

DOC'S DUGOUT - An Inning From Our Past

By Dr. Kent Kurtz - STMA Historian

An Interview with Dr. Fred Grau at College Park, Maryland

When I was the Executive Director of STMA, I traveled to many parts of the United States for meetings and to observe athletic fields. Several of the turfgrass leaders used to meet in College Park, Maryland, at the home of Dr. Fred Grau for a group we started called the National Sports Turf Council. On April 24, 1985, I had the privilege of sitting down with Fred and recording his version of the early people and pioneers in turfgrass. After I returned from the STMA Annual Meeting in San Antonio, I found the tape and will share excerpts from our discussion of 1985.

Fred was a cheerleader and a mile runner in high school and looked after the football field in rural Nebraska. The field was dirt with no grass and the team didn't score a single point all season and never won one game. When he attended the University of Nebraska a few years later he became a cheerleader dressed as a corn cob. He recalled that in those days the worst damage they ever did to Kansas State was to paint their statues on the Manhattan campus. Finally in 1931 he graduated and came east.

Most athletic fields in those days consisted of common Kentucky bluegrass, redbud and crabgrass. There was no tall fescue as this grass was not released until about 1945 when the USDA came out with the variety Alta. There was an assortment of grasses used during this time on athletic fields such as crested dogstail, meadow fescue, creeping red fescue and chewing fescue but none of these really made a good turf. Some common bermudagrass was used along the eastern US but it really did not grow well until July and turned brown early with the first frost. The whole system was very poor since there was no quality. The seed companies set the seeding rates that were used since no research was being conducted to determine the correct seeding rates. Fred recalled he traveled to California for his first speaking engagement at a turf conference and mentioned the seeding rates for bentgrass, redbud, common bluegrass and fine fescue should be 3 to 4 pounds per 1,000 square feet for the mixture. Seed companies at the time were recommending sowing 15 pounds per 1,000 square feet. These excessive seeding rates because of the crowding of grasses resulted in disease so the fields were mowed, raked and re-seeded with the result being the same disappointment - disease and weeds.

In 1935 along with Professor Burton Musser, Fred visited athletic fields in Pennsylvania that planted common Kentucky bluegrass, chewing fescue and redbud because nothing else was available. He recalled a shipload of

chewing fescue that arrived from New Zealand and, to be legal, the bags had to be tagged with the germination percentage. It was and the percentage on the bag was 0.00% and when it was planted nothing grew - but it was legal since it was tagged.

It was a time when there was no proper grass for athletic fields and no specialized equipment or fertilizer. They had manure spreaders and drag harrows and a 4-16-4 fertilizer, which was out of balance. They went with what they had and the result was mud. Fred remembered going to Lehigh Stadium in Allentown, Pennsylvania, where they were using sodium arsenate for weed control and spraying the material on the grass with an old potato sprayer. To insure the proper coverage of the arsenate he walked behind the sprayer in bare feet, pants rolled up to his knees and no protective mask. The field was infested with common plantain, buckhorn plantain, dandelions, crabgrass and goosegrass and the spray application cleaned up all of the weeds. **Editors note: Thankfully, times have changed.**

He further recalled that he visited Leo Previti, the stadium manager in Philadelphia at Municipal Stadium with Charlie Hollowell county agent and Harry Wilcox, county agent for Delaware County. In those days they let the crabgrass grow until seed-heads appeared and then they mowed the field and removed the hay. The result was they played on crabgrass, which eventually turned to mud.

In 1945-46 Tom and Tony Mascaro developed the first spoon tines for the aerifier they began marketing about this time. The aerifier was developed to loosen the soil and make the turf surface more resilient. The first demonstration of an aerifier on a golf course fairway occurred at the Lulu Temple Country Club in North Hills, Pennsylvania in 1947. It was successful and the West Point Products Company of West Point, Pennsylvania began marketing these machines to golf courses and athletic fields.

Dr. Grau indicated that the idea of the vertical mower or verticut machine started on his front lawn in College Park, Maryland about this same time. Fred sat on his lawn that was heavily infested with goosegrass and



Dr. Fred Grau

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drew a large knife backwards and forwards across the grass and when finished brushed the remains with his hand and the plants disappeared and all that remained was the crown of the goosegrass plant. The vertical mower was a marvelous invention that was finally marketed in 1948/49.

Around 1950, Merion Kentucky bluegrass was released and this became the first improved bluegrass from seed. In 1950, Fred called on his old friend, Father Miller, a priest who operated the Gate of Heaven Cemetery in Cincinnati, Ohio. Father Miller was a personal friend of the manager of the Cincinnati Reds baseball team and they questioned Fred about this new grass called Merion. Merion Kentucky bluegrass was discovered growing on a fairway by the superintendent at the Merion Golf Club near Philadelphia. Merion bluegrass was placed in the turf trials at the Arlington Turf Gardens, which were moved to Beltsville, Maryland when they built the Pentagon on the site in the early 1940's. Merion was a superior grass that survived the move from the Arlington Turf Gardens to Beltsville. In 1950, the Cincinnati baseball club approved the first large installation of this grass in their baseball facility, Crosley Field. It made quite a show as a pioneer grass because of its vigor and superior color and responded well by taking the wear required by baseball. The only drawback initially was that it required more nitrogen fertilization than the common types of bluegrass that were on the market at that time.

Fred Grau joined Tom and Tony Mascaro in 1953 as a member of the West Point Products Company. They put together their version of today's STMA "Seminar on Wheels". They organized athletic field tours of facilities in New York, Pennsylvania and surrounding states during 1953-1955. It was a great success joining county agents, athletic field managers, scientists and interested parties together on these bus tours to view and discuss problems and solutions. These tours resulted in lasting friendships and joined together people who had common interests. Just like today with STMA we all learn new ideas and return home from our annual conference with new confidence, education, ideas and friendships. Isn't this what STMA is all about?

The Dr. Fred Grau Scholarship that is awarded at the STMA Annual Banquet has funding for about one more year. Dr. Henry Indyk conceived the idea to initiate this award to honor one of the true pioneers of our industry. The original money was derived from the funds left from an organization called The National Sports Turf Council that was organized in the 1980's by a group of men who wanted to raise money to support education

and research on sports turf. Dr. Grau was the president of this group and when he passed away the group more or less dissolved. I was an officer in this group representing STMA. I would like to see Fred's legacy and memory continued in the form of this scholarship. When I returned from San Antonio I contacted Fred Grau Jr. and asked for his family's support of this scholarship. He has sent to the SAFE Foundation a check for \$1,000 to continue the award for a couple more years. I would like to solicit the help of all members of STMA to donate to this worthwhile scholarship to keep the memory of Dr. Fred Grau alive for future generations of STMA. I plan to financially support this worthwhile endeavor. Checks should be made out to the SAFE Foundation and designated for the Dr. Fred Grau Scholarship and sent to STMA/SAFE Headquarters. Thanks for your support of our Association.

*Dr. Kent W. Kurtz
STMA Historian*



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