DOC'S DUGOUT - An Inning From Our Past

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Yankee Stadium - "The House that Ruth Built"

Early Days with Walter Owens at Yankee Stadium

According to an account written in 1951, the turf at Yankee Stadium was referred to as the "most abused grass in the world." Walter Owens was the groundskeeper in 1951 at Yankee Stadium and had been since 1928. He arrived at the ballpark each morning by subway at 7:00 am. The spry, white haired, 63 year old groundskeeper kept the grass on the 3 1/2 acre field green and trim. Even when he was on vacation he would drop in to take a look at his field. Owen once remarked that baseball accounted for only part - and not the worst - of the beating the stadium grass took. In 1950, his schedule included 77 home games and 6 exhibition games and, the even tougher events: a one week circus, 10 days of a national assembly of a religious organization, a wrestling show, two championship boxing matches and a collegiate football game. To top off the year's activities, the Yanks of the National Football League used the stadium for six home games and for daily practice sessions after the baseball season.

"Terrific compaction." those were the words of a man who wore a regular Yankee uniform during games and couldn't keep his thoughts far from the life struggle of the grass roots in a hammered soil. "Actually, no single sport can be hardest on the grass. The wear and tear of any of them, especially when played in bad weather, is mighty tough on turf. Our biggest problem is that ongoing crowds must walk on the field. After years of experimenting, we decided that the best thing to do to keep the soil from becoming packed was to keep people off the grass. Building a walkway of brick dust, 18 feet wide, around the entire playing field, solved many compaction problems. We try to keep people on this path. However, with meetings such as the convention of Jehovah's Witnesses last summer, we confined activities as much as possible to the dirt part of the infield.

"If it becomes absolutely necessary for people to go on the grass for events like fights or wrestling, we lay down wood platforms or runways raised about two inches on 2x4s for air circulation. These wooden strips take the life right out of the ground and are especially damaging to the grass if set up or knocked down in a rain storm. If a platform is on the grass for any length of time for any event, we must re-sod the places where the 2x4s come into contact with the sod, as well as heavy traffic areas not protected.

"At no time do we allow chairs to be placed directly on the grass. And I might add that we definitely try to discourage any show or performance where a large or continuous body of people marches in step across the grass. When stakes must be driven into the ground for special performances, our agreement is that as quickly as a stake is withdrawn, a large sheet of waterproof paper is put into the stake hole. Once the performers have left the field we immediately fill the holes with our top-dressing mixture."

Babe Ruth

Aerification a must says Owens

In order to grow smooth, thick, green turf at Yankee Stadium, Owens and his four-man grounds crew (six for baseball and football) would loosen or aerate the soil to counteract the packing by crowds, mowing equipment, rain and irrigation. In August and again in December after the last football game, a concrete roller with spiked teeth was pulled over the stadium area to punch holes in the packed earth. The spots where wood platforms had been placed were hand spiked immediately after the event. Following the hand spiking, rainmakers were turned on the cleared field. When the soil on the field

continued on page 10

DOC'S DUGOUT - An Inning From Our Past

continued from page 7

was packed, water, air and nutrients would enter into the field very slowly, if at all. As a result, root growth was shallow, and a thatch of dry roots and stems at the surface increased the problem. It was discovered that the need to aerify varied with the soil and the use the field received. Heavy soils packed more easily than sandy soils. Owen discovered that he could loosen the soil with good results in the spring or fall, if done when the ground was neither soggy or dry. In mild weather, if the soil wasn't too wet, he could aerate into the winter months. If aeration was done in hot, dry weather a thorough watering followed the aeration. Under normal conditions, aeration to loosen the soil was done twice per year.

"Since plowing up a turfed area and reseeding it is expensive, the best answer to soil compaction is the newly designed soil-aerating equipment that is now available" (probably from Tom Mascaro at West Point Products). "For small areas a common hand pitchfork or hand aerifier can be used under packed areas of the turf with little or no damage to the existing grass. The new aeration equipment uses hollow tines or curved, hollow spoons to loosen soil to a depth of about three to four inches and removes soil cores. Enough room is left so water and fertilizer can move into the surrounding soil. Less rain runs off the aerated soil, and the need for extra sprinkling is sharply reduced. The hollow-tined tools are more effective than mechanical spikers equipped with solid spikes which force holes in the ground by squeezing adjacent soil."

Other Maintenance Practices used by Owens

Mowing

According to Owens, "In order to produce the best playing turf we generally do not let the grass grow higher than 1-1/2 inches. When the team is out of town, however, we let it run a little higher to gain strength."

Seeding

Seeding at the Stadium went on continuously throughout the year, except in January and February when the field laid idle under a light cover of marsh or salt hay. "We put in our spring stand of grass - a mixture of Kentucky blue, colonial bent, redtop and perennial rye - immediately after the last football game - around December 10. The seed lies dormant on the ground during the winter, and begins to germinate after the first big thaw in late February or early March. We get a headstart by seeding then because we don't have to wait until the frost is completely out of the ground before we put out our seed. We never seed through the snow, as the ground is too moist to work on. The hay is taken off to let the ground dry about March 1, and we seed the field lightly again."

Owens remarked, "Our method of seeding is quite conventional. In four standard hand spreaders, we place a top-dressing mixture brought in from outside." The soil mixture varied with the quality of the topsoil, which Owens tested by "the feel of it" to see how much sand and humus to add. The average top-dressing mixture

continued on page 14

continued from page 10

contained 5 parts topsoil, 3 parts of ordinary soil, and 1 of humus, all mixed in large bins under the stands in the winter.

Before the seed-soil mixture was applied to the field, the ground level was built up where needed with topsoil. In one application, the top-dressing of seed and soil was spread evenly over the Stadium grass about 1/4 inch deep. Once over with a light roller finished the job.

Feeding.

Owens used a commercial fertilizer high in nitrogen to feed the Stadium grass. "We use a standard product of the 8-6-4 type, and apply it in the spring and approximately three other times each year as needed. Each time, we drag a steel mat over the fertilized area and follow up with a gentle watering."

Watering.

"Our watering is done mainly during the later afternoon after the sun has reached a position where the grass will not get direct sunlight," Owens declared, adding that both sprinklers and hand hoses were used. "Revolving sprinklers that cover a 75-foot circle are turned on at night. They're left on from 8 to 10 hours and longer in dry weather as needed.

Sodding.

"In conjunction with sodding, we have found that the space in which the sod is to be placed should be well worked over, at the time mixing in a good portion of granulated peat. We use this at an average rate of about 24 tons a year. We then hand-rake the soil to the desired level, and remove any pebbles which might have worked to the surface.

"We buy cultivated sod of Kentucky blue, fescue and redtop. After watering the surface slightly, we lay the sod. In our experience, starting in the largest square corner requires a minimum of cutting and fitting. We allow no walking on the new sod for several days. As a final touch, we roll the new sod with a light roller," concluded Owens.

Note from Doc:

Walter Owens lived in a time when many of the innovations we take for granted were first appearing on the scene to assist groundskeepers with their jobs. The development of the aerator, the first commercial sod from improved pastures, top-dressing material maybe sold by Tom Mascaro who began selling these products about this time, and improved sprinklers mounted on stands with rollers that projected the water greater distances, all came into use about this time. Walter Owens spent 13 years at the New York Polo Grounds before moving over to Yankee Stadium where he completed 23 years in 1951.