



▲ Left: Opening Day at the new stadium. Top Right: Shooting bermuda stolons. Bottom Right: The design team decided to go with traditional Tifway 419 bermudagrass overseeded with perennial ryegrass.

The new Chicago Cub spring facility: ONE GROUNDSKEEPER'S SAGA

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Thousands of fans lined up outside the new stadium as 2 years of pent up anticipation finally comes to a head. Opening weekend at a new ballpark can be very stressful on a groundskeeper. Opening weekend with a torrential rain can be a nightmare. For John Knight CSFM, director of facilities and fields at the new Cubs Park, it was time to take a deep breath. "It's actually been a relief to get into day-to-day game activities. It is my first chance to exhale!" he said.

The new training facility for the Chicago Cubs, conjoined with the new Riverview Park in Mesa, AZ sits on the largest site of spring training homes in MLB, 146 acres. With dimensions modeled after Wrigley Field, the 15,000 capacity stadium should make visiting "North Siders" feel right at home with a brick wall behind home plate, light standards that mimic Wrigley's, and even a roof top deck in left field. Completed just in time for Opening Day, the park had a July 2012 groundbreaking which set a hurried construction pace for architecture firm Populous and Hunt Construction Group. For Knight, it felt as if he had been holding his breath on this project, not just through construction, but years beforehand.

From 2006 to 2010, the City of Peoria gave Knight his first taste of spring training excitement.

Working at the Peoria (AZ) Sports Complex and being very involved in the construction of Rio Vista Community Park prepared him for the magnitude of this project.

"The amount of earthwork was very time consuming. Some areas were very

sandy, some areas were hard compacted clay soil," he said. Being on the edge of the Salt River complicated the Cubs Park construction timeline. An archaeological survey was completed to preserve any Native history that might be exposed. All of the wildlife on the site had to be relocated, and an attempt was made to nursery the existing trees. These site challenges put a major delay on actual field installation.

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USGA sand without amendment was imported at a depth of 12 inches for the stadium field and two major league practice fields, and at an 8-inch depth for the four minor league fields and two half fields. The sand layer was placed over a 4-inch pea gravel layer on top of a geotextile fabric, which drains into a Varicore lateral flat pipe drainage system. The system drains to retention basins on site, then evaporates or goes into dry wells, recharging groundwater.

Although he jokes that construction is still not complete, Knight said the most difficult aspect of the process early on was that it raised more questions than answers, questions specifically pertaining to his employment. In a strange twist of fate, his participation in construction weaved in and out, and back again, first as a City of Mesa employee and later as a Cubs employee.

As usual, the role of water in a desert spring training complex was critical. John believes his previous experience in the golf industry helped him better grasp watering efficiency for the park as a whole ecosystem. "Other Arizona Spring Training sites are on a horizontal pumping system, we are on a vertical system more like a golf course," he said.

▼ Johnathan Knight, CSFM



The pumping system, an area of shared use between the Cubs and the City of Mesa, is more of a booster type station. The Rain Bird pumping station uses three 75-hp vertical turbines that draw from an 8-acre lake on site. The lake doubles as an architectural feature and a fishing pond for Riverview Park. At the pumping station water pressure is around 105 psi. This is moderated down between 60 and 70 psi through a traditional valve block system. The water then makes its way to a combination of Hunter I40 and I20 heads for turf, and Hunter I25 heads on all skin infields.

The infields are constructed with Stabilizer Ballyard Brown infield mix, installed at 5 inch depth on both major and minor fields. The mounds are constructed with a combination of Stabilizer Ballyard Clay and Hilltopper Waterless mound clay.

Knight chose not to install warning track heads, instead opting for waterless warning track mix on the stadium field. "I decided on the Hilltopper warning track mix because of labor savings, but also to control dust. I looked at the contract costs of cleaning the seating bowl. Each dust related cleaning cost \$3,000," he said.

In 2003, with Marriott Golf at the Royal St. Kitts Golf Club, Knight spent the greater part of 3 years learning the idiosyncrasies of paspalum turf. "What people don't realize is that although in the Caribbean, the island of St. Kitt's has an arid climate and little water. That is why I feel so strongly about using that turf in the desert." Using Seashore Paspalum Platinum TE on the Riverview Park soccer fields and common areas of the complex really became a passion project for Knight while employed by the City of Mesa. Some may view this as taking a risk, but he views it as "an opportunity." "That's one thing I learned from Ken Mangum (while working at the Atlanta Athletic Club); always look for opportunities to be innovative. We were definitely going outside the box."

