

Diamond construction—the right way

Rich Moffitt's in-house staff makes this urban university's ball fields and campus a colorful oasis.

■ When Richard Moffitt, supervisor of grounds, started rebuilding the Saint Louis University baseball field he only had one question...how do you do it?

He freely admits, "I knew how to grow turfgrass, but I didn't know how to build a baseball field. So I started calling some of the STMA (Sports Turf Managers Association) members. I'm glad I did." Moffitt said experienced athletic grounds managers in the association shared information freely. He's now an active member himself.

Another fortunate step, he says, was enlisting the aid of Steve Erbe at Top Care Lawn Services to remedy the field's one overriding handicap. It shared part of centerfield with a softball diamond. Water drained from the baseball field to the softball infield with each rain.

"It was finally decided that this was not going to work. We were not going to be able to play on both of these fields at this location," says Moffitt. "The softball field was never going to be right." It was taken out.

Then, he and Erbe walked the baseball outfield and decided it needed to be regraded and resodded. After the regrading and the grow-in, it's almost impossible to tell where the softball field was. A bright-red brick-dust warning track sets off the irrigated deep-green Kentucky bluegrass playing surface that now compares favorably to major league fields. Still, the ball park is a hidden treasure. It's neatly tucked into a corner of the urban campus.

Also, the baseball field literally lies in the shadow of the university's huge synthetic athletic field. Viewed from the top of the 3,000-seat brick Billiken Sports Stadium, the Polygrass surface below looks like it's approximately 3-4 acres. Moffitt isn't sure of its exact dimensions,



Richard Moffitt maintains Saint Louis U's ball fields and benches, and lots of other stuff, too. About 7,500 undergrads attend S.L.U.

but he says it can accommodate three different athletic events—played across the surface's width—simultaneously.

Número uno?—The light green synthetic field is home to the university's powerful soccer team. Soccer here is a sellout. The Saint Louis Billiken's are nationally ranked again this season. (*A Billiken? A student said it was an old fashioned goodluck charm.*)

"I know that if the coach or the players had their druthers, they'd choose to play on grass any day," says Moffitt. "But this field is about as good as a synthetic field gets." Installed in 6-foot-wide sections over gravel about four years ago, the surface drains incredibly fast. "We've never had a rainout because of field conditions," says Moffitt. Good thing, too. Besides soccer, the sprawling synthetic surface is used for field hockey, campus intramurals, and other social and fund raising events.

The university's outside athletic facilities are virtually new and so, in a sense, is the campus itself. At least it looks new to alumni who haven't been back in a few years. The university has spent \$200 million in its buildings and grounds in the last decade.

"It's fascinating to watch parents who came here in the '60s and '70s walk through campus with their kids. You can see the surprise in their eyes," says Moffitt.

The campus 'greens'—Just months ago, in fact, the university closed Spring and West Pine Streets. It replaced them with tree-lined walkways, the new John E. Connelly Mall.

A red brick bell tower encircled by flowers and a fountain dominates the mall's center. To one side is a waterfall. A steep

bank—too steep to mow—near the waterfall is planted in hardy Baltic ivy. The entire area is surrounded by seven acres of turfgrass. It's surprisingly green and trim considering the number of students enjoying the mall on pleasant St. Louis afternoons.

In fact, the entire campus is basically self-contained now, an island of grass, gardens and graceful brick buildings. You enter it

through redesigned entrances marked by elegantly massive, gild-trim gates.

Moffitt says Saint Louis University President Father Lawrence Biondi, SJ, and Associate Vice President Charles R. Smith are determined to make Saint Louis's urban campus one of the most beautiful in the nation. That's why since 1992 the campus has seen the addition of at least 400 three-inch-or-larger trees, more than 4,000 perennials (several hundred different varieties) and about 1500 shrubs.

Showcases—Some of the on-campus showcases include the popular Dolphin Pond, and Walsh Plaza brightened with its sprays of colorful annuals, the ever-evolving perennial gardens at Joseph Boland Plaza, the serene rock garden behind Verhaegen Hall.

"In an urban campus where you're surrounded by concrete, you have to really intensify the green spaces," says Moffitt. "We've put in open grass areas and closed off parking lots and put in gardens. It's a recruitment tool for us. It's our front door."

About 95 percent of the turfgrass at Saint Louis University is irrigated (22 different irrigation systems) and mowed each week. Moffitt, who likes micro-environmental design, says his in-house grounds staff must be incredibly flexible as it maintains benches, walkways, snow plowing, in fact, just about everything outside the buildings.

"I used to call myself a horticulturist, and that's my background, but I've come to realize that if you're going to make things happen in grounds, horticulture's extremely important—but there's a whole lot more too."

—Ron Hall