

N.J. firm digs up dirt on Cubs

Now that the Chicago Cubs have become the darlings of major league baseball, we're hearing more and more about idyllic Wrigley Field with its natural grass, its cozy atmosphere, its colorful, long-suffering bleacher bums, the rooftop fans on Waveland Avenue, the ivy that covers the outfield walls.

We've heard about the astute front-office moves that brought pitchers Rick Sutcliffe and Dennis Eckersley, outfielders Gary Matthews and Bob Dernier to the Cubs and sparked the team's resurgence.

We've heard all of this, and will hear much more should the beloved Cubbies continue their assault on the San Diego Padres in the National League Championship series and advance to their first World Series since 1945.

But could it be that there's a secret — or at least overlooked — ingredient to the Cubs' success? Could this glorious season be somehow attributable to something as seemingly mundane as dirt?

Jim Kelsey of Great Meadows, Independence Township, modestly says he doesn't think so. But he

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is proud to point out that this is the first season that the A.W. Kuntz division of the Partac Corporation has supplied the infield dirt for neatly manicured Wrigley Field. "Actually, it doesn't affect play, but we have made some improvements (in the composition of Wrigley's infield)," says Kelsey, owner and president of Partac.

Just as there is in Chicago, there's also a little piece of Warren County in the baseball stadiums of the Toronto Blue Jays, New York Mets and New York Yankees. Again, Kelsey says it's sheer coincidence, but those clubs finished second, second and third, respectively, in their divisional pennant races this season, and all of them played on surfaces produced by Partac.

"Until recently," says Kelsey, a

soft-spoken man who in college studied for a career in foreign service, "peat was our base material. Now, we've branched out into other things, gotten into specialty soils."

Last year Partac acquired the A.W. Kuntz company, which had been making infield mixtures since 1922. Partac now is producing mixes for clay tennis courts, running tracks, bocce courts and for greens on golf courses, as well as sod for general landscaping. Customers include several high school and college athletic departments in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, as well as private clubs and athletic teams.

"We blend different materials, but all of them come from here in New Jersey. What I enjoy most is the creative aspect of the business, finding a way to make a unique product that's the best of its kind," Kelsey says. He believes the mix he supplies to the Cubs and other major league teams is the only product of its kind made in the United States, although other companies make simpler varieties of infield dirt.

Kelsey prefers his dirt to be identified by its registered name, Beam Clay, or by what he calls its "ge-

neric name," baseball diamond mix.

"It's the soil and the blend," that make his product different, Kelsey says. "It's reddish clay and orange sand blended together, pulverized and screened, made to our specifications. It has to be the right texture and the right color."

The mixture must be firm enough to provide good traction for infielders and baserunners, but fine enough so that it becomes "nice and fluffy again" when grounds crewmen rake it between innings, Kelsey says.

Partac produces special mixtures for the pitcher's mound and home plate area. These blends contain more clay to furnish extra traction for pitchers following through on their deliveries and for hitters digging into the batter's box.

The Cubs took delivery of about 25 tons of Beam Clay before the start of this season. "I talked to them after they won the (National League East) pennant and asked if they needed more," Kelsey says, "but they said they'd be OK until next spring."

Apparently, the Cubs think the mixture they've got — both playing the field and covering it — is just right.

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