

DIRTY WORK

THE GRASS MAY BE GREENER, BUT IT'S THE DIRT THAT REALLY TIES THE FIELD TOGETHER



at first glance, Yankee Stadium's lavish outfield expanse usually catches fans' eyes before the infield does.

Except if you're Jim Kelsey.

Kelsey has owned the Partac Peat Corporation in Great Meadows, a rural town in Warren County, N.J., since 1984. Kelsey's corporation supplies the Yankees with the dirt that makes up the infield, pitcher's mound and warning track at The House That Ruth Built.

Additionally, Kelsey provides dirt to every major league team, in one form or another.

"We supply something to every major league team," he said. "Some teams buy mound mix from us. Some buy warning track mix and others buy accessories. We supply everything that's involved with maintaining a baseball field."

To most fans, dirt is dirt, but there is actually a lot more that goes into compiling the best possible playing surface than meets the eye.

For starters, there are vast differences between the dirt that is used in the infield and the pitcher's mound, and both differ significantly from warning track dirt.

"For the infield, the dirt must drain well, but still be firm enough to make it a safe sliding surface," Kelsey said. "It must not separate. That's one of the most important things in a stadium. You don't want it to separate and get dusty."

And that's precisely why Kelsey believes his corporation is so popular among major league clubs.

"We have competitors in probably every town in the country," he said. "Whoever makes sand and gravel makes some sort of infield mix for the local market. But it's usually waste materials, the silt and the fine sands that they're selling for

that. Those are the materials that we do not use in the mix. We use a uniform orange sand with a clay binder—not a silk clay binder—which makes a firm surface, but still drains well. It doesn't get dusty or wash away."

As for the pitcher's mound, the ability for hurlers to plant their lead foot without digging a hole in front of the pitching rubber is essential.

"The pitcher's mound is a much firmer, heavier material," Kelsey explained. "It's much denser. It packs in so a pitcher can get his cleats in it, but it doesn't dig out. If it digs out, which is usually the case on a recreational field, the pitcher gives up some of his height advantage to the batter. It's common for high school pitchers to have trouble adjusting when they get to college because the mound doesn't have the hole to get their footing in."

"We also make a home plate mix, which is in between the infield and pitcher's mound mixes," he continued. "Normally, on a major league field, we use a mound mix there, because home plate is covered when it rains."

And finally, the dirt that makes up the warning track helps define its name.

"The warning track material that the Yankees use is a crushed stone with a red clay binder," Kelsey concluded. "It's designed to make a firm surface but be crunchy on top so the player gets a distinctly different texture to warn him that he is approaching the fence."

When Kelsey was asked which infield looks the best, there was no hesitation in his voice.

"Yankee Stadium," he said. "I think it looks better every year."

—A.S.