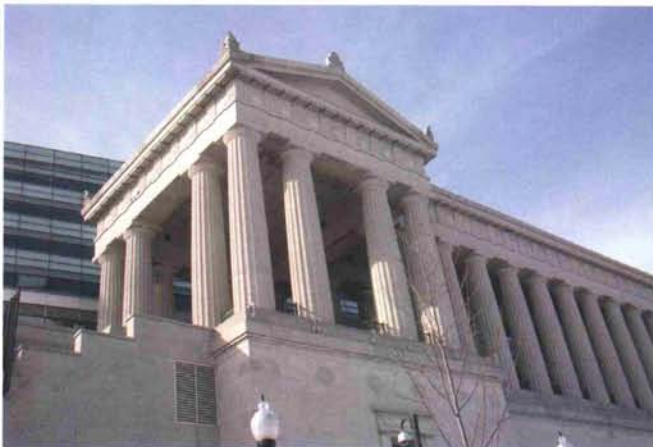
keeping people off the field." John stressed, "This is a game field, not a practice field. It is very important to prevent its overuse."

"Players are bigger, stronger and faster nowadays, and 96% of the players want to play on natural turf," says Ken. "The trick is getting it right for every event."

Ken and John are always on the field during a Bears game day, just to make sure all things are attended to. You might even see Ken or John haul off an injured player with the utility vehicle. No matter what the event is, either John or Ken is right in the middle of all the action.

During our visit, Ken and John also offered up all kinds of great "field factoids." Here are a few things I learned:

- The game field has a liquid heating system that is filled with propylene glycol (anti-freeze). The tubing that lies seven to eight inches below the surface of the field is about 40 MILES LONG!!! The game field comprises 85% sand, 10% Profile



The majestic colonnades are awe-inspiring.



The view from the skyboxes. Says the author: "Let me tell you, it is awesome!"



The Cadillac Room, site for our March meeting.




The Cadillac Room from another vantage point.

porous ceramic material and 5% peat moss. This medium rests on about six inches of pea-gravel. The sod is a thicker cut from mineral soil, with a bluegrass and perennial rye mix.

- The irrigation consists of about 30 heads. John says he can run almost every head at one time.
- The mowing time for the entire game field varies between one to three hours depending on how intricate the mowing pattern is.
- The game field has to be ready to go by March 26th for the first event. The “heat” will be turned on in the field in mid-February, and they will begin to work on the field as the weather allows. The “season” will then stretch through mid-January.
- The in-ground heating system is also used at the Halas Hall practice facility. In fact, much of the “in-house research” that was done to perfect the system took place there. Through trial and error, Ken and John used test plots to determine

the best possible depth and spacing of the tubing. This technology was “uncharted territory.” Ken, John and their staff drew up the plans from scratch and slowly developed the system into what it is today. These heating coils have such an effect on the grass that in 2004, the Halas Hall facility did its final mowing on January 18!

As I walked out on the snow-covered field, I heard the screeching sound of “birds of prey.” They use an automated system that plays these threatening sounds throughout the stadium to ward off pigeons and other nuisance birds.

Whether it is the game field, practice fields or the indoor practice facility, Ken Mrock and John Nolan put countless hours into getting it right for hundreds of players and for millions of fans. Thanks for all your efforts, guys, and we will see you at the March meeting! 



Ken and John admiring the view.



Inside the colonnades.