

Thanks to several Arizona superintendents, students at a tiny school on an impoverished Indian reservation will get their much-needed exercise by playing and running on turf fit for a golf course

RICHARD CARMER

# Field *of* Dreams

**BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR**

**I**t's exercise time at St. Peter Indian Mission, a small school located on the poverty-plagued Gila River Indian Reservation in tiny Bapchule, Ariz. Young students jog across the parched, grassless playing field outside the weathered school building. The kids huff and puff as they scurry by, their feet whisking up swirls of dust.

It's like they're running on concrete, really. The ground, although dusty, is rock-solid from baking in the searing desert sun. It's compacted and cracked, like the fractured pavement of a busy city boulevard.

It's nearing 10 a.m. on this sun-splashed spring morning, and the temperature is already flirting

with 90 degrees. The unadorned terrain of the reservation, located about 40 miles south of Phoenix, is several degrees hotter.

Standing on the outskirts of the barren field are representatives of Arizona's Cactus and Pine GCSA, including Mark Clark, CGCS from Troon Golf & CC; Lynn Cannon, executive director of the Cactus and Pine GCSA; and Randall "Hoke" Holyoak, a former superintendent who's now baseball field supervisor for the city of Mesa, Ariz. They are accompanied by Joe Garagiola, former Major League Baseball player and television sports personality; and Sister Martha Carpenter, principal of the Catholic school, whose students range in ages from 5 to 14. Together, they watch the children scramble and sweat under the bright, cloudless sky.

◀ Kevin Smith, Sister Martha Carpenter and Joe Garagiola (from left) admire the growing grass.

They squint their eyes toward the morning sun as they survey the field, whose only life consists of patches of tumbleweeds and sickly brush. But the group envisions a field of dreams — a sprawling, vibrant green plot of land stretching across the school's compound like soft, lush carpeting.

Garagiola invited the Cactus and Pine members to St. Peter, where he has volunteered since the early 1990s, to talk about their plans to grow grass for the kids to run and play on, instead of the bare and hardened ground. Clark, Cannon and Holyoak huddle with Garagiola and Sister Martha over a map of the proposed four-acre complex, which includes fenced and regulation-size soccer and softball fields, as well as a track.

In May, a caravan of superintendents and dozens of other workers hauled equipment to the site to install a computerized irrigation system with all of the state-of-the-art fixings, including fertigation and a drainage system to combat summer monsoons. Several volunteers



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returned in mid-June to sprig the field with bermudagrass and again in August to patch various spots and apply other finishing touches. The field will be ready this month, just in time for the 185 students to return to school.

This school year, and for many years after, the students at St. Peter will get their exercise by playing and running on turf fit for a golf course.

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▲ Joe Garagiola (right) embraces Musco Lighting's Gary Anderson as Sister Martha looks on. Anderson's company donated lights for the softball field.

▼ School children ran on ground that was rock-solid from baking in the desert sun before the field was built.



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Ed Shimkus, superintendent of Troon North GC in Scottsdale, Ariz., guides a trencher through the hard ground.

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“How many lives will this field touch?” Garagiola asks before quickly answering his own question. “It will reach out like an octopus. We’re going to have kids playing here all day long. This field will help them physically, spiritually and mentally.”

### Do you believe?

The Gila River Indian Reservation, established in 1859, is composed of Pima and Maricopa tribes, whose roots date back 2,000 years. The 372,000-acre reservation is home to about 20,000 people. Although it’s still part of the reservation’s name, the Gila River ceased flowing many years ago after a dam was built.

The reservation has serious social problems — nearly 75 percent of its residents live below the poverty line, and alcoholism is widespread. But just as alarming is that the reservation’s residents suffer from one of the highest rates of diabetes per capita in the world. That reason alone makes building a grass field for the children even more vital because exercise is essential to combat the onset of the disease.

Sister Martha explains that exercise helps speed up the metabolism in Indian children, which is genetically low and often leads to obesity, a major cause of diabetes. “The two biggest weapons we have to combat diabetes are exercise and nutrition,” she adds.

The students run one mile before breakfast, one mile before lunch and one-half mile before recess. Last December, Garagiola visited St. Peter and watched the kids run during one of the area’s notorious windstorms. The kids were covered with the desert’s irritating dust and overcome with frustration. Garagiola was agitated as well and felt helpless. But as he watched the children battle the elements, the notion struck him about the possibility of growing grass on the land.

That’s when Garagiola turned to the Arizona superintendents he met last year — people he knew were experts in grow-

ing grass and tending turf. Garagiola, a popular public speaker, had emceed a Cactus and Pine function and had met Cannon and several superintendents. He phoned Cannon to ask for help.

Cannon, in turn, spoke with Clark, Holyoak and chapter  
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president Kevin Smith. She explained Garagiola's plight to build a field at St. Peter. The four were more than willing to help — if they could. They went to the reservation last December and met Garagiola and Sister Martha to survey the ground's condition.

When Holyoak first saw the ground at St. Peter, the past president of the Arizona Cactus and Pine GCSA figured it would take a miracle to grow grass on it. "When I first saw it, I asked myself, 'Can we do *anything*?' " Holyoak recalls.

The environment reminded Smith, CGCS of The Golf Club at Eagle Mountain in Fountain Hills, Ariz., about the stories of dust bowl Kansas in the 1940s. "The wind blows there frequently, and it's oppressively hot," he says of the climate on the reservation.

