

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

continued on page 46

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."

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