

With millions of users, thousands of facilities, the previously neglected turf ballfield is gaining the public's respect. Now it needs public support.

Public Sports Turf: Drastically in Need of Standards

by **Bruce F. Shank**, executive editor, and **Ron Hall**, assistant editor

Orphan Annie and public sports fields have a great deal in common.

Both receive only minimal attention as wards of the state and have the potential to rise to greater status.

The big question is, who will be the Daddy Warbucks of public sports turf?

A significant number of organizations, including this magazine, are trying desparately to find the answer. A summit of all major public sports turf groups was held at the USDA Turf Research Center in Beltsville, MD, in late April to get the ball rolling.

The public sports turf market has the potential to expand the overall turf market as the professional lawn care market did in the 1970's.

This long-delayed market will boom because the public is demanding better, safer fields while public agencies face increased liability for injuries occurring on public fields.

Greater awareness of injury liability and skillful promotion of safer, better built and maintained fields to Parent Teachers Associations and public field user groups, will cause budget roadblocks to collapse under taxpayer pressure.

Roadblocks are not just financial. Current maintenance levels are recognized as inadequate for intensive use. Field construction standards used to build most of today's fields are resulting in poorly-drained, worn-out fields. A major reconstruction effort will be needed after adequate construction and maintenance specifications are developed.

Maintenance Practices*

Practice	Percentage of Respondents Doing
fertilization	92%
weed control	86%
aerification	73%
irrigation	60%
insect control	36%
disease control	29%

Scope of need

In 1983, the National Federation of State High School Athletic Associations in Kansas City counted 14,086 schools involved in football, 13,380 in baseball, 14,414 in track and field, and 4,454 in soccer. Add to these figures the more than 12,000 park systems in the U.S. with a varied assortment of fields.

The scope of public sports turf continues to snowball when you consider junior colleges, state universities, and municipal recreational facilities.

Another perspective of the market is provided by looking at the size of public field user groups. There are more than 2.2 million children participating in 7,000 Little League® programs, more than one million kids playing in other organized summer baseball and softball leagues, and 173,000 teams competing under Amateur Softball Association rules. Add the growing popularity of soccer leagues, and extremely serious over-demand for a limited number of fields becomes undeniable.

Liability

This overdemand only becomes important to public field decision makers when kids get injured and the liability of the public agency is threatened. A recent *Weeds Trees & Turf* survey revealed schools and parks carry an average of \$1 million in liability insurance.

Liability insurance used to provide public agencies with comfortable protection against serious fi-

Types of Fields Maintained*

Type	Percentage of Respondents
baseball/softball	81%
tennis	69%
soccer	65%
football	62%
basketball	56%
golf course	12%

* 364 responses

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nancial loss to injury claims. But, insurance companies today are actively researching injury rates on public fields for possible rate increases. In the future, insurance premiums may possibly be lower for properly constructed and maintained fields. Then, and possibly only then, decision-makers will move to provide the budgets, equipment, and personnel to keep fields safe.

Demand and injury liability will force public agencies to take field construction and maintenance seriously.

Golf leads the way

The National Golf Foundation was the first to record the growing dominance of the public sports facility in 1983 when it discovered 85 percent of all regular golfers played public courses (daily fee and municipal). Forty percent of frequent golfers played municipal courses, although these courses represented only 16 percent of the total number of all types of courses.

Clearly the golfer is depending more and more on municipal and daily fee courses. In response to increased demand, more municipal courses are hiring contract maintenance companies, such as American Golf Corp., Los Angeles, CA, are growing rapidly.

If an organization like NGF existed for football, softball, baseball, and soccer, a similar or perhaps stronger case for support of public sports turf could be documented. Statistics for both the number and types of fields and number of users are badly needed.

Another sign of concern for public sports turf is the increasing number of former golf course superintendents holding the titles of park superintendent or stadium facility director.

Private sports facilities

In the WTT survey it was discovered only 10 percent of leagues playing on

public fields pay a significant portion of maintenance costs. More than a fifth of the leagues playing on public fields, however, perform some maintenance tasks.

While a public facility by definition should be open to all taxpayers, intensive use by one or more groups should be supported with additional user fees. Intensive use hours can be limited for the benefit of general taxpayers and the turf.

When sports facilities, such as multi-field softball centers, are profitable on a private basis, then two conclusions can be drawn. First, the public is willing to pay for scheduled use of quality fields. Secondly, the quality of public fields is considered sufficiently lower to pay for private fields.

It follows that landscape maintenance contractors can build a case for better sports fields for a reasonable price. The WTT survey showed 11 percent of schools and parks contract out part of athletic field maintenance. Dramatizing this possibility is the fact that 71 percent of the school and park officials polled said they lacked the manpower to accomplish needed sports turf maintenance.

