

# Maintaining a Field of Dreams

From hunting haven to sports fan heaven

by Ray Van Dusen

**N**estled along the westbound lanes of Interstate 10 in Gulfport, Miss., the sound of clanging aluminum baseball bats and cheering crowds from several states drowns out the drone of busy traffic.

During the last decade, this 250-acre section of land occupied by the Gulfport Sportsplex has evolved from a deer and quail hunter's haven to the premier athletic complex of the southeast United States.

"When I first came onto this job, we had eight baseball fields sodded, fencing and a dirt road leading to it all," said Ken Edwards, who serves as the grounds crew director of the complex.

With high expectations from city officials, this Field of Dreams scenario would eventually blossom.

Now, the Gulfport Sportsplex is comprised of nine terraced baseball/softball fields; four international-size soccer fields; eight tennis courts; walking, biking and skating trails; a play-

ground; an outdoor amphitheater; and an RV park. These athletic facilities are a stepping-stone to what is soon to come, as an 18-acre water park is slated to open this summer, as well as four more soccer fields and four Major League Baseball (MLB) park replicas soon to be constructed.

Gulfport lacked a sports facility in the late 1990s, so city officials launched a campaign that polled 33 religious, athletic and civic groups associated with local sports.

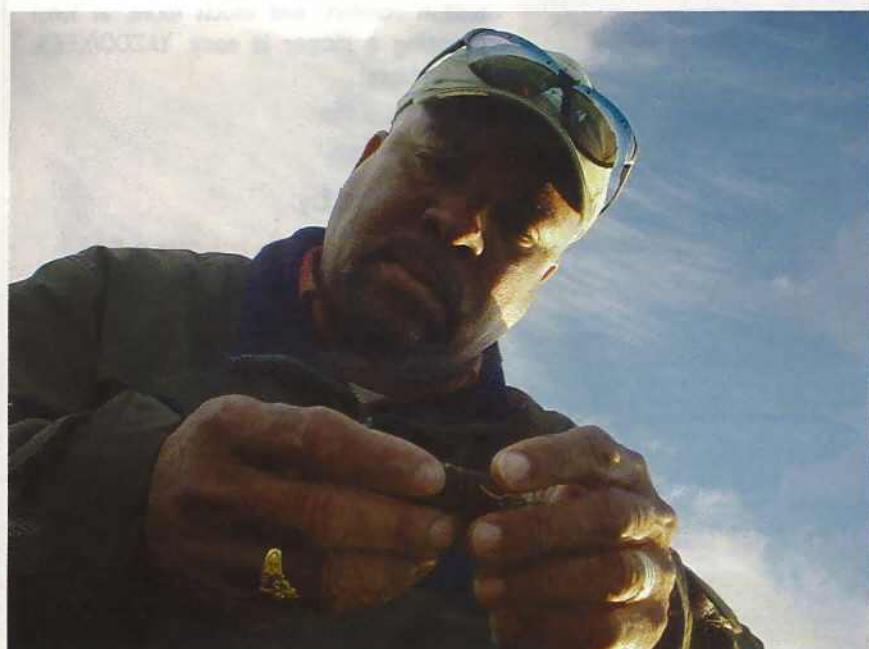
"We took all the ideas the local citizens had, let a consultant firm bring those ideas down to reality and that's what made this Sportsplex such an easy sell," said George DeCoux, director of Gulfport's Department of Leisure Services.

Now, four years after completion, the Gulfport Sportsplex hosts several local, state, regional and national baseball, T-ball, softball, soccer and flag football tournaments.



August vacuums plugs of Bermudagrass during the aeration.

PHOTOS BY RAY VAN DUSEN.



Ken Edwards examines a plug of Tifton 419.

In 2004, 1,400 teams played games at the Sportsplex, and an estimated 1,900 will run bases and score goals at the facility this year.

"In the past three years, there has been an incredible boom in the number of associations sponsoring traveling teams. For example, the first weekend of March, we had 35 teams playing, and most facilities don't see that kind of influx until July," said David D'Aquila, assistant director of the Gulfport Sportsplex.

#### Living up to hard work ethics

"These fields are just like a golf course; if you maintain them, then people will come back. It's satisfying to me that I set the standards of maintenance and quality," Edwards said.

Before taking the reins of the Sportsplex, Edwards' post-military background included a turf degree

from Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College and two-and-a-half years as a first assistant supervisor at a golf course on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. While serving in the Army, Edwards moonlighted at golf courses for 15 years.

To give credit where it is due, Edwards' knowledge and experience in the turf sector goes hand in hand with a hard working crew he helped mold into experts in the grounds maintenance field.

"My granddaddy said, 'ability is important, but to find it in others and then develop it is the true test of leadership,'" Edwards said.

The soccer fields have proven to be the greatest challenge, as thousands of pairs of cleats beat up the turf throughout the year.

"The goal mouths and center fields take the biggest beating. Besides

healing them with cultural patterns, we built them a little larger, which gives me more flexibility to move play out of the stressed areas," Edwards said.

In March and August, the fields are aerated; in May and August, they are verticut. During the verticut sessions, the fields are shut down for two weeks. The sooner the grounds crew accomplishes this task, the more time the turf has to heal.

