

by Ron Hall, associate editor

Wightman directs Mile High's changes

Steve Wightman's job as the chief groundsman at Denver's Mile High Stadium is always changing. That is, he's always changing his turfgrass playing field. One day to accommodate football, the next baseball. Throw in a few concerts.

Wightman, a slender 36-year-old with less hair than he'd want, is the unacknowledged king of conversions.

Consider. Mile High was the site of 121 events in 1985. This included 71 baseball games (the minor league Denver Zephyrs), 21 football games (11 by the NFL Broncos, 10 by the USFL Gold), and the remainder concerts and special events.

Mile High rarely sits vacant more than five days at a stretch. The demise of the USFL Gold franchise this season eases the pressure somewhat. But the facility, owned by the city and county of Denver, and operated by the parks department, will remain one of the busiest stadiums in the nation.

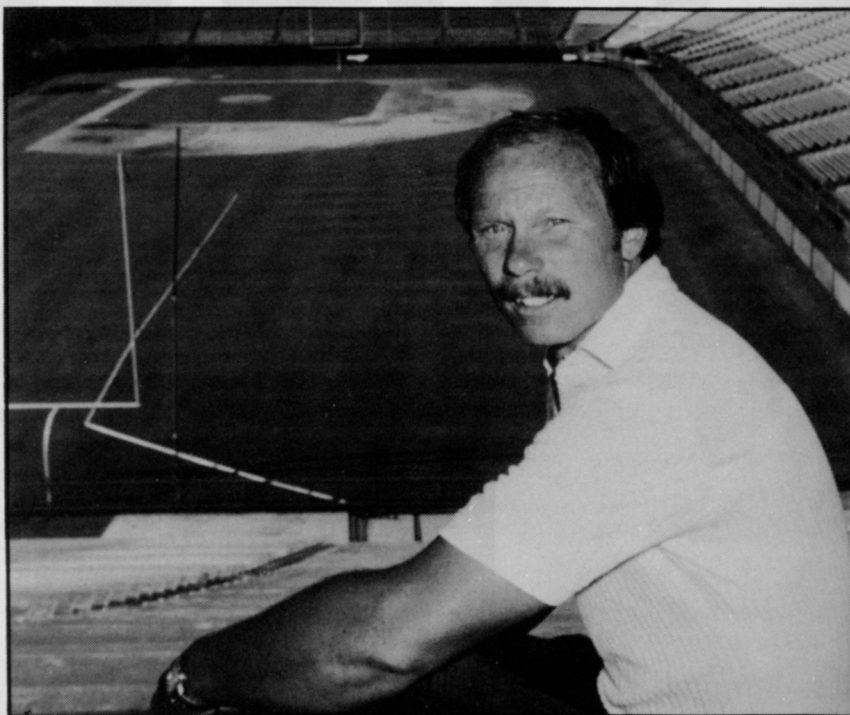
Wightman, who has been at Mile High 10 years, remembers the first conversion. It took two days. It's now down to 8½ hours. That's from football's final gun to baseball's first pitch.

"I think we outsmarted ourselves," says Wightman. "Now they schedule events one day apart and not two." This past season the Mile High Stadium crew whisked through five overnight conversions.

Two factors make these conversions remarkable. First, the field is resodded (Kentucky bluegrass) only twice annually, in March and October. Mile High boasts a Prescription Athletic Turf (P.A.T.) playing surface with excellent drainage and sub-surface irrigation. "P.A.T. saves the football field," says Wightman.

Also reducing the need for resodding is the use of Warren's Terracover, a needle-punched polyester blanket, over the grass to protect it from the feet, popcorn, and suntan lotion of concert-goers. For football, a 400-foot-long strip of Terracover protects grass in the pedestrian walkway in front of the east grandstand. This strip, a walkway for football games, is left field for baseball.

And that's the second amazing aspect of Wightman's conversions. The entire east grandstand behind the walkway—a nine-million-pound, 22,000-seat structure—can be moved 145 feet. In the forward position it provides sideline viewing for football; moved back, left field seating for base-



Steve Wightman, at Denver's Mile High Stadium, is in charge of preparing one of America's finest turf fields for 121 events annually.

ball. It's the largest movable structure of its kind, Denver officials say.

It takes a crew of 15 eight hours to slide the 13-story grandstand over 18 Teflon-coated concrete runways. Microscopically thin layers of water allow the stands to float over clusters of water bearings, each about the size and shape of a truck inner tube.

When the grandstand is back in the baseball position, its concrete tracks are covered with four-inch-deep steel pans of sod to complete the all-grass playing field. An experienced tow motor operator lifts these turf-covered pans into place in about three hours.

Meanwhile, Wightman's nine-man grounds crew babies the turfgrass and prepares the field for baseball, football, or a concert. Much of this work is "hand work," says Wightman, because of the presence of fragile heat cables six inches below the grass. These cables keep the turf playable and footing reliable for the Broncos through December.

Now that the USFL Denver Gold is history, will the pace at Mile High slow?

Probably not. Denver is one of a handful of cities lusting for a major League baseball franchise. Insiders feel it's a cinch. . .someday. The now-

renamed Denver Bears baseball team (Mile High was originally known as Bear Stadium) used to set the minor League attendance records on fire.

But, even without a team in the biggies, Denver vibrates.

How's this for a single weekend of action? Huey Lewis and the News (and thousands of teeny boopers) invade Red Rocks. On the other side of town, Cherry Hill swells with spectators for the PGA Championship. Downtown the international Coors bicycle race attracts thousands more.

And the Broncos are at Mile High.

Wightman likes this pace, and he still finds time to help direct the fledgling Sports Turf Managers Association. In 1984 that group honored him with its highest honor, the "Lone Ranger" award, for his work at Mile High. He's working to change the grounds manager's lot for the better.

What else would the ever-changing Wightman change if he could?

Says Wightman, "there is so much inconsistency with the construction and maintenance of natural grass fields, I think there should be some standards." These written guidelines would provide maintenance help for sports turf managers from the school yard to the professional level, the slender groundsman feels. **WT&T**