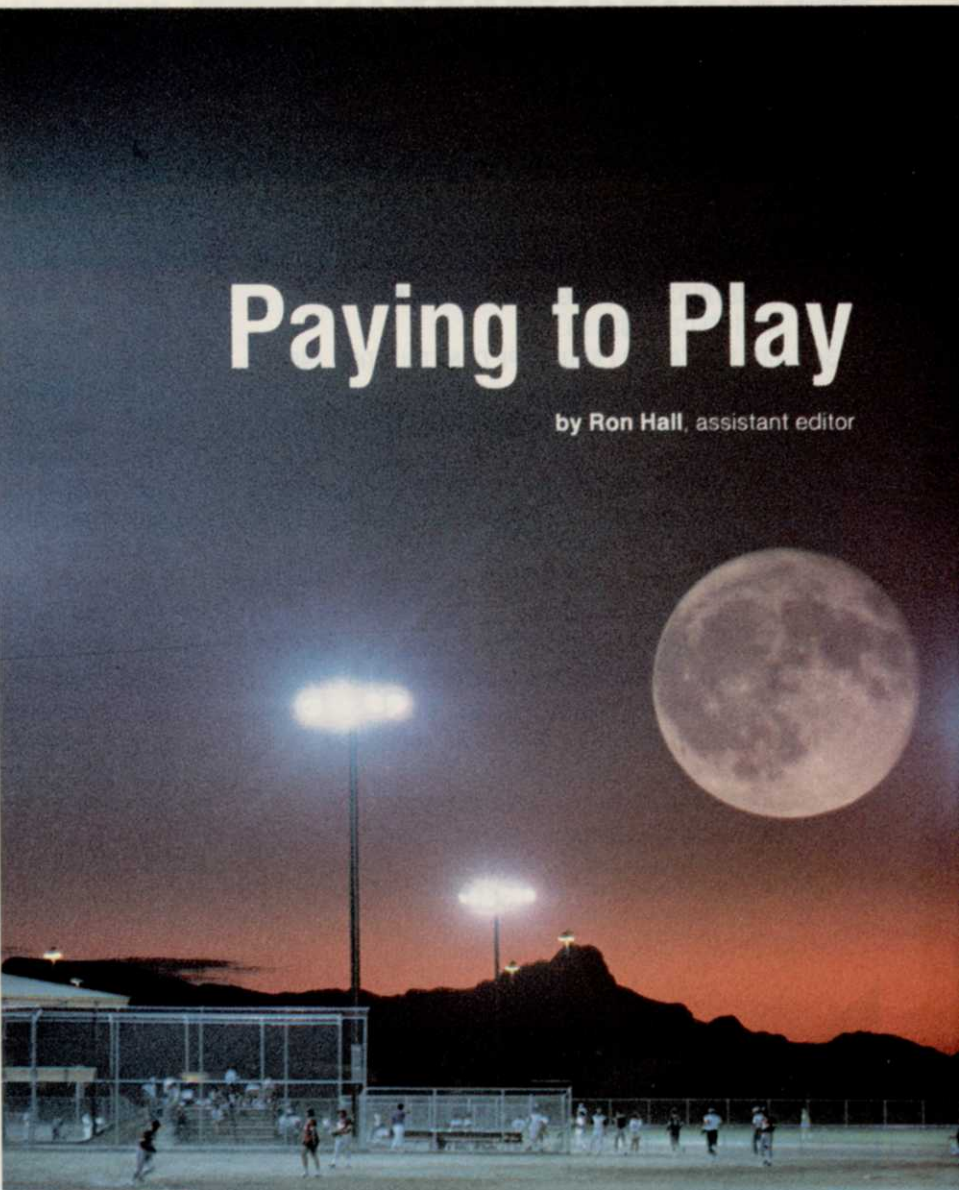


A new softball complex in Tucson is free enterprise's answer to the question of providing quality playing conditions for weekend athletes

## 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.”

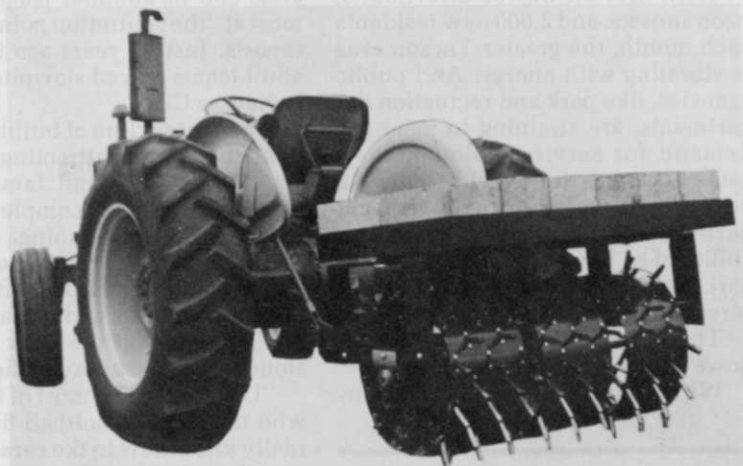
Adults, however, “They have to pay to play.” **WT&T**

## CORE AERIFY WITH DEDOES 3 PT. HOOK-UP

### FEATURES

- Standard 3 point tractor hook-up
- Patented hinged tines
- 2, 3, 4 or 5 drum units
- 36-60-120 tines per drum combinations
- Option of collecting plugs
- Heavy duty weight box
- Low cost maintenance

**FAST-EASY AND EFFECTIVE**



**MODEL H**

If you are responsible for strong healthy attractive grass and are concerned with saving time and money, investigate Dedoes quality aerators. We have units that fit most utility carts, garden tractors, full size tractors and units that can be pulled by most utility type vehicles.

**Call today and see our complete quality line of grounds maintenance equipment.**

**DEDOES** INDUSTRIES  
INCORPORATED

**Grounds Maintenance Division**

P.O. Box 575  
Walled Lake, Michigan 48088  
(313) 624-7710  
1-800-521-7086

Circle No. 113 on Reader Inquiry Card