

CUTT

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The World Series From the Ground Up

One of the more glamorous aspects of being the New York State Turfgrass Extension Specialist is when professional sporting events request my assistance. One such opportunity occurs on a regular basis with the New York Yankees baseball club.

Dan Cunningham is the head groundskeeper for the Yankees and a friend of mine from college many years ago when we studied at the University of Rhode Island. Like many of us who graduated from the URI program, Dan pursued his interest in turfgrass management on the golf course, working at Winged Foot Golf Course in Mamaroneck, NY. Until, that is, he was encouraged by Bob Alonzi to apply for a grounds position at Yankee Stadium almost 20 years ago.

Dan started out on the crew, working his way into the assistant's position and for the last several years has assumed the

Head Groundskeeper position. Dan is aided in every aspect of field care by his assistant Rob Ley, as well as the staff of Steve, Horace and Tommy.

Given the dominance of the Yankees in the American League, it has been an exciting time in the Bronx for the last seven years, especially in Fall. For the last two years I have been able to attend the last game of the season at Yankee Stadium. Neither were the closing games of the World Series, since the Series was concluded, to different results, at the visitor's field. However, both games were memorable.

The Setup

I arrive at the field by noon the day of the game. The starting time for World Series games is generally around 8:00 pm. It is an

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Can We "Count" on You?

The turfgrass industry in New York is an important aspect of the state's agriculture yet it has not been properly assessed for its economic value to the state. The last survey of the industry was conducted in 1977 and clearly the industry has experienced substantial growth in the last two decades.

Industry surveys conducted in other states have resulted in substantial additional financial and legislative support from state governments. In some cases, several hundred thousand new dollars have been allocated to turfgrass research and education. This is a vital time for New York—with pending legislation and lack of effective pesticide alternatives—to invest in turfgrass research

focused on environmentally responsible management. Your participation in a new turfgrass industry survey will help the process and could yield significant additional resources.

The New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets and the National Agricultural Statistics Office is preparing to conduct the survey in Fall 2002. The financial commitment from the state is expected to be over \$100,000 while the industry will be asked to provide \$65,000. The Board of Directors of the New York State Turfgrass Association has been actively and successfully advocating for this project and now needs your help. Work with

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World Series

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incredibly grueling time for the grounds crew who are there from the morning of the game to the early morning hours after the game. The day is busy with mowing, detailing and preparing the skin areas as well as the various oddball requests that come from the media for Dan and his crew.

In 2000, I had ringside seats for the Clemens vs. Piazza thrown bat incident. It was an exciting experience to watch a bunch of rather large men consider brawling on a world stage. The game itself was dominated by the Yanks who went on to close out the series in 5 games. However, this paled in comparison to the 2001 battle with the Arizona Diamondbacks.

As a rule I have avoided much commentary regarding the tragic events of September 11, 2001 in these pages. However, it is impossible to fully appreciate the ambiance at the stadium that early November evening for the Series' 5th game—the final game at Yankee Stadium in 2001—without recalling that horrific disaster: the deep sense of reverence for those who lost their lives, the Challenger Eagle flying in on cue during the National Anthem, the ragged flag from the World Trade Center, the moving performance of the Harlem Boys Choir, visiting with some of New York's Finest. These would have been enough to ensure a memorable evening, but there was more.

The Game

The game the night before ended in dramatic fashion with Tino Martinez tying the



game in the 9th inning with two outs. Derek Jeter came up in the 10th inning to hit a home run and bring the Yankees into a series tying 2 games to 2. Upon my arrival for the 5th game, the stadium was both electric and subdued as well as under tight security. Most all the staff was there late the night before and up early this day to prepare for the game. All I heard was, "you shoulda been here last night, nothing can compare."

The Yankees continued to struggle at the plate, hitting well below .200 for the Series, and fell behind 2-0. It remained 2-0 into the 9th inning as Paul O'Neil approached the plate for what he expected was his final at bat in Yankee Stadium. With one out, Jorge Posada doubled, then the second out was made and Scott Brosius approached the plate. To start the 9th the Diamondbacks had brought in their closer Byung-Hyun Kim who was burned the night before for the Yankees win. Could lightening strike twice?

The buzz began among photographers where I was sitting, but no one could have believed it. With two strikes and the pitch on its way, time seemed to stand still.

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Top: the Challenger Eagle flew in for the National Anthem. Middle: the World Trade Center flag flies over center field. Bottom: the grounds crew prepares for batting practice for Game 5.



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The ball left Kim's hands and Brosius lifted it into the left field seats to tie the score and the place erupted. In all my years as a sports enthusiast and rabid Yankee fan I have never experienced as much excitement as I did in the last few innings of this game.

