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The return of professional baseball to Washington D.C. could mean a bigger crew and more work for groundskeeper Tony Burnett, but he welcomes the challenge.

RFK's Turf Is Major League

by Ron Hall, assistant editor



There's no "Mr. Baggy pants" at Washington D.C.'s professional sports mecca.

Tony Burnett, chief groundskeeper at Robert F. Kennedy Stadium, is decked out in snappy blue blazer, tie, pressed trousers. He's got that spiffed-up, ready-to-go-to-a-party look about him.

The "party" could be the return of

"The majority of the Redskins love natural turf."

—Burnett

professional baseball to the nation's capital.

There's a buzz in RFK. Smiles. People humming. "Hey Tony, howya doin'?" And the long-suffering fans of the nation's capital (They've paid, oh how they've paid!) sense their 15 years penance is ending.

The once-proud Senators— world champs in '33—slinked out of D.C. about 20 years ago and resodded themselves in Minnesota, smack dab in the middle of Injun' country, proud Washingtonians hurrumphed. Then the expansion Senators. They couldn't get over the hump. Small wonder. They traded the left side of their infield (rifle-armed Aurelio Rodriguez at third, steady shortstop Eddie Brinkman) to the Tigers then hot-footed it to Texas. Rodriguez and Brinkman obliged by helping Detroit to the 1971 American League East championship.

"I'd love to see baseball come back to Washington D.C.," says Burnett, who at a youthful 40 years old is putting in his 25th year at RFK. That's a bit hard to believe because Burnett, trim and soft spoken, just doesn't look old enough to have a high-school-age

continued on page 46

Tony Burnett, chief groundskeeper at Robert F. Kennedy stadium.



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son (a basketball player) in his household. He looks like he could take a swing or two at the plate himself.

Pro baseball at RFK? "Why not," says Burnett.

"I'm trained as a baseball groundskeeper. Initially I broke in with a baseball team," he says.

That was in 1962. Burnett was fresh out of high school. His boss was Joe Moony. ("He kind of took me under his wing. He's one of the best," Burnett recalls.) And the Senators played in Washington in new D.C. Stadium. Lombardy coached the professional football Redskins.

Lombardy moved to Green Bay, and Moony took over as chief groundskeeper at Boston's Fenway. D.C. Stadium became RFK in 1971, and Burnett became boss groundskeeper.

His number one job since then has been keeping the 'Skins happy; and he has.

'Skins love turf

Natural turf plays a big part in the success of the Redskins, Burnett is convinced. "The majority of the Red-skin players love natural grass."

In the category of "action speaking louder than words" the Redskins delivered an oration in the 1982-83 season. They rolled over Miami 27-17 in Super Bowl XVII as aging Mack-truck-on-legs John Riggins gained more than 100 yards in four consecutive playoff games (a record).

Could it be that RFK's modified Prescription Athletic Turf (PAT) playing surface contributes to Riggins longevity as a power back? Larry Csonka, the former all-pro bulldozer for the Miami Dolphins thinks so. Speaking about artificial turf, Csonka once told writers, "it can finish every player in the league before his time. Let the engineers play on it. I hear there's a guy off somewhere working on a different weather-resistant surface. It's called grass."

But growing grass isn't as easy as it looks, not in D.C., however, which is in the so-called "transition" zone. Burnett tried Kentucky bluegrass after the sand-based PAT system was installed in 1975. He abandoned bluegrass in favor of Bermudagrass the following year even though it goes into dormancy about the time the Redskins start play.

"The last four years we've used three different Bermudagrasses," Burnett says of his field which is re-sodded each June. "Last year we used

419, but I might try a new one next year if I think I can get a better stand."

Much of Burnett's maintenance schedule is now common practice on many professional sports fields: overseeding with a pregerminated ryegrass blend before and after every game, aeration (he uses a Ryan Greensaire II and a piston-driven Hahn Aerifier II) about every 10 days during the Bermudagrass growing season, application of about 1/2 lb. nitrogen in water-soluble 16-8-8 at reg-

"Washington is going to end up with an expansion baseball team."

