

New turf's 'roots' run to CASNR

By Matt Kelly

Wandering around the third floor of Agricultural Hall looking at landscape design posters is where Dan Almond found himself after two years as a pre-medicine major. He was not sure what he wanted to do, but he knew he wanted a change.

About that time, Steve Ownby, former department head of the Oklahoma State University landscape design department, stopped and talked to Almond about landscape design. Almond decided that was what he wanted to do with his life, and Ownby took him under his wing.

Today, Almond finds himself running Millennium Sports Technologies Inc., where he is a sports field design consultant. His business has brought him right back to where it all began: Stillwater, Okla., and his alma mater.

Almond designed the new field in Boone Pickens Stadium. His company directed contractors to implement the plans for the drainage, irrigation design, logos and colors of the new field.

Almond was hired through contractor Landscapes Unlimited of Lincoln, Neb., who constructed Karsten Creek Golf Club. Mike Holder, OSU vice president for athletic programs and former OSU golf coach, was impressed with the work they had done and referred them to work on the renovation of the football field.

When asked to do the job, they said Almond should design the field. After the design was complete, Almond was asked to participate in designing OSU's Hedge Field and Allie P. Reynolds Stadium.

Almond said there is not another field in the country like the one in Boone Pickens Stadium; he designed this field to the specifications provided by head coach Mike Gundy.

"I wanted this field to be very 'athlete-friendly,'" said Gundy. "I think the players really enjoy it. With this turf there are no turf burns, and players enjoy the flexibility and cushion it provides."

Many characteristics make this field unique. One is a turf that is not like most synthetic surfaces. Three inch blades of artificial grass give this field the feel of real grass but the durability and care of an artificial surface, said Almond.

Along with an artificial playing surface, the new field is adaptable to a natural grass surface with an irrigation system and sand under the new artificial turf to give it more cushion.

On top of the turf is a one-quarter inch of sand to hold the surface in place, along with tiny pieces of crumb rubber to provide more cushion to the surface. This rubber comes from truck tires that have been cryogenically frozen and shattered into tiny pieces. These characteristics are what make this field so "athlete-friendly," said Almond.

A former Cowboy quarterback, Gundy said the field he played on was not "athlete-friendly."

"It was just like playing on concrete or on the street," said Gundy. "It was hard as a rock and hard on players' knees, shoulders and backs."

He said his back hurts today as a result of playing on the hard surface.

Under the new field's softer surface is a state-of-the-art drainage system. This system consists of 10 inches of reinforced sand placed over a drainage mat and is "loosely based on a combination of patented drainage systems GraviTURF and Air Field," said Almond.

Almond trademarked and patented GraviTURF in 1987, and Air Field is the product of another former OSU graduate, Stan Schone. This combination of drainage systems allows the field to take up to 30 inches of rain an hour without flooding.

"If this field floods, you better build an ark," said Almond. "This is absolutely the best field in the country right now."

The turf came to OSU from a company called Desso-DLW in Europe, which is a sub-company of Armstrong World Industries Inc. Almond has worked on getting their products the past several years, and this is the second NCAA Division I field in the United States to use this turf.

The turf came in rolls that measured 15 foot wide and 160 foot long. (It was rolled out just like carpet on the field.) The turf is a luscious green color that makes it look like real grass, and it has white yard lines and orange end zones.

The field is accented with the orange-on-orange OSU brand in the middle of the field, a Pistol Pete logo and a Big 12 logo. The end zones are a bright orange and possess the Oklahoma State name with white outlines and brighter orange accents.

Almond said he got into the business by fate. In spring 1979, he was working with an architect in Denver doing all types of landscaping jobs when he was asked to work on the Denver Broncos' practice facilities. He discovered his personal satisfaction from designing sporting facilities and developed new ways to improve the playing surfaces.

After his work for the Broncos, he worked with the New England Patriots, and business has continued to come his way. Almond does no advertising; all of his jobs come from "word-of-mouth."

"Dan's expertise is in playing field systems and surfaces, and he is building quite a reputation," said Dale Maronek, head of the OSU Department of Horticulture and Landscape Architecture. "With Dan's strong background in horticulture, he brings more things to the table than just design; he understands what plants need."

Other fields Almond has completed include Invesco Field at Mile High and Coors Field in Denver, Lincoln Financial Field in Philadelphia, Shea Stadium in New York, many Big 12 schools' sports facilities, about 45 minor league baseball fields and many other sports venues.

Although Almond has had many great jobs, he said his favorite has to be his work at OSU, not just because it is his alma mater, but because of the people.

"It is very rare that you get to work with people like Mike Holder, Mike Gundy and Boone Pickens, who are all so focused on the same job," said Almond.

Almond said his favorite thing about his job is interaction with people, getting to know those who make a difference.

Almond is a third-generation "Okie," having grown up in El Reno, Okla. He lived in Stillwater, Okla., as a youth and has been watching the Cowboys play since he could walk, attending games with his dad, who was a soil science graduate of Oklahoma A&M in 1957. Almond now lives in Littleton, Colo., where he established Millennium Sports in 1995.

Almond's wife, Sherri, is an OSU alumna. They have two daughters, Kindall and Alaina. Kindall is a sophomore at Littleton High School, and Alaina is a freshman at the University of Colorado.

When Almond is not at work, he enjoys attending any sporting event, golfing and skiing. He said his family enjoys living close to Denver, since it has so many sports to offer to its residents.

"My advice to anyone is try to decide what you want to do and work to be the best at it," said Almond.

CASNR students know how great Ag Hall is, but who knew a walk through it could change a life like Almond's wandering has changed his life. Only one question remains: Who is wandering the halls now, and where will life take him or her?

Horticulture and landscape architecture alumnus Dan Almond does his part to help produce a competitive Cowboy football team. (photo by Matt Kelly)