

LITTLE LEAGUE READY TO START PLAYING BALL



CARLOS ORTIZ staff photographer

Karl Gielenfeldt, left, and Rich Arnold are more than baseball coaches in Greece. They also volunteer their time and labor to help prepare six baseball fields, four T-ball fields and batting cages at the Greece Little League Complex.

Sparkling diamonds greet field of dreamers

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STAFF WRITER

Sporting a dark blue, short-sleeved Little League polo shirt, Rob Bounds sits high atop his black Yard Boy riding tractor.

From his perch, Bounds is king of the diamonds, carefully manicuring the lands at the Greece Little League Complex.

While cars, trucks and vans whiz by on Latta Road alongside the complex, Bounds doesn't notice. The head groundskeeper is intently focused on transforming the land from rough, unkempt fields into all-star quality diamonds fit for budding baseball and softball stars.



WILL YURMAN staff photographer

Rob Bounds estimates he spends 40 to 50 hours getting the Greece Little League Complex ready.

Across the region, eager adults equipped with rakes, shovels and water hoses have been showing up early in the morning or late

in the evening to repair the infields, fill and tidy up the sand in the baselines and

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Opening dates

Today: Batavia, Canandaigua, East Rochester, Geneva, Le Roy, Oakfield, Pittsford.

May 3: Avon, Brighton, Conesus, Dansville, East Side (city of Rochester), Fairport, Genesee Valley, Geneseo, Greece, Nunda, Palmyra-Macedon, Penfield, South Side, Wayland, Webster.

May 10: Gates Chili, Irondequoit.

Online Extra

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Fields

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patch the outfields as if primping their own lawns.

Opening day, complete with the distinct, metallic ping sound of Little Leaguers' bats connecting on base hits, is thought of by many as the real first day of spring. For these dedicated and zealous field crews, spring commences when they arrive to undo months of harsh weather and snowfall, and start breathing life back into the fertile green fields.

In Greece, the persistent pounding of more than 1,200 children's footsteps will soon disturb these well-kept fields, but Bounds doesn't mind. The sound of young athletes laughing and enjoying baseball and softball are reward enough for Bounds and his team.

Along with his team of volunteers, Bounds, 55, is responsible for preparing 10 of Greece's fields for the upcoming season, which begins May 3.

"I take a lot of pride in doing this," said Bounds, a Greece resident.

"We all do this for the community and our children. Volunteers did this for my kids when they were growing up playing baseball, and I'm just giving back to the community in my own way."

Bounds' field preparations begin in October, after the season is finished. With the beatings the fields take, Bounds and his staff will re-plant and re-water the fields, and re-cut the infield to make up for the wear-and-tear.

At night the fields are dried out and any holes are filled to promote field growth.

Once winter passes, Bounds waits for the first "nice, warm" day of spring to resume work on the fields. RM Landscaping will mow each of the fields, and Bounds and his team will take care of the tilling, or digging up of the infield.



CARLOS ORTIZ staff photographer

Rich Arnold helps measure the distance between bases as he helps prepare fields for the Little League Baseball season in Greece, which opens on May 3.

With a mixture of Mar-Co Clay and sand, Bounds, who has done this for a decade, goes to work creating his masterpiece. With the infield as his tapestry, Bounds digs up and turns over the new infield around the base lines until it's consistently mixed up throughout, creating a perfect mix of clay and sand.

More than 30 tons of Mar-Co Clay are ordered before the start of the season. That type of clay is preferred because it doesn't retain water, and is kilned clay, "so the infield doesn't turn to mud," said Bounds.

At night, the fields are dried out before being raked over the next afternoon. Using a roller, Bounds flattens the entire infield to create a consistently level surface free of bumps.

On average, Bounds will spend 40 to 50 hours each preseason working on the fields, including three hours a day during the nice, sunny days at the complex, usually from 3 to 6 p.m.

Each Saturday morning, Bounds and Gene Noga, the president of Greece Little League, arrive at the complex by 9 a.m. for the day's tilling, raking and rolling.

"I come out here and it's very peaceful," Bounds said. "I don't get bothered by anybody. It's great. It's like golf, except I don't have to worry about where I hit the ball. I don't have the pa-

tience to work with kids anymore, so this is the perfect spot for me."

Unlike Greece's fields, run mostly by volunteers, Webster employs the services of its parks and recreation department to prepare its 18 fields.

As the parks foreman, Mike Buckley heads the team responsible for field preparations for Webster Little League. Buckley and his crew roll and aerate the fields and add a light amount of fertilizer in the spring to aid the field's growth.

Buckley estimates that from April 4, the first day his team worked on a field, until opening day, between 600 and 700 hours are spent preparing the fields.

"We take a lot of pride in providing safe, aesthetically nice looking fields," said Buckley, a Sodus resident who has been with the town of Webster for 23 years.

"Most of our wear-and-tear is on the infield area. That's where we concentrate most of our work and effort. We go a little bit extra to make them nice."

Gates Chili's Little League program has two fields at Westgate Park, and every year Steve Graziano and Frank Guary have to seek permission from the town of Gates before working on the fields.

The town of Gates mows the grass while Graziano, Guary and others in the league use a tractor

to comb over and loosen the infield dirt. The real challenge is repairing the pitcher's mounds.

"We have to use a lot of clay and infield dirt mix to repair the mounds. It's probably the hardest part," said Graziano, 49, a Gates resident.

"It's a matter of getting a rake on the mound, mixing in the dirt and clay and filling in the spots where pitchers like to dig their holes after throwing a pitch. We just have to stay on top of the mounds, not let them get too hard or packed-down."

A lot of groundskeepers have connections with Little League.

Before taking on the challenges of being a groundskeeper, Bounds used to coach a Little League team in Greece. When his children graduated from the program, Bounds was looking for new ways to help. During a meeting in 1998, a call went out for a head groundskeeper, but no one wanted to take on the duties. Bounds did, but he said it wasn't always easy.

"I knew nothing about field maintenance when I first started," Bounds said. "Those first fields, we had too much sand and not enough clay, but how were we to know that? The wind would blow and we'd have too much dust and people would get sand in their eyes. So we made changes. You just do the best you can." □

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