Furthermore, the superintendents responded that equipment expenditures were of most concern to them (64%), more than labor (41%) and more than chemicals (21%). Equipment leasing and contract maintenance are alternatives to rising equipment costs.

Considering that 46 percent of park and school superintendents work with no budget growth and 15 percent with falling budgets, public agencies are being forced to make hard decisions.

Case by case interest

The attitude of public officials in response to public demand is very important to the attention sports fields receive. A winning team or local media coverage may create the dedication needed for adequate field care. More often fields are lumped into the overall physical plant budget simply because they exist, not because they have special needs.

Sports fields must be treated as a unique maintenance function. If the public agency is unable to provide staff for necessary care, then contract maintenance should be used.

Field maintenance contractors need to sell a package specifically designed for sports fields. Bids

should meet recognized maintenance standards for specific types of fields.

Public agencies are currently at a loss for such standards. No national park or scholastic agency can currently provide maintenance standards to local schools or parks. The only way they have any idea of what is needed is to contact extension. Extension often lacks these standards as well.

Without standards budgets are impossible to build. Once standards are developed realistic budgets can be established.

Maintenance budgets for the park and school supers polled by WTT ranged from \$200 to \$3 million. The average maintenance budget was nearly \$250,000 and the median was \$55,000.

When the status of public sports fields is raised to an appropriate level, budgets should not be a problem.

Public golf course budgets are actually higher than daily fee maintenance budgets as discovered in a WTT survey published in the January 1985

Without construction and maintenance standards budgets are impossible to build.

issue. Maintenance and construction standards exist for golf, but not for many other sports fields.

There are roughly 160,000 acres of municipal golf courses in the U.S. WTT estimates there are at least 250,000 acres of public softball, football, soccer, and baseball fields in the U.S. Using National Golf Foundation statistics for rounds played on municipal courses in 1983 (5.5 million), revenue generated by municipal golf courses (\$8 per round) was \$44 million. This revenue paid maintenance costs. Some method of generating maintenance funds for public sports fields has to be considered.

A change in status must begin with development of widely recognized field construction and maintenance standards. Then, and only then, can our public sports fields leave the orphanage.

WT&T

The return of professional baseball to Washington D.C. could mean a bigger crew and more work for groundskeeper Tony Burnett, but he welcomes the challenge.

RFK's Turf Is Major League

by Ron Hall, assistant editor



There's no "Mr. Baggy pants" at Washington D.C.'s professional sports mecca.

Tony Burnett, chief groundskeeper at Robert F. Kennedy Stadium, is decked out in snappy blue blazer, tie, pressed trousers. He's got that spiffed-up, ready-to-go-to-a-party look about him.

The "party" could be the return of

"The majority of the Redskins love natural turf."

—Burnett

professional baseball to the nation's capital.

There's a buzz in RFK. Smiles. People humming. "Hey Tony, howya doin'?" And the long-suffering fans of the nation's capital (They've paid, oh how they've paid!) sense their 15 years penance is ending.

The once-proud Senators— world champs in '33—slinked out of D.C. about 20 years ago and resodded themselves in Minnesota, smack dab in the middle of Injun' country, proud Washingtonians hurrumphed. Then the expansion Senators. They couldn't get over the hump. Small wonder. They traded the left side of their infield (rifle-armed Aurelio Rodriguez at third, steady shortstop Eddie Brinkman) to the Tigers then hot-footed it to Texas. Rodriguez and Brinkman obliged by helping Detroit to the 1971 American League East championship.

"I'd love to see baseball come back to Washington D.C.," says Burnett, who at a youthful 40 years old is putting in his 25th year at RFK. That's a bit hard to believe because Burnett, trim and soft spoken, just doesn't look old enough to have a high-school-age

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Tony Burnett, chief groundskeeper at Robert F. Kennedy stadium.

son (a basketball player) in his household. He looks like he could take a swing or two at the plate himself.

Pro baseball at RFK? "Why not," says Burnett.

"I'm trained as a baseball groundskeeper. Initially I broke in with a baseball team," he says.

That was in 1962. Burnett was fresh out of high school. His boss was Joe Moony. ("He kind of took me under his wing. He's one of the best," Burnett recalls.) And the Senators played in Washington in new D.C. Stadium. Lombardy coached the professional football Redskins.

Lombardy moved to Green Bay, and Moony took over as chief groundskeeper at Boston's Fenway. D.C. Stadium became RFK in 1971, and Burnett became boss groundskeeper.

His number one job since then has been keeping the 'Skins happy; and he has.

'Skins love turf

Natural turf plays a big part in the success of the Redskins, Burnett is convinced. "The majority of the Red-skin players love natural grass."

