

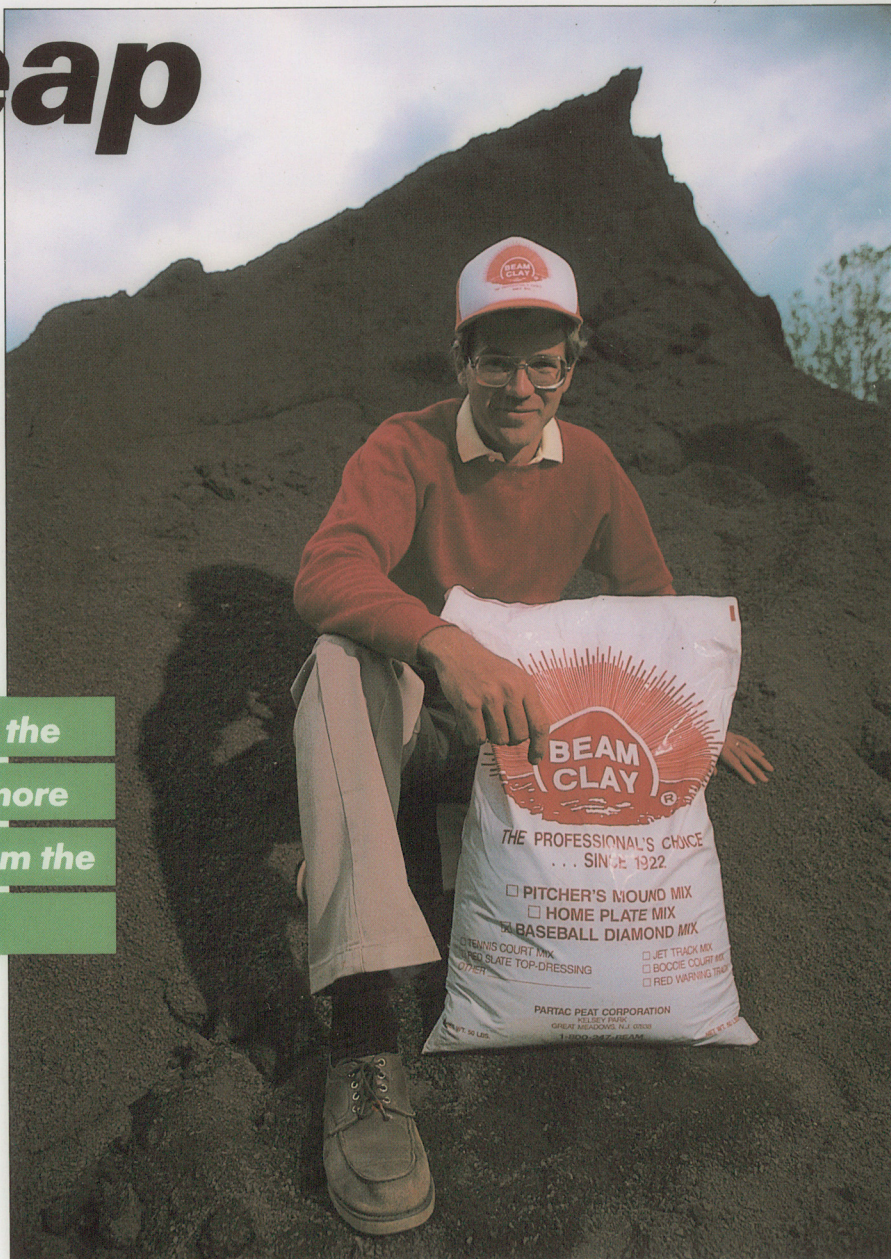
DIRT Cheap

Fancy scoreboards please the fans, but the players are more interested in the game from the ground up.

The next time you see manager Don Zimmer or Davey Johnson or Tommy Lasorda go into an umpire-baiting frenzy, keep an eye on the dirt he kicks around the diamond. Jim Kelsey does. It's his dirt.

"I get a charge out of watching managers kicking dirt around," says Kelsey, 42, owner of the Partac Peat Corporation of Great Meadows, New Jersey. "I figure I'm doing my part to contribute to the game."

Kelsey's farm provides the terra firma adorning the diamonds of 12 major league stadiums. The muck that cakes the cleats of Mets,



President of Partac Peat Corp., Jim Kelsey, with his feet in clay.

Padres, Phillies and Twins alike is dug from the same 1000-acre farm located 50 miles west of New York City.

In addition, his clay-and-sand mixture (dubbed Jim Beam clay) is

used at eight spring training sites, 42 minor league parks and 225 colleges. The University of Hawaii Islanders have slid in the stuff for years, and recently, it turned up on new fields being built in Australia.

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Kelsey has never been to Australia, but he annually tours as many parks as he can. "I watch a game differently than most people," he says. "I spend most of my time studying the field rather than the players."

Indeed, Kelsey speaks of his dirt with a reverence others usually reserve for gold dust.

"It's not just whatever comes out of the 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 several mixtures. A softer mix—more sand—is used for base paths. "That's the most difficult mix," Kelsey says. "It needs to be firm enough to give the runner a good running surface, but soft enough that he can slide in it."

