

# 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.

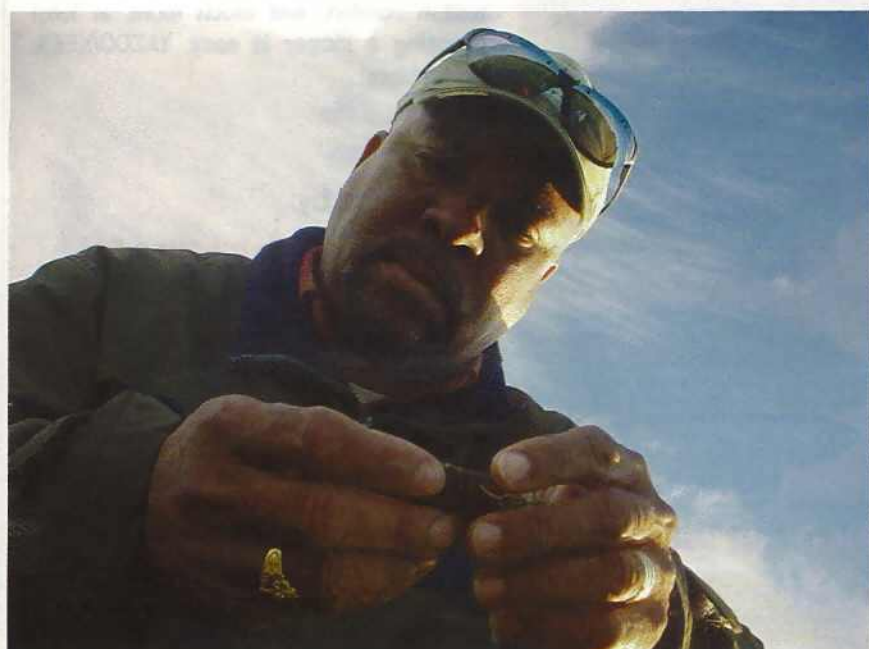
"We took all the ideas the local citizens had, let a consultant firm bring those ideas down to reality and that's what made this Sportsplex such an easy sell," said George DeCoux, director of Gulfport's Department of Leisure Services.

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

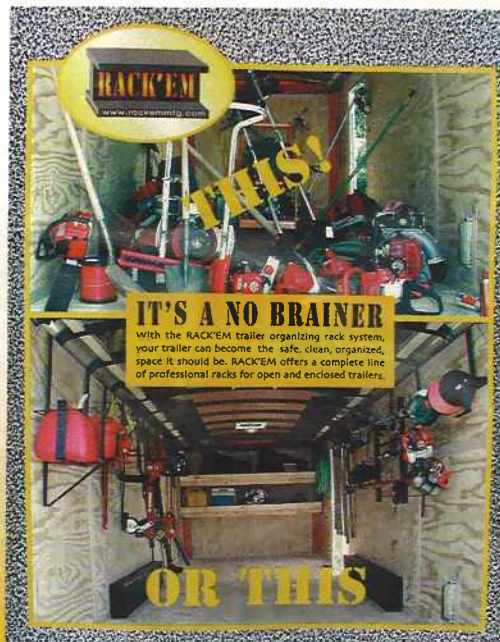
*Continued on page B32*

# BACK'EM Rugged Landscape Trailer Rack Systems For Open And Closed Trailers

As designers and manufacturers of an extensive line of hammered steel, trailer rack systems for both open and closed trailer applications, **RACK'EM™** is bringing order and efficiency to Landscapers and Lawn Maintenance Crews nationwide. Find us on the web at: [www.rackemmf.com](http://www.rackemmf.com)

Mention that you saw us in *Turf Magazine* and take an additional 10% off of our already low prices.

FreeInfo! 513 \*



## Decisions...Decisions...

What to choose among 10,000+ chemicals for your **Turf Needs...**

**Nature** has been **landscaping** for millions of years with only **ORGANIC HUMUS SOIL...**

**Follow Nature's** way by choosing

scientifically made and proven **actosol®**

**ORGANIC MIRACLE FORTIFIED WITH NUTRITION...**

- for:
- ◆ Lush green turf with deep roots
  - ◆ Bright color ornamentals
  - ◆ Resistance to diseases and drought
  - ◆ Enhanced uptake of fertilizers
  - ◆ Reduced input and maintenance costs
  - ◆ Environmentally safe and non-toxic

\* **Seeking Representatives and Distributors**

USDA Allowed/EPA Approved/OMRI Listed

LIQUID now with QUICK & SUSTAINED RESULTS



**actosol®**  
South Boston, Virginia 24592  
703-222-0280

FreeInfo! 534 \*

## RAISING THE BAR

ON RUBBER TRACK LOADER INNOVATION, PRODUCTIVITY AND EFFICIENCY.

### RC-30 Features Summary

- R-Series Traction and Support System™ (RTSS) undercarriage means high traction, low ground pressure and excellent maneuverability.
- Undercarriage suspension gives smooth ride and stable handling.
- Cat 3013 diesel engine with 31.5 hp (23.5 kW).
- Ride-on operation from a comfortable cab and easy-to-use, pilot-operated controls.
- Compact size simplifies transportation and allows excellent maneuverability.
- Dozens of dedicated work tools available.
- Easy service and minimal maintenance required.

RC-30: PERFECT FOR LANDOWNERS, LANDSCAPERS & RENTAL STORES, CALL OR VISIT YOUR LOCAL DEALER:

<p><b>FLORIDA</b> Ocala HIGHLAND TRACTOR COMPANY 352-732-4646 352-732-8820 Fax htcdeere@highlandtractor.com</p>	<p><b>GEORGIA</b> Atlanta NORTHSIDE TOOL RENTAL 404-237-9515 404-237-8993 Fax</p>	<p><b>TEXAS</b> Cleveland TEXAS TIMBERJACK, INC. 888-672-7135; 281-592-4959 281-592-7636 Fax www.texas timberjack.com</p>	<p><b>Lufkin</b> TEXAS TIMBERJACK, INC. 836-634-3365 936-639-3674 Fax www.texas timberjack.com</p>	<p><b>VIRGINIA</b> Chesapeake TIDEWATER MULCH &amp; MATERIAL 757-436-0149 757-436-2175 Fax sales@tidewatermulch.com www.tidewatermulch.com</p>	<p><b>ClearBrook</b> VERNON E STUP COMPANY 540-662-8266 540-722-4372 Fax dstup@vernonestup.com</p>	<p><b>Manassas</b> BYRD TRACTOR, INC. 703-361-2135 703-361-4804 Fax</p>
---	---	---	--	--	--	---

FreeInfo! 373 \*