In the category of "action speaking louder than words" the Redskins delivered an oration in the 1982-83 season. They rolled over Miami 27-17 in Super Bowl XVII as aging Mack-truck-on-legs John Riggins gained more than 100 yards in four consecutive playoff games (a record).

Could it be that RFK's modified Prescription Athletic Turf (PAT) playing surface contributes to Riggins longevity as a power back? Larry Csonka, the former all-pro bulldozer for the Miami Dolphins thinks so. Speaking about artificial turf, Csonka once told writers, "it can finish every player in the league before his time. Let the engineers play on it. I hear there's a guy off somewhere working on a different weather-resistant surface. It's called grass."

But growing grass isn't as easy as it looks, not in D.C., however, which is in the so-called "transition" zone. Burnett tried Kentucky bluegrass after the sand-based PAT system was installed in 1975. He abandoned bluegrass in favor of Bermudagrass the following year even though it goes into dormancy about the time the Redskins start play.

"The last four years we've used three different Bermudagrasses," Burnett says of his field which is re-sodded each June. "Last year we used

419, but I might try a new one next year if I think I can get a better stand."

Much of Burnett's maintenance schedule is now common practice on many professional sports fields: overseeding with a pregerminated ryegrass blend before and after every game, aeration (he uses a Ryan Greensaire II and a piston-driven Hahn Aerifier II) about every 10 days during the Bermudagrass growing season, application of about 1/2 lb. nitrogen in water-soluble 16-8-8 at reg-

"Washington is going to end up with an expansion baseball team."

—Dalrymple

ular intervals, and mowing (he uses a Toro Professional 76 and a Jacobsen Turf King) every other day when the Bermudagrass is growing, twice a week for the ryegrass.

Pros destroy turf

Neither the PAT system (which Burnett swears by) nor good field maintenance procedures can compete with the damage of a professional football team, however. Burnett claims the turf on a professional football stadium starts to deteriorate, particularly in the center of the field, soon after the season begins.

It's the groundskeepers job to slow down the deterioration. That determines his worth.

Says Burnett, "professional football creates a tremendous amount of pressure on a playing surface. College games don't come close. I've had both games here and after a Redskin's game it's like a bunch of cattle have been out there. When those big linemen dig in, they really dig in. And here at Washington they like to run. Those running plays compound the problem."

Vince Lombardi, who coached at D.C. when Burnett started his career, had definite feelings about field maintenance.

"Lombardi once told me, 'I don't care about your blankety-blank-field. Level it out, roll it, and mark it. We'll play on it.' He didn't particularly care about how a field looked, but he wanted it to play good," Burnett recalls.

"You can have the best looking field in the world, but it may not play

well. We are more concerned about the structure of the field than just having it look good. The root structure is more important than the leaf."

When it comes to preparing a field for a game, Burnett says just about anything (including dyeing a field for the television camera) goes. "We do anything and everything to get this field ready," he says. "When the whistle blows on Sunday that field has to be ready. That's the bottom line."

The bottom line for Burnett, however, isn't just RFK Stadium. He maintains a pair of nearby practice fields that are used by the 'Skins in the summer and by area colleges for soccer in the spring. And snow removal in the parking lots of the Starplex complex, which includes the stadium and an adjoining arena, also falls within his responsibilities.

His position is unique. He works for the D.C. Armory Board, a quasi-governmental agency, which manages RFK. Burnett calls it a "beautiful" situation.

"We create our own revenue through events," he explains. "We are not subsidized. That makes it good when we need equipment because when we need a new piece, we go out and get it." With D.C.'s star rising in baseball circles Burnett might be needing additional equipment a year or two down the road.

How close is D.C. in returning to the major leagues?

"Washington is climbing rapidly with the baseball people," Jim Dalrymple, general manager of the D.C. Armory, which takes care of the stadium, says.

"We have a committee that the Mayor has put together and it's been very, very active. There's no doubt in my mind that Washington is going to end up with an expansion baseball team."

Proponents of baseball in the capital have gone so far as to suggest \$16 million in improvements to RFK to entice a new club. Frank Smith, Jr., chairman of the D.C. Baseball Commission, reports that the cost could be decreased by \$1.25 million by keeping a natural grass playing surface.

Optimists in D.C. are hoping for a National League franchise by the end of this year.

"I don't know how a baseball team would affect me right now, but I know it will mean a bigger crew," says Burnett. "And," as he flashes a broad smile, "a whole lot more work. I'm excited about having baseball again."

WT&T

Fichter's Rule: "The impetus for good fields must come from the users. If the public demands good fields, then we'll have to provide them."

Ann Arbor's Soccer Showcase

by Ron Hall, assistant editor

He's 39. His dark hair is flecked with gray. He's not given to pronouncements. But, Gary Fichter, the top turfman in the Ann Arbor Department of Parks and Recreation, says a community's athletic fields will only be as good as a community demands.

