

ROYAL FLUSH

When Prince Charles played polo in Chicago last fall, the field had to be in prime condition for spectators and TV cameras. The field managers worked overtime to prepare the field.

by Heide Aungst, associate editor

It's a field fit for a king. Or, a future king, anyway.

When H.R.H. Prince Charles of England travelled to Chicago to play polo at the Oak Brook Polo Club, the Windy City rolled out the red carpet. Jim Mello and his crew rolled out the green field.

In March 1986, Mello, president and owner of Nice 'N Green products, took over the care for the three polo fields adjacent to the renowned Butler National Golf Club.

At one time, Butler National was a vast expanse of 14 polo fields. That was in 1922, when the Oak Brook Polo Club was founded. Today, the polo fields double as Butler National's driving ranges...a convenience for the golf course, a headache for the field managers.

But the only person worrying about that on this cool, sunny September afternoon is Steve Mello, Jim's nephew, who heads the polo field crew of four. "It needs time to heal," Steve says, shaking his head.

How can the field survive golfers' divots immediately after eight horses have torn up the turf? The spectators do all they can to help.

It's a polo ritual for fans to run onto the field at half-time—or, between chukkers, that is—to replace the divots. The thousands of polo-watchers—the men clad in silk ties and

designer suits, the women hanging on to their Princess-Di-look-alike hats, and causing their own divots with their spiked heels—run onto the field to stomp divots back into place. It's almost as much fun for the fans as sipping champagne out of silver goblets in the grandstand.

"It's really a big help to me when they replace the divots," Steve tells a

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Chicago radio reporter, who got an exclusive with the divot expert after eavesdropping on the WEED TREES & TURF interview. The entourage of media at the polo match try desperately to find interesting angles surrounding the royal visit, since Prince Charles won't grant interviews.

But the excitement of the day has to make the field abuse worth it. "It's a pain in the neck, seriously," Jim says. "It's just a lot of work, a lot of expectation and pressure. I'll be happy when it's over. It is kind of exciting, though."

Most of the excitement for Mello came the night before the match when he and his wife Sheila attended the Polo Ball on the top floor of Marshall Field's department store. Sheila, a professional dancer danced with the Prince.

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When the Prince and several other players fell off their horses, spectators



Prince Charles, #4, greets the crowd before the polo match. (Photo by Nancy Devon)

immediately blamed the field. "It's too wet," snarled one fan.

But Steve immediately jumped to his field's defense. "It's not the field," he says. "We watered it about one inch on Wednesday (two days before the match), and it rained about $\frac{2}{10}$ of an inch that night."

The crew had to work extra to get the field in top shape for television viewers.

They usually water two or three days before a tournament, using a water wench, traveling sprinkler, which throws out 700 gallons a minute. The system completely waters the field, 300 yards long by 150 yards wide (more than nine football fields), by passing over it twice.

The amount of moisture on the field significantly affects play. "If the

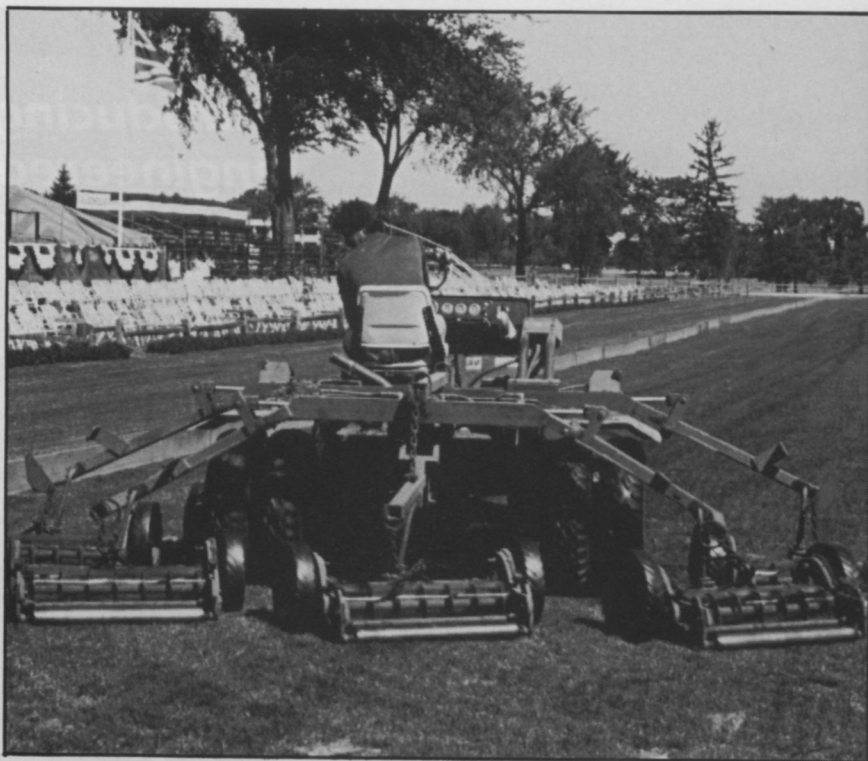


field is too hard or dry it's tough on the horses. A horse can't get its footing and slides over the turf," Jim explains. "If it's too wet, the horse digs in and it tears up the field worse."

The divots and the height of cut also affect the ball roll. Steve double-cuts the field at a height of 1 1/2 inches on the day of a match. The double-cutting increases the speed of the ball.

The crew usually mows the field three times a week, using a Toro Parkmaster, at 1 1/2 inches during the season. They raise the height to 2 1/2 inches after the season is over to let the turf recuperate.

The bluegrass on the field is a mix-



(Above) Steve Mello double-cuts the field on the day of a match.



(Left) Jim Mello, owner of Nice 'N Green, overlooks the polo field before the big match.

ture of Ram I, Touchdown, Adelphi, Cheri, and Glade. The dirt and seed mixture used to fill in divots is a 50/50 blend of Manhattan II and All*Star ryegrass, which germinates quickly.

Jim says he would like to re-seed the field using turf-type tall fescues which require less water than bluegrass.

Turf is fertilized with Nice 'N Green's liquid iron four times a year and a dry application in early winter. The crew aerifies in spring and fall.

"The horses are my best weed control," Jim says. His biggest weed problem is knotweed, which grows in wet areas with poor drainage. The crew usually spot-treats the problem, but waits until the season ends to treat it full force.

At the end of the season the field is renovated through slit-seeding, top dressing, and dragging. That's all repeated again in the spring.

"I could take care of Comiskey Park, no problem," Steve says. "After this it would be a piece of cake."

Getting the field ready for the royal visit and television cameras which zero-in on the field was a lot of work for Jim, Steve and the crew, but it was a lot of satisfaction. "This is my big day," says Steve. "I feel like I'm the fifth member of the team."

And that team was a winner. The U.S. beat England, 12-10. **WT&T**