A medium-hard mixture is used for the batter's box. And a hard-packed clay is used for the pitcher's mound. "It stays firm so the pitcher can get good footing without digging a deep pit," says Kelsey.

There are other mixtures for coaching boxes and on-deck circles, as well as a tinted gravel used for the outfield warning paths. It is that variety of products that helps make Kelsey baseball's biggest supplier of dirt. Whatever color, texture, or firmness a particular club wants, Partac Peat is able to supply it.

Kelsey keeps his exact dirt recipes secret. He will say only that the clay is pulverized, ground up, run through screens, and then shredded. At that point, it is blended with sand, processed through mixing equipment and

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then run through screens again.

Still, the King of Dirt gives most of the credit to Mother Nature.

“The glaciers stopped right here in northern New Jersey and dumped all kinds of minerals on the

property,” he says. “We just got fortunate.”

Kelsey’s father, a commodities trader, opened the business 42 years ago as a sod farm and producer of peat moss, topsoil,

and planting mixes. In 1964, the company provided all the peat for the New York World’s Fair, and it has long sold soil to the United Nations. Its chief product, however, is a top dressing used by golf courses to break down thatch and improve the growth of turf.

This year, Partac Peat developed a new product—a ceramically colored green sand—designed to further the marriage between golf and television. “It used to be that the networks didn’t like to shoot tee-shots from above because

viewers saw too many brown divots," says Kelsey. "But with this sand spread over the tee areas, all you see is a beautiful green color. If you watched the 1989 U.S. Open on TV — that was our stuff."

His stuff is also found in clay tennis courts, running and horse tracks, horseshoe pits, and bocce courts. But baseball is where Kelsey's client list has more than doubled in the past four years. And that begs the question — exactly how does one go about selling something that comes free

in most people's backyards?

"Well, that's the biggest challenge," admits Kelsey. "Traditionally, groundskeepers just went out to the river bed behind the stadium and dug out whatever was there. They used the same dirt all over the field, regardless of the needs of a particular area. And most of our competitors just viewed sports dirt as a side business — a way to get rid of their waste materials."

Such policies rankle the man who views dirtiness next to

godliness.

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The biggest sale of 1989 went to Toronto's \$530-million Skydome. In addition to its movable roof, luxury hotel, and three-story-high video replay scoreboard, the

Skydome can also boast a pitcher's mound of Special Red Jim Beam clay — \$8.25 per 50-pound bag.

To push his product, Kelsey advertises in baseball insider publications ("Available in bulk or bags!") and travels to trade shows, setting up an exhibit booth, and actually carrying a briefcase full of dirt.

"I have a 3 x 2-foot model diamond I carry around in my case," he says. "At one winter meeting, I was in the parking lot trying to sell to the general manager of the Vero Beach Dodgers. I dropped my briefcase, but the pitcher's mound didn't even crack. The guy just looked at

it and said, 'I'll take some of that.'"

Partac Peat also garners some publicity by co-sponsoring with the Sports Turf Managers Association an annual contest to choose the best professional and amateur baseball diamonds in the nation. This year's professional winner — as judged by a crew of major league groundskeepers — was Jack Russell Stadium, home of the Clearwater (Florida) Phillies and a client of Partac Peat.

Stadium crew chiefs praise Partac Peat's dirt for its appearance, consistency, and durability.

"It's probably some of the best dirt in the country," says Milwaukee Brewers' grounds-crew chief Harry Gill, who recently built a pitcher's mound from Partac's dirt. "It's almost like molding clay — soft and smooth when it's wet, nice and hard when it's dry. People figure the dirt on their field is just what was there at the beginning, but we don't have the good stuff like this around our part of the country. So we have to order it."

The cost is, well, dirt cheap. A 50-pound bag of the pitcher's mound mix ranges from \$6.25 (gray) to \$8.25 (red). That means it costs no more than \$41.25 to

Those players figure to be sliding in this soil for some time to come. Although dirt is not exactly a renewable resource, Kelsey recondition a mound, or about \$325 to build one from scratch. "But you can't just throw it on," warns Kelsey. "You need a bonding layer — we sell a special bonding agent for that. You need to wet things just right. There's a science to it."

Adding a one-inch coat to an entire baseball diamond — something major league clubs do about once a year — costs around \$2000, or less than the average big-league player makes for each game.

doesn't envision running out of it for at least the next 25 years.

By that time, Partac Peat figures to be entering new markets. Recently, after Americans playing in the Japanese leagues kept complaining about the quality of that country's playing fields, the Japanese commissioner recommended importing Partac peat for each stadium. The product was shipped across the world, but turned back by Japanese customs agents who classified the dirt as an agricultural resource rather than an industrial good.

Kelsey didn't give up. He arranged to have the product

shipped to American military bases. From there, the dirt found its way into Japanese ballparks.

The next frontier may be the Soviet Union. Kelsey was called shortly before an Eastern league all-star team flew to Russia to play some exhibitions, but didn't have sufficient time to ship his goods to Moscow.

"The international shipping made it difficult," Kelsey says. "But as baseball grows over there, I think we'll be able to get in. I'm excited — not so much for the money, but for what I can do to help out baseball."

Not to mention *glasnost*. ■