Fichter likens sports turf to something he's more familiar with, golf. When weekend golfers began demanding the types of courses they saw on television, the entire golf maintenance industry benefited. Fichter says the weekend athlete has some catching up to do.

"Right now, I don't really know if the public wants good athletic fields,"

Fichter notes. "I mean, how far is the public willing to go to get them? I don't often hear those good hard questions."

It's a curious pose for the city's golf course superintendent. But the Cleveland, Ohio, native with a luxuriant brown moustache has a lively six-year-old son playing in the local soccer league and a daughter waiting in the wings. Also, his experience in turf makes him a valuable helper in the park department's athletic field maintenance.

But, back to Fichter's Rule, and a group of citizens, the Ann Arbor Soccer Association (AASA), who help prove it.

Fuller Park

The AASA pushed for top-rate playing facilities. A progressive city responded. The result is city-owned Fuller Park, a picturesque soccer complex tucked in a bend of the serpentine Huron River.

The Fuller Park soccer fields now showcase some of the best amateur soccer in Michigan. The fields are used by the AASA which provides top-level competition for 400 adult and 500 adolescent players. These are the skilled soccer players in this college town of 115,000, that lays claim to being home of huge Michigan University.

A few years ago Fuller Park was



Fuller Park soccer fields—a lush landscape from the air.

part of a sagging 18-hole golf course. In the mid-1960's the course was reduced to nine holes, and in 1974 abandoned altogether. For a few years at least, Fuller Park sported little more than a healthy crop of weeds.

The Association's move to Fuller in 1978 wasn't without a few rough spots. Indeed, when the AASA began play, the park resembled what it had been, a broken down golf course. Scoring paths to the goal often took players over dilapidated tees and greens. Turf on the natural-soil fields at Fuller Park disappeared under the pounding of intensive spring and fall play.

Fuller wasn't safe for soccer.

The AASA asked for help.

Help needed

"About three years ago we offered to match money to regrade and resurface the fields," AASA President Hugh McPherson says "Then about a year after that the city ran a park millage, and we again approached the city, this time about putting in irrigation."

Ann Arbor and the Association inked a five-year pact that would see the city contributing \$100,000 in materials and services. The AASA puts up \$15,000.

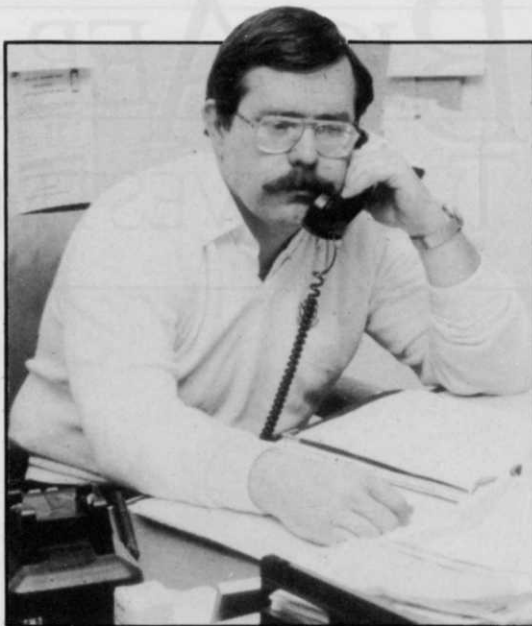
So far the financial arrangement seems to be working well, although there is a slight disagreement over the condition of the playing surfaces.

"It's got to be the nicest soccer facility in the state," says the AASA's McPherson.

"I think they were expecting a Mercedes. When I only delivered a Cadillac, they were disappointed," says Fichter as he surveys the grass soccer fields.

McPherson is obviously pleased with improvements at Fuller. The turf, however, is still not what it should be, Fichter feels. Years in golf course maintenance (and a stint in his own lawn care company) make him his own worst critic.

After earning a B.S. degree in agriculture from Ohio State University, Fichter switched directions by going heavy into turf. He served as assistant superintendent at Sylvania Country Club, Toledo, OH, before an eight-



Gary Fichter, Ann Arbor Parks and Recreation Department.

year stint as superintendent at Ironwood Golf Club in Northwestern Ohio, "a real learning experience," he recalls. He helped develop the then-new Ironwood course. Several years in his own lawn care company preceded a move to Ann Arbor.

In the two-plus years he's been in Ann Arbor, Fichter has taken solid steps in rebuilding the playability and popularity of the public Leslie Park and Huron Hills golf courses. His turf training allows him to help with the ball diamonds and soccer fields, too.

The rebuilt Fuller Park fields could be his showcase.