For Knight, advocating for the use of paspalum, being so involved in the design, and even establishing a soccer field/parking area proving ground, truly made relinquishing control of this portion of the project bittersweet. The original design included an 8-inch sand cap over the existing bermudagrass, as a result of value engineering; this sand cap was left out, leading to bermuda contamination. Knight is currently re-

searching how to solve this problem, which he thinks can be contained through patience and diligence. "It's tough to let the whole responsibility go, but I still get to consult for the City and share the responsibility to make it work."

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At the optimal time in June and July, landscape contractor Siteworks stolonized three-quarters of the project, with the exception of the infields, which were sodded. For the baseball fields, the design team decided to go with a more traditional Tifway 419, overseeded with perennial ryegrass. The entire stadium field and berm were completely sodded in September 2013 without overseeding.

Construction delays pushed Knight's overseeding plans all the way back to November 26, not a good time for overseeding in general, but the new stadium made it even tougher. While a great design feature for fans, the majority of the seating area is shaded, especially along the 1st base line. Knight, still

unsure of how overseeding worked out just in time for the season, could only explain, "I was really fortunate for a warm winter."

In September 2010, amidst rumors of the Cubs' leaving, Knight accepted the head groundskeeper job at HoHoKam Park for the City of Mesa. While the new ballpark was not yet approved, he took a calculated risk, believing the Cubs would not leave Mesa. Although welcomed, the 2012 announcement of the new complex created even more uncertainty. No one knew whether the Cubs or Mesa would be responsible for maintenance. To make matters worse, City officials were negotiating with the Oakland Athletics to lease HoHoKam Park. This pretty much meant that the A's would bring Chad Huss from Phoenix Municipal Stadium to manage HoHoKam, potentially leaving Knight without a home. "It was very challenging not knowing what would happen," he said.

After the groundbreaking, one piece of the puzzle was finally made clear. A facility use agreement was signed between the Cubs and Mesa,

outlining the role of the Cubs in the stadium, facility and field management, and the role of the City in regards to the minor field timeshare, Riverview Park and common areas. The Cubs began interviewing for the Director of Facilities and Fields position in February 2013. Knight quickly submitted his name. Still awaiting the Cubs decision, the City offered him the position to manage the Riverview Park portion of the complex. What should have brought relief, spurred even deeper soul searching. “I was happy to manage the paspalum for the city, but still very much wanted to be involved with professional baseball. For their patience and understanding I am very fortunate, and thankful to the City of Mesa management.”

Despite the uncertainty, Knight continued the spring 2013 season operating as he always had, a loyal City employee treating the Cubs as a valued client. “I had to walk a fine line, being a fiscally responsible City employee and to be very customer service oriented at the same time. Although I’m a Cubs employee now, I still think of the coaching staff as my client. I think it helps me do my job better.”

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Involvement in the construction and maintenance of the facilities is the reason why Knight made the leap from the City of Mesa to the Cubs when finally offered the position. The Cubs will use the 65,000-square-foot training facility, with 10,000 square foot gym space as a year round rehab center. Featuring hydrotherapy rooms, weight room, and agility

field, it is considered a medical facility, and maintenance must abide by stringent medical standards.

As Knight and his crew transition from construction to maintenance, an interesting dynamic is emerging. Responsibility for the site is shared between the Cubs and the City of Mesa. Maintenance must be coordinated between the two parties on a day by day basis. “We are still learning the facility and learning how to interact. It has been challenging and rewarding discovering a new operation method,” Knight said. Many of Mesa’s maintenance staff were employees of his at HoHoKam. The familiarity there, combined with his laidback personality, make this potentially tough sharing arrangement, a productive method for both parties.

Being part of the design with the City of Mesa, while executing his own spring training daily responsibilities at HoHoKam, not knowing his employment fate, then overseeing the construction process for the Cubs, and finally taking over the facility with a short timeframe before opening, have made the last few years a blur. At one point Knight, being the only Cubs employee on site, was responsible for giving tours of the stadium. Now that he finally gets to reflect on his journey, the challenges were what he learned from the most. “I’m starting to see a big picture view of how great a project this really is. I learned so much from the infrastructure construction. What I really learned is that without the help of my crew, we wouldn’t be sitting here today.” ■