

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.

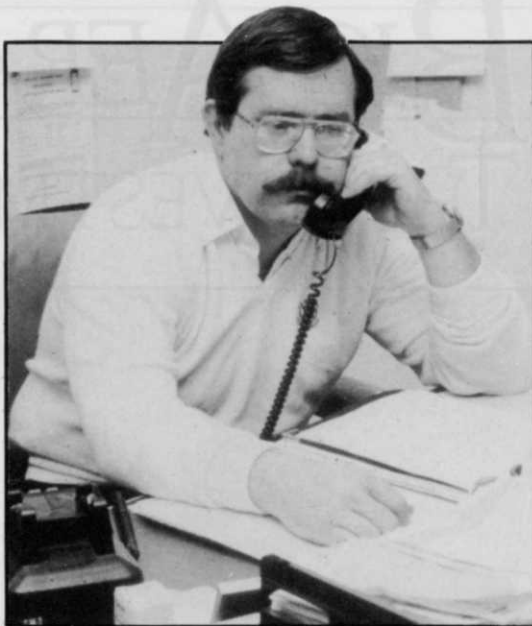
So far the financial arrangement seems to be working well, although there is a slight disagreement over the condition of the playing surfaces.

"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**