Renovation begins

Renovation began with a regrading of Fuller in August 1982. Workers removed tons of topsoil and stockpiled it for reuse. No other topsoil was added. This was a "good news, bad news" situation. The original soil consists of loamy sands which drain well but are "droughty", not the best environment for strong, young athletic turf.

Next, a Brillion seeder spread a mixture of grasses—25 percent Adelphi and 25 percent Parade (both Kentucky bluegrass), 25 percent Galway (tall fescue), and 25 percent NK200 (perennial ryegrass) at a rate of 150 lbs. per acre. The fields were mulched with straw, two tons an acre. Fertilizer, 12-12-12, preceded seeding.

Fichter reports germination "was only slightly satisfactory" by the spring of 1983 with a turf cover of

about 50 percent, and 95 percent of that ryegrass.

More work was needed.

Irrigation added

In 1983 funding became available for irrigation, and Fichter oversaw the installation of a Toro system which sucks water from the bordering Huron River to a wet well and then to the Toro 640 pop-up heads. Fichter says the addition of irrigation might be the key to Fuller Park's soccer fields.

Prior to irrigation in mid-summer 1984, the fields (overseeded in May with Kentucky bluegrasses Adelphi, Baron, Eclipse, and Glade) showed only a 50 percent cover. With the addition of irrigation, use of Trimec for broadleaf control, and applications of 29-0-14 at 1½ pounds N/1000 in August and 1 pound N/1000 in September, "turf quality improved immediately. . . we had 95 percent cover of quality turf with 50 percent being Kentucky bluegrass," he explains.

Now that the agronomic pieces are in place, Fichter wants to finish the puzzle of Fuller Park's turf with a strong maintenance program.

Says Fichter: "Right now the top priorities for these soccer fields are building up fertility levels, aeration, weed control, and overseeding."

The 1985 season should see the fields getting four applications of 29-0-14 at 1 pound N/1000, broadleaf weed control as needed, and a mid-summer aeration with a Dedoes trailer-type aerifier. The turf will be maintained at a 1½ -inch cutting height with a Brouwer 7-gang mower.

Overseeding is a big part of the program, but Fichter needs the help of the Association. "We're going to give them the seed and ask them to apply it to the goal mouths and other high use areas on a weekly basis," Fichter says. At least two different types of perennial ryegrasses will be used. In August the entire complex will be overseeded using a Jacobsen thatcher/seeder.

"Right now I don't know if the public really wants better athletic fields. I don't know if they're ready to demand them like golfers demanded better courses," Fichter says.

"The soccer association asked the hard questions. It said, 'look at those fields. They're atrocious' and it acted. You wouldn't see nice fields at Fuller if that group wasn't behind it."

Or if Fichter didn't think he could do a bang-up job with the turf. **WT&T**

The Cincinnati Bengals professional football team counts on a local maintenance company to give it good practice conditions at Spinney Field.

'Practicing' Class

by Ron Hall, assistant editor



Bengals work out on two-year-old PAT facility at Spinney Field in Cincinnati, OH

Not exactly chump change \$28,000, not even in the megabucks world of professional sports. It buys a lot of turf maintenance on the Cincinnati Bengals practice fields at Spinney Field.

The Bengals management feels it might be the finest practice facility in the National Football League. The two-year-old Prescription Athletic Turf (PAT) field is cared for by a private Cincinnati company, Motz Environmental Services. The adjoining synthetic grass practice field is just a year old.

Money counts

Contrast this with the \$1,600 the schools at Goshen, IN, budget for the

**"You can't aerate
too much"**

—Motz

care of their football fields. The dollar might be the single greatest variable in the equation of providing athletes

with safe playing conditions, not that it always tells the complete story.

"I think we provide excellent conditions at our fields on a reasonable budget. As a taxpayer, I know this is appreciated," says Richard Kercher who advises in the care and maintenance at Goshen's Foreman Field, one of the first PAT fields built about 12 years ago. Kercher's efforts are voluntary. That's often the way it is in many budget-strapped schools and park departments.

The gulf between the care of professional and playground sports fields

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seems to be widening regardless of the number of athletes using them or the amount of wear they receive. The numbers that count are \$\$\$ numbers.

Barney Barron, superintendent of parks in San Francisco, last fall provided members of the Sports Turf Managers Association with a comparison.

Candlestick Park, home of the San Francisco Giants professional baseball team, is maintained by a four-

The gulf between the care of professional and playground sports fields seems to be widening regardless of the amount of wear they receive.

man crew and budgeted \$75,000 for supplies. The turf is mowed three times weekly, aerated four to six times annually, fertilized every seven to 21 days (or as needed), and treated with fungicides as a preventative measure every 10 to 21 days. In six months 81 games are played there.

