

*Most people who come to the New York Mets' Shea Stadium watch the base runners. Jim Kelsey of Partac Peat Corporation prefers to watch the base paths—made from his dirt.*

## Diamonds In The Dirt

The next time you're watching the New York Yankees play, and manager Billy Martin goes into a frenzy, keep a close eye on the dirt he kicks toward the umpire. Jim Kelsey does. It's his dirt.

"I get a charge out of managers kicking the dirt around," says Kelsey, 40, owner of Partac Peat Corporation of Great Meadows, N.J. "I figure I'm doing my part to contribute to the game."

Kelsey's firm provides the clay-and-sand mixture that is used by nine major-league teams, 36 minor-league teams and more than 150 colleges. The stuff that cakes the cleats of Yankees, Dodgers, Astros and Cubs alike is dug from the same 1,000-acre farm in northern New Jersey.

Kelsey speaks of his dirt with a reverence others reserve for gold dust. "It's not just whatever comes out of the

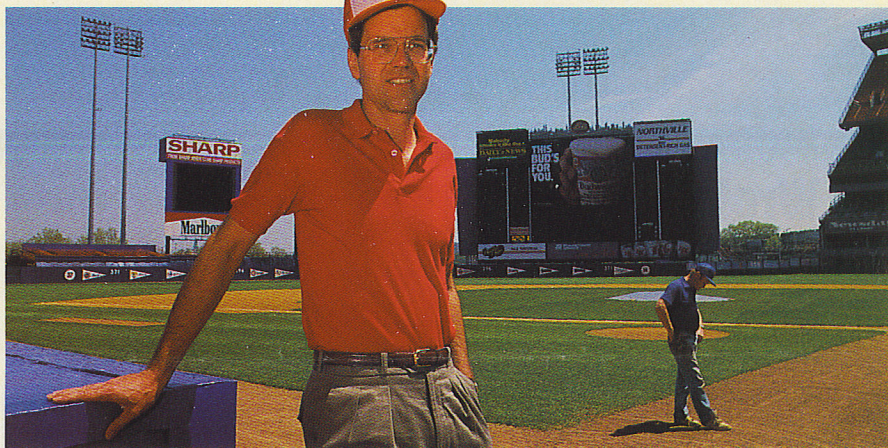


PHOTO: ALAN DOROW

ground," he says. "It's a fine mixture that's processed and shredded to the right consistency. And we can even match colors—red, orange or brown—to suit a particular diamond."

Actually, there are three mixtures: a firmer dirt for the pitcher's mound, where good footing is essential; a medium-hard mix for the batter's box; and a

softer version for the base paths, which must be safe for sliding and porous for quick drainage.

Partac Peat has secret recipes for the mixes (the dirt is sifted, ground up and heated), but Kelsey gives most credit to Mother Nature. "The glaciers stopped right here and dumped all kinds of minerals on the property," he says.

Kelsey's father opened the business in 1947 as a sod farm and producer of peat moss, topsoil and planting mixes. In 1964 the firm provided all the peat for the New York World's Fair. The company's chief product, however, is a special peat moss used by golf courses.

In 1984, Kelsey (who had inherited the firm a few years earlier) bought out a failing local company and picked up its business of producing and selling sports-field dirt. Kelsey has since expanded that business, and now, in addition to selling dirt for ball fields, Partac Peat provides the stuff that clay tennis courts, running and horse tracks and horseshoe pits are made of.

Kelsey won't discuss specifics of sales or profits, but he does say that sports-field dirt accounts for about one third of his revenues.

Partac Peat's dirt is, well, dirt cheap. The special pitcher's-mound mix costs \$7 for a 50-pound bag. That means it costs about \$35 to recondition a mound, \$280 to build one from scratch. "But you can't just throw it on," says Kelsey. "You need a bonding layer, you need to wet things just right."

Adding a one-inch coat to an entire baseball diamond—something major league teams do about once a year—costs around \$2,000.

Although dirt is not exactly a renewable agricultural resource, Kelsey doesn't envision running out of it "for at least the next 20 years."

—Glen Macnow

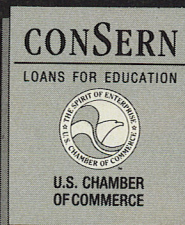
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