

sports

Player comfort is priority for Purner

Somerset groundskeeper focuses on making field safe before its appearance

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Dan Purner has a saying, “The dirt is for the players and the grass is for the fans.” Regular folks who walk into TD Bank Ballpark expect a glorious green carpet. But the Somerset team needs the infield to be just as even and smooth.

As the head groundskeeper since 2011, Purner must cater to both every day.

Owned by Somerset County and run by the Patriots, the 6,100-seat ballpark is Purner’s office. He is the only full-time groundskeeper, with a five- or six-man crew helping him out during the Atlantic League season.

Purner checks on the ballpark almost daily from March until December, whether the Patriots are at home or on the road. During the season, he walks the field daily, cutting the grass to 1½ inches, “water what needs to be watered” and watching for signs of fungus or insects.

“If you skip, it feels like it starts to get messy,” said Purner, 33, who grew up in Rockaway but now lives in Raritan Borough.

“We can maybe let it go two days. Skipping a day or two is like skipping a week on a real lawn. If we don’t cut it every day of a game, the players will notice.”

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BOB KARP/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Dan Purner, head groundskeeper for the Somerset Patriots, prepares the field for the 2017 Atlantic League All-Star Game on July 12.



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Dan Purner, head groundskeeper for the Somerset Patriots, talks to a colleague prior to the 2017 Atlantic League All-Star Game on July 12.

Purner

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And they won't hesitate to let Purner know if something's amiss.

Infielder Scott Kelly, a West Windsor North alumnus in his fourth season at Somerset, checks the same things in every ballpark. First, is the grass thick? Thin? Short or long? Is it a hard surface? Kelly will sometimes roll a ball down the foul line to see if the field is level. Next, is the dirt wet or dry? On a dry field, the ball tends to go faster and takes higher hops. Wet dirt can make the players' footing more difficult.

Purner's first priority is player safety, making sure there's no soft spots or unexpected hops. He also strives for consistent playability, so "the pitchers feel comfortable, the batters feel comfortable, and they're able to perform." Only then, does Purner consider "the aesthetic portion of it, making sure it looks good" for the fans. He admits that's the opposite of how most people think when they arrive for

a game.

Purner's biggest challenge is weather, the summer combination of heat and humidity – and the seemingly ever-present possibility of a rain delay. His crew also works long hours "behind the scenes and under the radar," particularly during Somerset homestands.

"You don't see the work being put in before a game, or even after a game," Kelly said. "A guy like Dan, he's the first one in the ballpark and legitimately the last to leave. You show up at 12 o'clock for a 7 o'clock game, Dan's already out there. ... I've gotten to experience the dirt from all angles on the field. I know every piece of dirt is great on every side of the field."

Purner's path to the Patriots began in Rockaway Little League, when a coach asked him to cut an elderly neighbor's lawn. By the time Purner was at Morris Hills, he had his own small business – in addition to being the varsity goalkeeper – and worked part-time on a farm in the summer. He continued to play soccer at County College of Morris, where he studied landscaping, then went to Rutgers to major in turf science.

Though Purner had hoped to continue to play soccer at a four-year school,

CCM athletic director Jack Sullivan convinced him, "If you focus on your education now, you'll be able to have a longer career. ... Looking back, it kind of made sense, but I didn't think it would lead to being around a professional baseball field."

Opened in June 1999, TD Bank Ballpark was named Ballpark Digest's best independent minor-league ballpark in 2015 and 2016. The Patriots hosted the Atlantic League All-Star Game last month, giving fans from across the country a taste of Purner's Jersey hospitality.

Though he watches Major League Baseball, Purner isn't as anxious as the players for a taste of the brighter lights and bigger stadiums.

"Literally, the grass can sometimes be greener on the other side, but I hope this place looks as good as those," he said. "The players here, their paychecks aren't as great as the major leagues, and there's not that many fans. But I hope they found this to be one of the best surfaces they can play on. Hopefully, we're producing that."

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DOWN ON THE FARM

Player	Team/ Hometown	Position	Current team	Affiliate	Avg.	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	BB	SO	SB
Tyler Benson	Montville	LF	Tri-City Dust Devils	San Diego (A)	.269	27	78	9	21	4	0	0	9	17	22	8
John Kristoffersen	Oak Ridge	SS	St. Paul Saints	Independent	.183	64	208	23	38	12	1	2	17	27	74	0
Mike Rampone	Randolph	2B	Utica Unicorns	Independent	.278	23	72	10	20	3	0	1	8	9	15	0
					W	L	ERA	G	GS	SV	IP	H	R	HR	BB	SO
El'hajji Muhammad	CCM	RHP	Sussex County Miners	Independent	2	1	2.57	32	0	2	35	27	12		18	25
Marcus Reyes	Denville	LHP	Bluefield Blue Jays	Toronto (R)	2	0	1.69	13	0	3	21.1	19	4	2	1	25
Gavin Wallace	Madison	RHP	West Virginia Black Bears	Pittsburgh (A)	1	2	2.75	10	8	0	39.1	33	17	0	3	24
Mike Wallace	Madison	RHP	West Virginia Power	Pittsburgh (A)	9	11	3.86	52	13	1	165.1	152	83	11	41	133