In contrast, a typical ball diamond in a San Francisco park might host 81 games in four weeks, is mowed weekly, aerated once, fertilized twice, and is treated with fungicides on a remedial basis only. The combined budget for all park diamonds is \$165,000. Significantly, Candlestick brings in revenues of about \$1 million while the public diamonds don't generate enough cash to cover their expenses.

Big business

Professional sport is a business with television contracts exceeding the GNP of some third-world nations and almost incomprehensible salaries. Organizations view the health of players as an investment, and professional teams like the Bengals cast an exacting eye to practice fields. They'll pay for professional service.

"It's worked out quite well for the Bengals," says Joe Motz. "Our contract has come up for renewal twice and they've had two opportunities to look at it. They're very shrewd business people."

Motz (pronounced like "most")

came on site in August 1983, shortly after the sand-concept PAT field was constructed by Dixie Irrigation, Louisville, KY. Actually the PAT concept field with its sub-surface irrigation covers 2.3 acres of Spinney Field, an area considerably larger than a football field.

The turf, a combination of five different varieties of Kentucky bluegrass, is kept full by spot seeding with a mix of sand, Michigan peat, and perennial ryegrass. Pre-germinated perennial ryegrass, a trick borrowed from Kansas City groundskeeper George Toma, is used when time is a factor. "Toma's pre-germination tactics were a tremendous boost to the entire industry," says Motz, a 1977 graduate of Ohio State University.

The turf field is mowed weekly with self-propelled reel mowers. Tupersan is used as pre-emergence (usually in conjunction with seeding), and this season Motz says he will be using eight pounds of nitrogen 4-1-2 (he used 12 the first season) to feed the grass.

The PAT field requires special handling, Motz relates, including lots of aeration "to prevent sealing off the surface" and the addition of tons of sand. "You can't aerate too much. We go four to six passes and then we bring in 40 to 45 tons of sand to fill in the cores," says Motz. "We pour a tremendous amount of sand onto our fields."

"We feel the practice facility should be in just as good shape, or better, than the playing field"

—Motz

As far as irrigation, Motz believes in letting the turf "call for water" before turning on the sprinklers. Spinney is equipped with both sub-surface and surface irrigation. "You don't want the turf too lush," he says, "but you've got to have it moist enough that it provides firm footing."

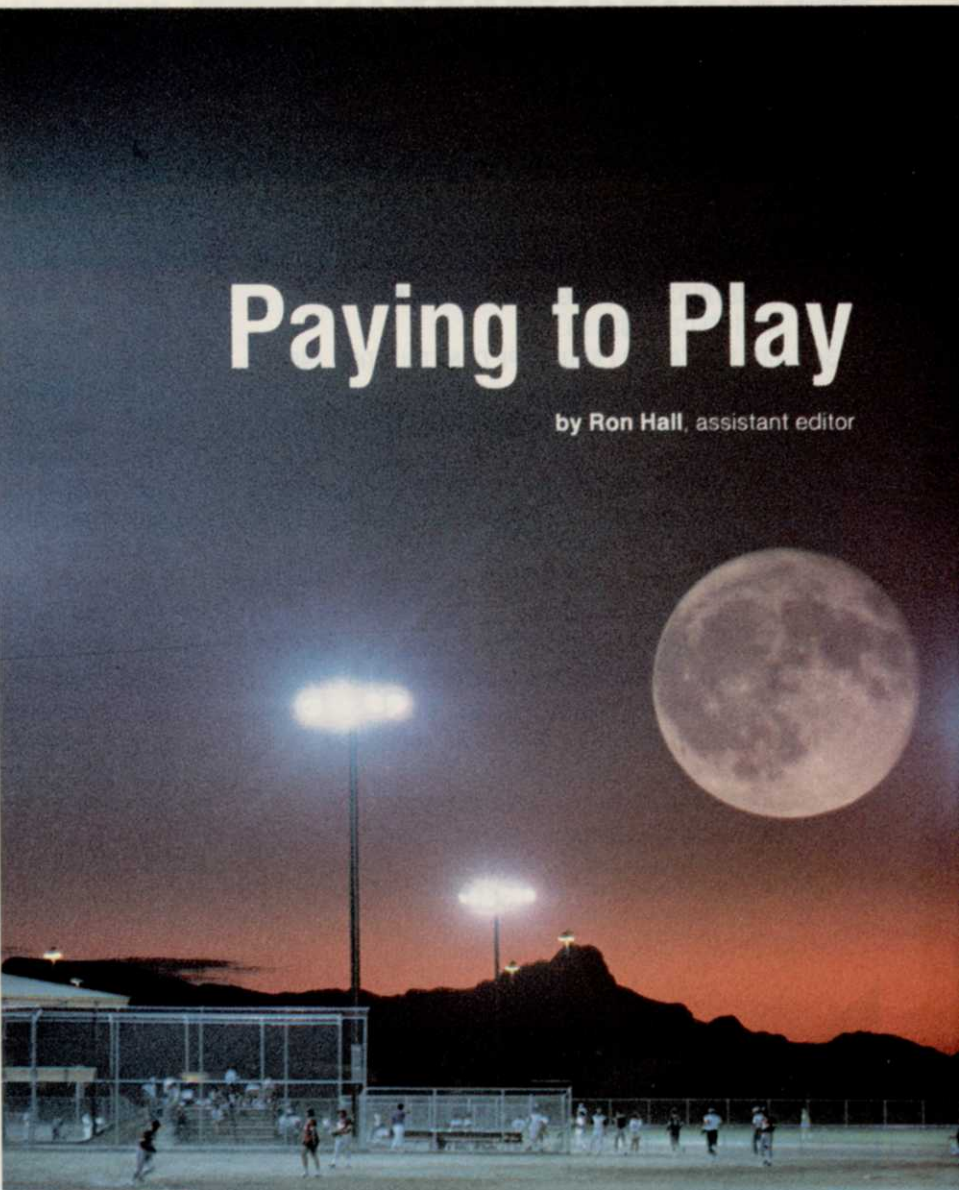
Motz says the agreement his company has with the Bengals is mutually beneficial. The \$28,000 cost also includes the cost of maintaining 3/4 acres of perimeter area and marking the fields on a bi-monthly schedule.