—Dalrymple

ular intervals, and mowing (he uses a Toro Professional 76 and a Jacobsen Turf King) every other day when the Bermudagrass is growing, twice a week for the ryegrass.

Pros destroy turf

Neither the PAT system (which Burnett swears by) nor good field maintenance procedures can compete with the damage of a professional football team, however. Burnett claims the turf on a professional football stadium starts to deteriorate, particularly in the center of the field, soon after the season begins.

It's the groundskeepers job to slow down the deterioration. That determines his worth.

Says Burnett, "professional football creates a tremendous amount of pressure on a playing surface. College games don't come close. I've had both games here and after a Redskin's game it's like a bunch of cattle have been out there. When those big linemen dig in, they really dig in. And here at Washington they like to run. Those running plays compound the problem."

Vince Lombardi, who coached at D.C. when Burnett started his career, had definite feelings about field maintenance.

"Lombardi once told me, 'I don't care about your blankety-blank-field. Level it out, roll it, and mark it. We'll play on it.' He didn't particularly care about how a field looked, but he wanted it to play good," Burnett recalls.

"You can have the best looking field in the world, but it may not play

well. We are more concerned about the structure of the field than just having it look good. The root structure is more important than the leaf."

When it comes to preparing a field for a game, Burnett says just about anything (including dyeing a field for the television camera) goes. "We do anything and everything to get this field ready," he says. "When the whistle blows on Sunday that field has to be ready. That's the bottom line."

The bottom line for Burnett, however, isn't just RFK Stadium. He maintains a pair of nearby practice fields that are used by the 'Skins in the summer and by area colleges for soccer in the spring. And snow removal in the parking lots of the Starplex complex, which includes the stadium and an adjoining arena, also falls within his responsibilities.

His position is unique. He works for the D.C. Armory Board, a quasi-governmental agency, which manages RFK. Burnett calls it a "beautiful" situation.

"We create our own revenue through events," he explains. "We are not subsidized. That makes it good when we need equipment because when we need a new piece, we go out and get it." With D.C.'s star rising in baseball circles Burnett might be needing additional equipment a year or two down the road.

How close is D.C. in returning to the major leagues?

"Washington is climbing rapidly with the baseball people," Jim Dalrymple, general manager of the D.C. Armory, which takes care of the stadium, says.

"We have a committee that the Mayor has put together and it's been very, very active. There's no doubt in my mind that Washington is going to end up with an expansion baseball team."

Proponents of baseball in the capital have gone so far as to suggest \$16 million in improvements to RFK to entice a new club. Frank Smith, Jr., chairman of the D.C. Baseball Commission, reports that the cost could be decreased by \$1.25 million by keeping a natural grass playing surface.

Optimists in D.C. are hoping for a National League franchise by the end of this year.

"I don't know how a baseball team would affect me right now, but I know it will mean a bigger crew," says Burnett. "And," as he flashes a broad smile, "a whole lot more work. I'm excited about having baseball again."

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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



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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.

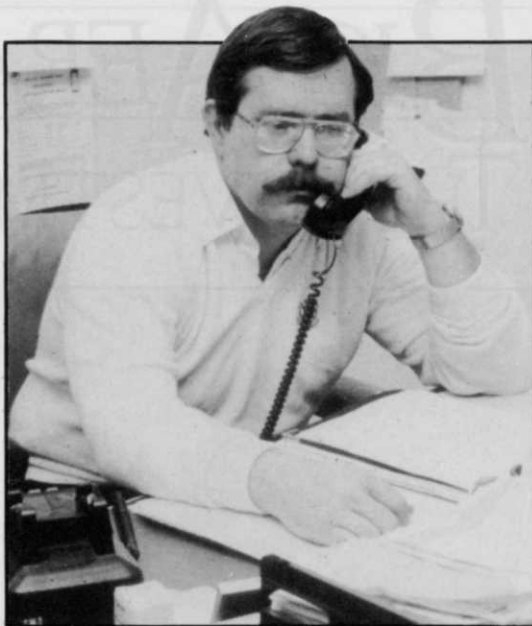
So far the financial arrangement seems to be working well, although there is a slight disagreement over the condition of the playing surfaces.

"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**