Early summer means a dose of foliar iron for the fields to help in the green-up process of the complex. Edwards also applies post-emergent fungicides in the late fall for winter weeds and in late spring to ward off any summer weeds.

The 35 acres of Tifton 419 Bermudagrass rest on 3 inches of clay soil; 5 inches of a base composed of 70 percent sand and 30 percent peat moss; and 8 inches of pea gravel. The Tifton 419 was selected because of its reputation as an ideal variety of heavy-duty turf for sports fields. The percolation rate for the Sportsplex's fields is 8 inches per hour.

"These fields are built to USGA standards; they're just like golf greens. This complex was built for the economic impact on Gulfport, so we didn't want to have to deal with cancellations—and that's why the fields are constructed like they are. Most other parks around here have to shut down after 1.5 to 2 inches of rain," Edwards said.

When the rain gods do wreak their fury on Gulfport, water is taken off site by 4-inch pipes encased in pea gravel that tie into 10-foot centers flowing into perimeter drains.

The fields are terraced into three sections and, because of the drainage system, no games have been cancelled on the upper fields since the complex opened.

During the typically dry Mississippi summers, Edwards puts his Rain Bird Maxicom Central Control system to work. The Rain Bird Falcon 6504 sprinkler heads (284 of them throughout the complex) spout out an average of 700,000 gallons of water per year to fulfill the complex's deep and frequent irrigation routine.

Though the wet weather may be an uncertainty, one constant comes through every June: mole crickets.

"You don't eradicate mole crickets, you just control them; and through our experiences with pesticides, Top Choice has been the most effective. It's

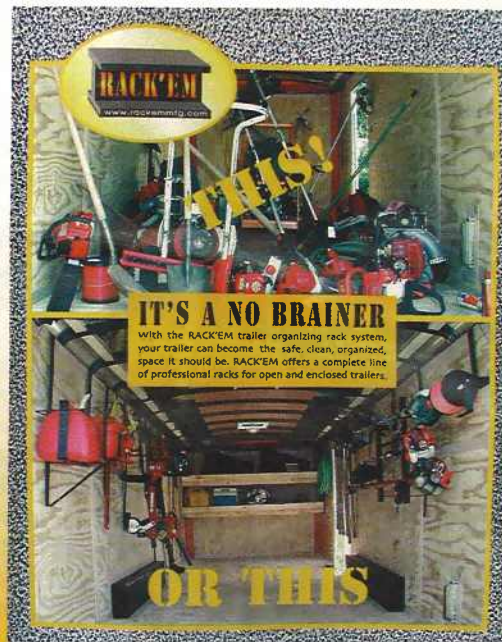
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expensive, but it is well worth it. We've sprayed other pesticides four times a year, but they still don't do as good of a job as spraying Top Choice once a year," Edwards said.

### Big crowds, big bucks

The total cost of the Sportsplex to date is \$12 million; \$3 million of that figure comes from the acquisition of 250 acres. According to a formula calculated by the Harrison County Tourism Commission, this year's tournaments at the Sportsplex will pump \$13 million back into the local economy.

Money is pumped back into the community with the weekly influx of

players, coaches and team supporters keeping the beds of nearby hotels full and the cooks at local restaurants busy.

They expect an estimated 1,900 teams to utilize the complex this year for a wide range of events, including two World Series, two national events, two regional events and two state tournaments, among the 54 scheduled events.

The upcoming year will prove to be a landmark year for the Gulfport Sportsplex, as an 18-acre water park is scheduled to open in late spring, and the construction of four replicas of MLB parks begins, boosting the tourism industry even more.

Mini-versions of Boston's Fenway Park, Baltimore's Camden Yards, New York's Yankee Stadium and Houston's Minute Made Park will give little



The Green Monster, a statue of a baseball player covered in vines, serves as a greeter to those visiting the complex. Below, Ken Edwards poses in front of one of the softball fields on the grounds of the Gulfport Sportsplex.



leaguers a big chance to feel like their baseball heroes.

"We'll have so many tournaments going on at our regular fields, but every team will have a chance to play on the replica fields. If you're an eight-year-old and you have a chance to play on a field just like in the majors, that's an unbelievable feeling," DeCoux said.

"Two years ago, a group of 10-year-olds came in for a tournament, and while I was in the process of turning the field over to the coaches, one of the players asked me if this is where the pros play. I told him, 'No, but you're the pro for today.' For kids to come and play in replicas of the stadiums where the pros play is going to be amazing," Edwards said.

To DeCoux's knowledge, similar complexes in California and Texas are

building miniature MLB parks, and that's where the idea came from.

Just as this idea comes from the west, so do compliments on Gulfport's Sportsplex.

"We had one instance during a visit from the United States Olympic soccer team coach in which he told us our fields were of better quality than those they practiced on in San Diego," DeCoux said.

*The author, a new contributor to Turf, resides in Biloxi, Miss., and attends Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, where he majors in turf and landscaping. He may be reached via e-mail at ray\_vandusen@hotmail.com with interesting story ideas in the Biloxi area.*

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