"We feel the practice facility should be in just as good shape, or better, than the playing field," he says. **WT&T**

A new softball complex in Tucson is free enterprise's answer to the question of providing quality playing conditions for weekend athletes

Paying to Play

by Ron Hall, assistant editor



Rising moon signals the rise of slowpitch softball that is played into the night on many fields. The inset shows Jim Munson (left) discussing mowing of Sports Park field with Jim Hilkemeyer and groundsman Ed Rostenhausler

In the shadow of the craggy spine of the Tucson Mountains, "pay for play" softball is digging its cleats into the alien (at least in Southern Arizona) softness of moist Bermudagrass turf.

Private enterprise is in the softball business in a multi-million dollar way. It is building fields, signing up leagues, and scheduling games.

Here in Tucson the profit approach to what was previously a park and recreation department service is just getting off the ground.

"It's not proven yet that this is a money-maker," says Jim Hilkemeyer, one of the partners in Tucson's six-month-old Sports Park located on a leased 50-acre tract in an otherwise undeveloped Pima County park. "There is no formula in this industry yet."

Pieces in place

Indeed, there isn't, but the pieces for success—at least at Sports Park—are in place.

With melted-butter afternoons, neon sunsets, and 2,000 new residents each month, the greater Tucson area is vibrating with energy. And public agencies, like park and recreation departments, are straining to meet the demand for services. Slowpitch, a game that was foreign here just 12 years ago, is exploding in interest and participation, and outgrowing the ability of a "land rich, but cash poor" parks and recreation department to serve it.

That's not the case everywhere, however.

While new private softball com-

"You can't have a good softball complex without irrigation"

—Swint

plexes are sprouting in Albuquerque, Cincinnati, Houston, Los Angeles, and Atlanta, others have germinated, flourished briefly, then withered in the heat of poor business practices or competition from public facilities which usually charge

lower team entrance fees.

"These facilities (private complexes) are businesses. They've got to be run like businesses and not play toys," says Chuck Hawke, the young pro shop manager at Miller's Woods

These facilities are businesses. They've got to be run like businesses and not play toys"

—Hawke

softball complex in Overland Park, KS, one of the more established and successful of the private parks. Miller's Woods accommodates many of the approximately 1,000 adult teams in the Kansas City-Overland Park area, and its summer leagues are almost at "the saturation point," Hawke reports. Just 15 years ago barely 100 adult teams played slowpitch softball in Kansas City.

The bottom line of building a profitable ballyard is attracting ball players, their wives and families, and keeping them at the complex for more than just a seven-inning, one-hour-limit game. The payoff comes from the sale of everything from softball paraphernalia to suds and pizza.

The carrot on the stick is professional-style grass playing fields.

"Unfortunately, most of the people who take care of softball fields don't really know how to take care of them," says Jim Swint, who manages Fun Valley in a contract agreement with the City of Hutchinson, KS.

First class fields

With investments like the \$1.3 million it took to build the six softball diamonds and two club houses at Tucson's Sports Park, providing first-class playing surfaces is critical to the success of the private softball park idea.

It's also a mammoth job.

The turf at these private parks is pounded by almost daily use, in Tucson from March to November. Eighty five teams used the Sports Park fields

this spring. During the peak of the season the number of teams could jump to 300. At Miller's Woods an estimated 8,000 contests are played on eight diamonds, while at Fun Valley in Hutchinson, KS, an estimated 5,000 games are divided on seven diamonds. Each field might be used as many as four times a day for up to eight months.

