

Mining Dirt for Baseball Diamonds



Norman Y. Lono for The New York Times

Jim Kelsey, president and owner of the Partac Peat Corporation in Great Meadows.

By PHILIP GOOD

GREAT MEADOWS

IMAGINE Nolan Ryan of the Texas Rangers winding up for a pitch and stumbling because there's a hole in the mound, or Rickey Henderson of the Oakland A's trying to steal second and failing because he slips in a puddle of mud.

Jim Kelsey is in the business of seeing that that doesn't happen. As the president and owner of the Partac Peat Corporation, on a 1,000-acre farm here in this Warren County community, Mr. Kelsey supplies dirt and clay to 13 major league teams, 57 minor league teams and hundreds of colleges, high schools and municipal ball fields.

By all accounts, thousands of pitchers and base runners have reason to be grateful for that fact.

One recent day, Mr. Kelsey, who is 44 years old, was discovered in the company's office, a converted trailer, gazing out the window at piles of dirt. His wife and business partner, Bonnie, walked in to ask him to look over an order. In his soft-spoken way, he discussed with her how much clay mix was needed in what particular color to suit a customer's needs.

Outside the trailer, Mr. Kelsey examined the different mixes as workers loaded 50-pound bags onto trucks. The company's 15 workers ship about 30,000 tons of dirt and clay a year.

'A Matter of the Right Mix'

There is an art to the business. The soil must be cleared of stones, and the various dirts, sands and clays must be blended to achieve particular consistencies and colors (the final product can be red, brown, orange or gray).

"It needs to be firm and not too moist to give a true bounce to the ball," Mr. Kelsey said. "It's just a matter of the right mix."

His lucrative crop of soil was planted during the Ice Age by glaciers that pushed sand and gravel into the land and also carved out lakes from which the clay and peat on the Kelsey farm originate.

Ron Witte, a geologist with the State Department of Environmental Protection and Energy, said that the Kelsey farm has a wide variety of material to work with and that the supply is ample. He said he had dug down 90 to 200 feet in the soil before hitting rock.

Near the company trailer are piles of dirt, each with a different purpose.

There are the pitching mound blend, the home plate mix, the red warning-track mix and the soil used for the base paths.

The warning-track mix has a crunchy consistency so that a ball-player can feel it under his feet. Picking up a handful, Mr. Kelsey said: "We make sports surfaces safe for those who play on them. Notice there are no sharp edges in this mix."

He pointed at one mound and said: "Shea likes to use all orange, like that one over there. And the Yankees use a brown color."

Pete Flynn, head groundskeeper for the New York Mets, gives the company's products high marks. "Tom Seaver always loved the mound here," he said. "I think it's the greatest, and it's been with the Mets for years."

Jeff Innis, a Mets pitcher, added: "It's a good mound. Of course, the height and angle are important, and there's no holes in it."

The Mets groundskeeper also emphasized the appearance of the field. "When you watch on TV," he said, "that orange color against the green grass looks real nice." Soil, he said, is added to all parts of Shea Stadium throughout the season — a total of

about 20 tons of the farm's products a year.

The company supplies complete instructions on how to build a mound. Building a regulation mound from scratch requires five tons of clay mix, and resurfacing existing ones could take one to two tons.

Groundskeepers also use a top dressing soil to strengthen the grass. Back at the farm, this dirt is tumbled, creating a fine grain, and then heated to destroy parasites that could harm the turf. Working this processed earth into the grass prevents damage to the field from rough play.

Family of Farmers

Mr. Kelsey's grandfather came to the United States at the turn of the century and settled in Warren County because it reminded him of his Ukrainian homeland. He started farming on rented land.

Mr. Kelsey's father, who died in 1954, bought 1,000 acres of land here in the 40's and began selling peat and sod. One of his customers was the United Nations. He also packaged peat for chain stores.

During his college years, Mr. Kelsey planned to get into a "cleaner" business by going to law school at Rutgers University. But he decided to return to the family business in 1970 and help his mother run the farm, which was having financial trouble at the time.

Mr. Kelsey's first involvement with sports was in 1984, when a local parks department superintendent called looking for baseball dirt. The supplier the superintendent had originally been dealing with, the Beam Clay Company of Berkeley Heights, had gone out of business.

Mr. Kelsey spoke to the owners of Beam Clay and struck a deal. They shared their knowledge of how to mix dirt for sports surfaces, as well as a client list that included six major league baseball teams. Mr. Kelsey also kept the Beam Clay name for his

Major league clubs are particular about having the right dirt mix.

products.

Today, Mr. Kelsey's major league client list includes the Chicago Cubs, the Cincinnati Reds, the Houston Astros, the Los Angeles Dodgers, the Milwaukee Brewers, the Minnesota Twins, the Montreal Expos, the New York Mets, the New York Yankees, the Philadelphia Phillies, the Pittsburgh Pirates, the San Diego Padres and the Toronto Blue Jays.

Not only does he supply dirt for baseball fields, but also he sells the equipment needed for sports fields, like rakes, bases, line markers, drainage systems and fences. He also supplies the green-dyed sand used on golf course grass to enhance its color and hide bare patches during televised tournaments.

Despite the company's wealth of professional sports customers, Mr. Kelsey takes pride in supplying smaller clients. "I think it's important for kids in Little Leagues to have good fields," he said. "Sometimes you see kids pitching off mounds with holes in them."

And he is optimistic about New Jersey's chances of getting a major league team to make use of his services.

"We'd rather have a New Jersey team," he said. "I believe there's a growing awareness of the state, so I think we're going to get one." ■