

## Yearning for Recognition

Maintaining college fields is not well understood. Grounds managers are asked to do much more than just keeping the gridiron neat.

by Ron Hall, assistant editor

A major roadblock to serving the athletic field market has been that there is no such thing as a typical athletic field manager.

It's the least understood area of turf management," one grounds manager told WEEDS TREES & TURF, "with the least amount of information available."

An informal survey of college and university athletic field managers in September now provides some consistencies in the way athletic fields are managed.

The individual in charge of athletic fields is also responsible for the entire campus in more than half the cases. He reports to the Physical Plant Director but must consult regularly with athletic directors and coaches. He puts together his own budget and field maintenance standards.

His biggest concerns are overuse of the fields, control of them, time available, and water (irrigation and drainage.)

For the most part, he operates without any particular set of recognized field maintenance standards, putting together his own based upon his experience and requests from the athletic department.

The average budget for chemicals and equipment for fields was \$16,000, while the track surface and pits are worth \$117,400, the fencing around fields is worth \$52,000, the equipment used worth \$163,000 and the stadium building and stands are valued at \$1.57 million.

With sizeable investment for just the athletic portion of their respon-

**STADIUM BUILDING & STANDS** \$1.57 million

**EQUIPMENT USED WORTH** \$163,000

**TRACK & PITS' WORTH** \$117,400

**CHEMICAL & EQUIPMENT BUDGET** \$16,100

**FENCING** \$52,000

**SALARY** \$24,000

### ATHLETIC FIELD SURVEY

Average



room in the gym.

The athletic field manager of today has to work out complicated schedules, substantiate budget requests, deal with unions, and still know grass. He has to overcome bad weather, satisfy alumni, and even invent equipment and methods to get his job done.

### Salary range

Salaries (and respondents were surprisingly frank) ranged from \$12,000 to \$40,000 annually, with 14 percent of those polled earning in the \$12,000-\$19,000 range, 48 percent in the \$20,000-\$25,000 category, and approximately 26 percent \$25,000-\$30,000.

Those indicating the highest salaries usually hold titles such as grounds and services manager, physical plant director, or director of facilities and grounds.

"I think you'll find the salaries to be about the same as what park directors make," one superintendent notes. "In the North they're probably a little higher than in the South."

Experience is a big word in the college groundskeeping fraternity with 11 years on the job being an average of all those responding, the low respondent having one year experience, the veteran 36 years.

These averages may not give the complete picture since some of those relatively new in their positions also indicate previous experience in grounds departments or related businesses.

Slightly more than half hold undergraduate degrees with hor-

sibility, colleges need more than a "maintenance man."

"Colleges don't want people in charge who go out and just work with their back all day," a chief groundskeeper at a college in the Southeast says. "They want people with some leadership, and people who can put together a budget, train other people, and supervise effectively."

College administrators can't expect a person who has little education and is unwilling to accept responsibility to manage buildings and landscapes worth millions of dollars. There is more than money at stake. The atmosphere of the campus to students and alumni and the safety of athletes are also at risk.

Management decisions for these can't be made by someone working out of a closet with a washtub in it or a cramped corner of the equipment

ticulture, just edging agronomy, the most prevalent educational background. Nine percent hold associate degrees, 15 percent graduate degrees.

While many of the college grounds superintendents who responded to our survey earned their positions by coming up through the ranks, they, like their more formally educated counterparts, are eager to broaden their understanding by attending conferences and seminars. Winter short courses in turf management by some larger universities provide an excellent opportunity to learn, several note.



**Harry Gill, right, and assistant Gary Vanderberg of County Stadium, Milwaukee.**

### Specialized training

The feeling among grounds superintendents is that the profession will require more specialized training in the future.

Differences caused by the size of colleges and universities and geographic location sometimes make direct comparisons tricky.

If the grounds superintendent isn't worrying about pushing the snow off a parking lot in the North, he's fretting about the seed he put down on the bermudagrass in the South, hoping for just a bit more green before the alum-

nae show up for their once-a-year homecoming bash. In fact, he often doesn't have the same responsibilities from campus to campus.

Few—a very few granted—fulfill responsibilities seemingly unrelated to athletic field maintenance, like one respondent who schedules events at the university ice arena also. Or another who serves as athletic director and baseball coach. More common are the grounds superintendents (a title used by 60 percent of those answering the survey) responsible for all the grounds at their particular universities or colleges, athletic fields being just part of the picture.

Almost 80 percent of those responding to the poll indicate they maintain more than ball fields, slightly more than 10 percent doubling as transportation supervisors also.

Although there's no such animal as the typical grounds superintendent, there are typical problems, our survey suggests, the most common being over use and control of the use of athletic fields.

### Problems

"The biggest problem we have is keeping everything off the main football field. Now we've got soccer and rugby and that's one reason why I'm

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retiring," one veteran superintendent says. "You can't play on it everyday and expect it to stay good."

Band practices, ROTC drills, even parking ("if we don't play on it, we park on it," one manager moans) cause headaches for those charged with keeping the campus green.

"Coaches as well as other field users need to be more realistic and sensitive to field wear," a supervisor in the Northeast says.

Another superintendent complains, echoing the responses of several others, he can't keep "conscientious" help because of lack of funds. "You kind of scrimp," he says. "You know what has to be done, but you just can't get it done."

Time. It's a major problem.

"I'm responsible for 119 acres of campus plus the athletic fields," a

West Coast grounds supervisor explains. "It's hard to find time to do everything. This year we rebuilt our football field (900 yards of new soil, new grass). We only had six weeks to get ready before our first game."

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**80 percent of those responding say they maintain more than ball fields.**

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Other problems listed in order of their frequency on the survey include poor drainage, inadequate irrigation, lack of equipment or equipment failures, and weed control.

University field managers and grounds supervisors keep themselves informed in a variety of ways, and 65 percent of them specifically listed trade publications with 30 percent using suppliers for ideas on a regular basis.

### Solutions

Grounds managers are not bashful in seeking solutions to specific problems and the sources they use include product manufacturers, local extension offices, and specialists in related areas. Most have developed a network of "experts" they contact on a periodic basis for assistance, our survey shows.

Most indicate a need for a better exchange of information, or as one harried answerer pleads, "I need all the help I can get." Just over 50 percent responding to our survey said they would join an association for field managers with another 18 percent answering "maybe" or "depending upon the benefits." Only 12 percent came back with a definite "no."

Many current athletic field managers made it to the top by hard work, on-the-spot problem solving, and by being good politicians. Replacing them, however, are former golf course superintendents and horticulture graduates.

These new managers are more receptive to new techniques, more willing to share their expertise, and more determined to make natural turf withstand the wear of athletics. They will take the athletic field manager out of the days of secrecy and into the days of rapid progress.

**WT&T**