Jim Munson, a former supervisor for Pima County Parks and now general manager of Sports Park, says overseeing the care of his fields, sodded with Midiron Bermudagrass last January, might be his most exacting task. "We want to provide all the things a softball player needs and some of the things he often can't get at a public park, including quality play."

Golf course approach

The management of Sports Park borrows from the golfing industry in its approach to field maintenance.

"We want to keep everything as attractive as we can, like on a golf course," Hilkemeyer says. The Bermudagrass is overseeded with annual ryegrass for an early spring greenup. The turf is babied with smaller equipment.

Mowing—it takes about an hour per field—is done with a Toro Turf-Pro reel mower, and the clippings are immediately gathered by rows of sweepers pulled by a Honda Big Red ATV with turf tires. The ATV also pulls sprayers, aerifiers, and the Maxwell Steel Company scarifier/drag for the infield grooming.

Irrigation, however, might be the key to keeping these private parks first rate.

At Miller's Woods they played for 43 straight days without rain last summer. The park's irrigation system literally sucked a nearby creek dry, and the fields had to be irrigated with city water.

"You can't have a good softball complex without an irrigation system," says Swint, executive director of the 60-member Softball Owners and Directors of America (SODA). Most of the owners of private complexes are members of SODA, a four-year-old association which began four years ago with just five members.

Conservation questions

In arid Tucson, the largest American city to be supplied exclusively by wells, irrigation is essential—and touchy. The nearby Santa Clara and Rillito Rivers are a ribbon of dust by the time they approach the city for much of the year, and newly constructed golf courses are ordered to use only effluent for irrigation. Although the Central Arizona Project will divert water from the Colorado to a reservoir in the mountains just south of the city within the decade, water will likely remain a political issue for rapidly growing Tucson.

The Rain Bird sprinkling system at Sports Park takes its water from a well located near an old landfill site which qualifies it for use in irrigation. But developers of the complex also used some clever design techniques to conserve water.

By constructing a major-league-style warning track just inside the home run fence and extending the dirt portion of the infield an extra 10 feet beyond the bases, the amount of turf at each field is reduced. Less turf,

less mowing, less needed water.

Another obvious benefit of the warning track is the elimination of mowing and trimming along the 10-foot-high fences.

Conservation also prompted the installation of drip irrigation and bub-

“It’s still taboo to charge the kids, and it should be”

—Hilkemeyer

bler systems to nourish the hundreds of quick-growing oleander which should green out and provide a solid green backdrop behind the home run fences.

Other drought resistant plantlife at Sports Park include jasmine, native mesquite, eucalyptus, and Mondale and Aleppo pine, two natives of the mid-east well suited to arid Tucson.

Softball, and its manicured and heavily maintained fields, is the primary drawing card to these new turf recreational complexes, but Hilkemeyer, who has been in both the bowling and skating businesses, feels more attractions might still be needed to make the project payoff. Sports Park also offers volleyball on professional beach-type courts. A Bermudagrass soccer pitch for adult leagues is on the drawing board. Eventually a mile-long “people trail” for jogging and bicycling should encircle the 50-acre complex.

“We’ve tried to design a situation where people will want to stay longer,” says Hilkemeyer, a situation “where it’s convenient for people to spend an extra buck.”

Hilkemeyer does not foresee the growth of private ball yards for youth leagues (Sports Park allows the use of its fields for special youth events) because it’s “still taboo to charge the kids, and that’s the way it should be.”

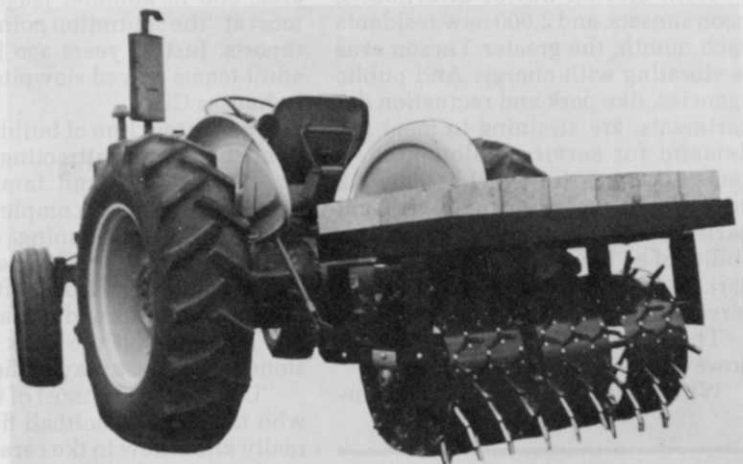
Adults, however, “They have to pay to play.” **WT&T**

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