The Yankees held off a rally in the top of the 11th as the Diamondbacks got to the Yankees' ace closer Mariano Rivera. This situation would repeat itself in the 7th game and bring Arizona their first championship. However, the 5th game and a 3-2 series lead belonged to the Yankees as Alfonso Soriano singled and Chuck Knoblauch beat the throw in a dramatic play at home plate in the 12th inning for the Yankees' win.

The Aftermath

My voice was gone and the crew needed to secure the field while the media circus began. Paul O'Neil garnered much of the spotlight in spite of the heroics of Brosius, Knoblauch and Soriano. Paul was a Yankees favorite and the hard-working intense kind of player that appealed to demanding Yankees fans.

The season for the crew had closed on the highest of notes. Dan and his crew were physically exhausted yet they were clearly a part of one of the greatest two games in World Series history. This is a crew that seems to cherish

anonymity. They do their job best when they are not noticed. Still, the players and Mr. Steinbrenner appear to appreciate the consistent playing conditions that in some small way have contributed to an amazing run.

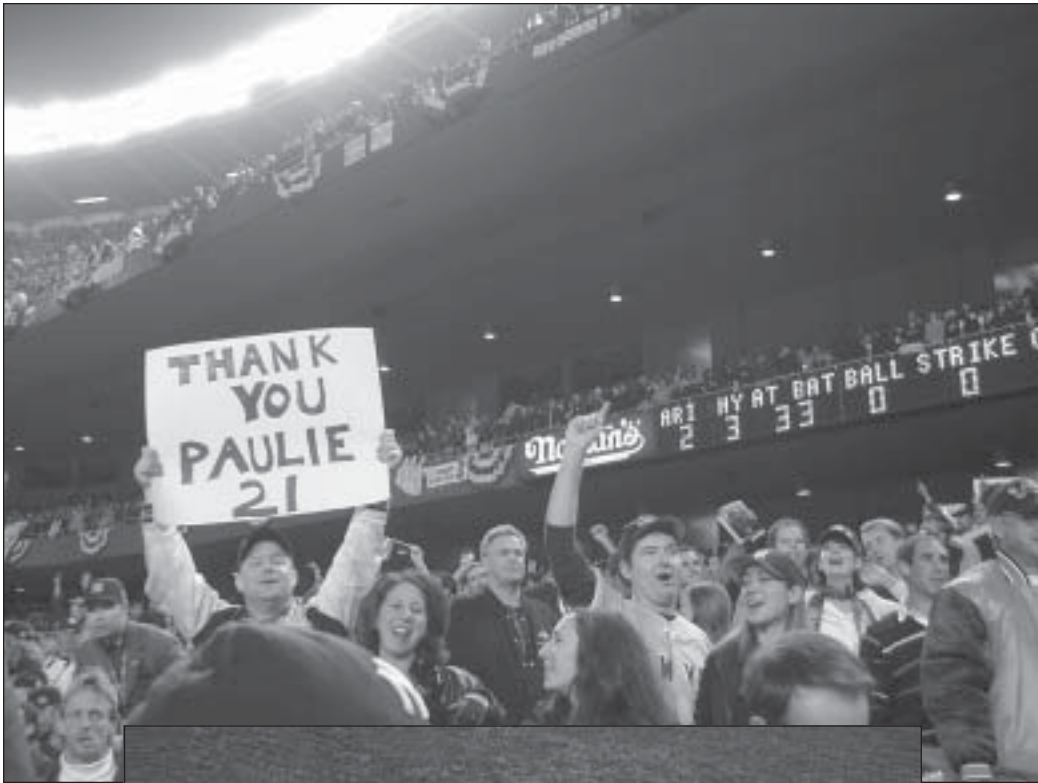
While the Yankees did not prevail in the Series, New York City got the gift of joy for a few days on the heels of an enormous tragedy. I am not a philosopher or a sociologist, but I am a New Yorker. It is hard to say that a game can be such an important part of our social fabric, but last November in New York it proved true and those who lost loved ones received a brief, joyous respite from their grief.

For a moment time stopped and 60,000 people knew they were part of something special. For me it may have been the first time I was not thinking about the grass because so much around me seemed unbelievable!

Frank S. Rossi



This page top: the Harlem Boys Choir entertains the sold-out crowd. Bottom: Rob Ley of the grounds crew prepares to draw base lines. Opposite page top: fans salute Paul O'Neil's final game in Yankee Stadium. Middle: first base adorned with the World Series logo. Bottom: members of the press capture the action.



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