

# Roger Bossard on the industry: today and tomorrow

**W**hen it comes to groundskeeping and sports field maintenance, Roger Bossard, head groundskeeper for the Chicago White Sox, is in a league of his own. In Major League Baseball for more than 35 years, he's been through the famous days of former owner, Bill Veeck, Disco Demolition Night and, more importantly, has pioneered the sports field techniques used with the latest retractable domes and other ballpark innovations.

For Bossard, the game is in his blood. He's a third generation Major League groundskeeper. Grandfather Emil and father Gene are remembered for their "masterful groundskeeping techniques" and the entire family has a reputation for doing their part to deliver checks to the "Win" column for nearly a century. He's emerged from the long shadow of his father and grandfather and their famed 17 Tricks of the Trade, which were touted for delivering a real home field advantage in the old days. Today he's recognized, in his own right, as one of the premier groundskeepers in baseball.

"From the age of 8 or 9, I was dragging a hose around for the crew," remembers Bossard. "It took me 6 years to move up through the system to make assistant groundskeeper. I wasn't even allowed to water the field for the first 5 years because my dad always said that no two days were alike and I needed to be able to recognize what the field needed."

Today, he's known for his impeccably manicured infields that give the true, clean hops that all major league players love. Bossard is also a premier sports field builder, designing major and minor league ballparks around the country.

He works with a team of experts. People like Dr. Hank Wilkinson of the University of Illinois, and Andy Wright of Muller Mist Irrigation are among the industry's leading professionals. Each brings years of experience in his field of expertise to every project, including turf management, drainage and irrigation systems, and other important facets.

They have built six of the last 10 MLB ballparks in the U.S.: Comiskey Park in Chicago, St. Louis' renovation to turf at Busch Stadium, Seattle's Safeco Field, Bank One Ball Park in Arizona, Detroit's Comerica Park, and Miller Park in Milwaukee. They've designed minor league and spring training facilities in Tucson, Tampa, and Juniper, FL, and all the natural turf soccer fields for the Royal Family of Saudi Arabia. Bossard also consults for twelve major league teams.

## Groundskeeping today

Because of his unique position and years of experience, there's no one better to reflect on the challenges of today's groundskeepers and what their futures hold.

"I've seen a lot of change throughout the league during my years with the White Sox. Everyone in the game works for people who expect perfection," said Bossard, "and everyone, managers, players, even the umpires, expects that perfection from the groundskeeping crew. The groundskeepers are often the first people blamed—one bad hop and your name's mud. For the new groundskeepers out there, that's a lot of pressure. It takes experience to be able to handle those situations."

"These guys are putting in 14-17 hour days and having to deliver on the demands of the players and others in the organization," said Bossard. "Now days the job is much more like a business. When I started, it was like a family around the league."



**Bossard, pictured here with his late father, Gene, is the third generation to work in the big leagues. Including his grandfather, father, uncles and cousin, the Bossard family has a combined total of more than 250 years of baseball experience.**

Many of the managers and owners recognize the importance of the groundskeeping staff. Some even refer to them as the 10th man on the field. But, there can also be a stigma as being just a "glorified grass cutter."

"In today's game," explained Bossard, "it's exceedingly important to understand the importance of a good groundskeeper and help train them to do their job to the best of their ability and reward them for their significant contribution to the organization."

"I think that working with other groundskeepers is the best way to learn," said Bossard. This year he's planning a training camp during December in Arizona to work with groundskeepers and managers from around the country to help them be the best at their jobs. This Professional Sportsfield Institute will be geared toward anyone interested in maintaining high-quality sports fields at any level of play. During the 3-day camp, the attendees will actually re-construct three of the spring training fields at Tucson Electric Park.

"I'm very excited about it," added Bossard, "they'll get an opportunity to get some real hands-on training and work with a couple of major league groundskeepers. I think it will be a very beneficial program and add to the credibility of the profession."

## Philosophies

"When it comes to maintaining a field, the most important thing to remember," said Bossard, "is that 70 percent of all the action takes place on the infield, so that's where your resources should be focused." Keeping the infield conditioned and in play is critical. "A rainout can cost you close to a million dollars in the big leagues," said Bossard. The effects of rescheduling games at any level can seem almost as daunting.

all his own soil analysis. His famed hands-on style keeps him down in the trenches with his crew every game day.

In addition to Bossard's insight, several other industry professionals, including Alan Sigwardt, director of grounds and engineering for Pro Player Stadium in Miami, and Dr. Hank Wilkinson, former STMA Scientist of the Year, will be contributing at the institute in Tucson.

### Speaking from experience

When asked about the projects that have shaped his experience, Bossard said, "Every construction project has its own unique challenge. However, the Miller Park installation was extraordinary."

"Because of construction delays at the stadium, we were installing the field in December of the worst winter on record. There was 14 inches of snow when we started and upwards of 30 inches before we were through," said Bossard. "The dome was scheduled to be finished before we started putting in the field, so the outdoor temperature shouldn't have had an effect on us. It wasn't finished though, so we had to devise a way to install the field on frozen ground."

The field had to be thawed before the sod could be installed. A foot of snow had to be plowed away and a 6-inch trench of frozen ground had to be torn out by frost teeth on D8 bulldozers to put in the irrigation system. "But we were ready for opening day and that's all that matters," added Bossard.

Bossard and his team also developed a unique irrigation strategy for Miller Park. Its overhead, integrated hydraulic irrigation system was the first of its kind. It heats water from 80-93 degrees, then runs it through the irrigation system to help bring the turf out of dormancy and establish growth in the cool weather. "Sure, projects like this may push the envelope of creative sportsfield care," said Bossard. "But the point is that the best way to broaden your skills is to work with the most experienced people in the game. This forum provides that opportunity."

"In the end, it's what you do on your field that counts. This course will teach you how to properly maintain your field, but more importantly how to fix mistakes that may have happened in the past. You'll design a program that meets your specific maintenance needs and be able to apply it."

"And if the attendees are really lucky," added Bossard, "I may even reveal a few of my grandfather's famous '17 Tricks of the Trade'—strictly for nostalgia, of course."

For more information on the Professional Sportsfield Institute and the Roger Bossard Training Camp, contact [www.sportsfieldinstitute.com](http://www.sportsfieldinstitute.com) or 800-851-2399.

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Bossard says, "When I work on my field, I get all these great ideas in my head that I know can help other groundskeepers, techniques they don't teach you in school. This is my opportunity to pass on some of that experience."

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