**Nearly 50 people showed up at St. Peter on a weekend in May to trench and install a state-of-the-art computerized irrigation system complete with fertigation and a drainage system. Superintendents and others vow to continue to help maintain the field in the future.**

The project officially started when Clark took a soil sample from the clay- and silt-laden ground. There were problems with the soil — it was very high in sodium because of the high salt content in the reservation's water supply — but

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it was treatable. Clark determined that gypsum amendments would improve the soil and make it fertile.

Cannon and the superintendents then called their own meeting for their peers and Garagiola. Nearly 25 superintendents attended, and all committed to giving their time and energy to build the field.

"I couldn't believe it was happening," Garagiola says. "I never lift my nose at someone writing a check [to make a donation], but these people wrote a check with their hard work, muscle, sweat and tears."

Smith was awed that so many superintendents and others from the golf course maintenance industry, including several equipment suppliers, were willing to help. Nearly 50 people showed up at St. Peter to help install the irrigation system in May. "We knew this would be

► **Sister Martha Carpenter is filmed by a local TV cameraman. The project has received mainstream media attention.**

▼ **A group of volunteer workers, including former Cactus and Pine GCSA president Randall "Hoke" Holyoak (center), help install the irrigation system in May.**

something that could galvanize our membership and bring our members together," Smith says.

### Heart of the matter

Garagiola jokes that he changed the name of St. Peter Indian Mission to Our Lady of Quicksand. "Because once you get in, you can't get out," he says.

Garagiola has an endearing relationship with the students. They know that because of the former St. Louis Cardinals catcher, they have a new basketball court, new floors in classrooms, new restrooms, a new feast house and new carpet in the church, not to mention a new convent for the five nuns.

Garagiola knows a lot of people in high places. When he tells them about St. Peter and asks them to help, they take out their

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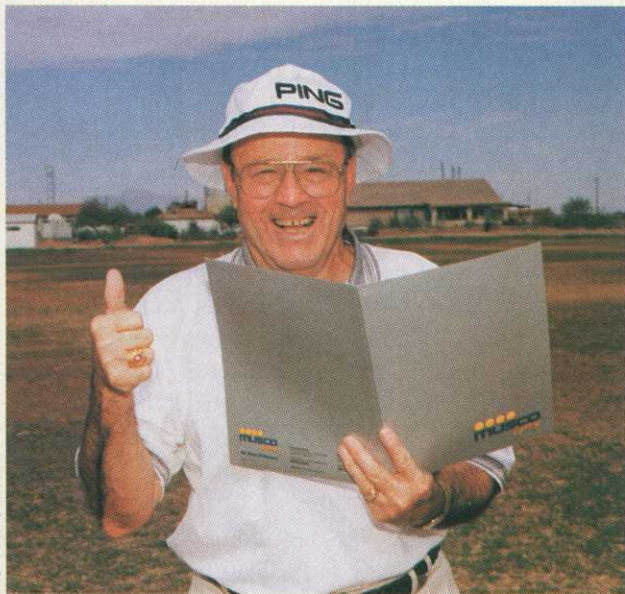
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wallets. Garagiola says his friend, Joe Crookham, president of Oskaloosa, Iowa-based Musco Lighting, promptly donated lights for the softball field after hearing Garagiola's pitch.

When Garagiola walks in a second-grade classroom, the kids see him, smile and exclaim, "Hi Joe!" in unison. Garagiola cherishes the gesture.

"I just want these kids to have a chance," he says pensively. "Life is a race, and we're all at the starting line. I want these kids to be in the race. They're no different than anyone else."

Smith is touched by the undertaking and honored to be a part of it.



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**"These people – in a strong, silent and efficient way – got the job done," Joe Garagiola says of those who helped build the field.**

"You can't put into words what you see and experience there," Smith says. "It's really something special."

Smith spread the word about the project to the association's affiliate members, who also responded in droves to help. Shawn Connors, president of Horizon's golf division, presented Sister Martha with plans for the field's irrigation system on April 21, which happened to be Good Friday. "She told me, 'This is really a *good Friday*,'" Connors says.

Of course, the kids are ecstatic about the field. Cameron Fasthorse, a sixth-grade student, says he won't miss running and kicking up the annoying dust. All John White, a seventh-grader, can say about the field is, "Cool!"

Sister Martha says the field will be like an oasis in the desert. "People will be out here all the time," she adds. "It will change the face of the earth here."

Everyone knows the field must be maintained if it's to endure. But superintendents and others vow their support and insist they won't forget about the project in a few years.

"This ball field will get treated like a golf course," Clark says. "We have people lined up who will aerify it annually."

But Clark realizes that he and other superintendents won't be able to stop by St. Peter on a regular basis to mow the grass or service the irrigation system.

"They have state-of-the-art everything," Clark says of the equipment. "But there's a lot here and not just anyone can run it. It's going to take training."

Garagiola and Sister Martha say they will train parents of students to maintain the field. "There's a hidden element in all of this, and that's parent involvement," Garagiola says.

Garagiola, who an Indian medicine man dubbed "Awesome Fox" for his dedication to St. Peter, admits he was a doubting Thomas and wondered if the field would ever be built. Now that he sees a thick grass field in place of what used to be, Garagiola is inspired. His soul is especially stirred by the altruism exhibited by superintendents and other industry representatives who embraced the project so passionately.

"They're hall of famers," Garagiola says. "The kids feel important because these people didn't just give them lip service. A lot of people come by here and say they're going to do this and that. But these people — in a strong, silent and efficient way — got the job done. You judge people by what's inside of them, and these people have heart." ■

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