



PROJECT SUMMARY

Chicago Bears' Halas Hall Practice Field Expansion

HEAD GROUNDSKEEPER, CHICAGO BEARS

Ken Mrock

PRODUCTS USED

Profile Porous Ceramic (PPC)
Greens Grade™

BACKGROUND

In the mid-1990s, when the NFL's Chicago Bears wanted to build their new Halas Hall training complex in Lake Forest, Ill., the club's head groundskeeper, Ken Mrock, knew Profile Products' Profile Porous Ceramics (PPC) was a necessity. Mrock had enjoyed proven success with Profile dating back to the 1970s when he oversaw the Chicago Park District's golf courses.

Halas Hall's two new practice fields (one heated) would need to stand up to the punishment of consistent rigorous use by professional athletes for 10 months out of the year, not to mention the Midwest's changing weather. That project, a seed grow-in, included a blend of 85 percent sand, 10 percent PPC and 5 percent peat moss. The consistency and functionality of the entire playing field system still performs at nearly the level of the designed criteria established 22 years ago, according to Mrock.

In 2017, Bears ownership moved forward with a plan to construct two additional practice fields on an adjacent 14-acre parcel. Throughout the season, the team could then alternate practicing between the two sites. Given a history of consistent performance with Profile Porous Ceramics, Mrock was able to confidently make rootzone mix recommendations to help tackle some of the unique challenges that would come with the project.

CHALLENGES

The adjacent 14 acres included a wetlands environment that would require considerable infill and modification in order to prepare the playing surface.

The Profile team was brought into the process early to discuss the site, examine the soils, and ultimately test the local sands to determine the proper mix for the 200,000 square-foot space. When the perfect blend was established, trial runs of blends would be required and ultimately thousands of tons of root zone mix would need to be trucked in on a narrow single-lane road to a busy site that also involved numerous city and county officials working with the contractor and owners. In addition, the project dealt with numerous weather challenges.

"It was a project that certainly had a lot of moving parts," added Randy Hamilton, Profile's Market Development Manager for Sports Fields and Golf Courses.



"I can honestly say that we have three-inch rains and we're out there the next morning practicing," Mrock said. "It's really done its job, so to speak. It has not disappointed at all."

— Ken Mrock, Head Groundskeeper, Chicago Bears



THE SOLUTION

Profile's adherence to extensive testing (the company offers to cover costs of soil testing for construction and renovation projects) was a major part of the project's root zone mix solution.

Tests revealed a root zone mix of eight inches would be sufficient, with a mix of 10 percent PPC and 90 percent sand. Mrock decided that the inclusion of 5 percent peat moss, used on the first two fields at Halas Hall as well as Chicago's Soldier Field, was no longer needed because the moisture and nutrient retention benefits could be achieved with the PPC alone. Profile Porous Ceramics feature 74 percent pore space (39 percent capillary and 35 percent non-capillary) to improve water and nutrient holding capabilities, increase oxygen levels, and even facilitate drainage when saturated.

With the dedication to testing and re-testing, Mrock and Profile could confidently move forward knowing that the new mix would perform well for a long period of time.

"We hold all of the rootzone materials to a high standard and rely on testing to ensure consistency for each load of mix that will be delivered to a project site," explained Hamilton. "Sometimes a local sand might be cheaper partly because of lower freight costs, but it isn't always a good quality material like we get when we work with one of our selected sand blending partners to source and supply the ideal sand for the mix."

Mrock took a similar approach to construction as he did with the first two fields. He started prepping the sub-grade, added irrigation and drainage, a six-inch lift of pea gravel, then the 90-10 root zone mix in the fall and winter of 2017, taking advantage of some warmer days at the time. He then laser-graded in early March, after spring frosts subsided, so that the growing medium could be prepared for the installation of sod from a local grower on March 31, 2018.

"In this business, we try to take advantage of every window of weather opportunity. Everything we do in late fall and winter is going to set you up for early spring. ...You want to be ready for when it does start to grow," Mrock said.



RESULTS

After laying the sod in spring, the two practice fields were ready for full use by August, 2018.

"We had activities on the fields every week from the second week of August all the way through to the second week of November. We then transitioned to our heated field and remained there through the first week of January because we were in the playoffs," Mrock said.

"The Profile growing medium is still doing well today ... and those fields have been well received by the coaching staff and players."

With four fields offering pro-level performance for 10 out of 12 months in a climate that is sometimes unforgivingly wet and cold, Mrock continues to share his experiences with others about the benefits of using PPC for a wide range of turf surfaces.

"I've always been a strong believer in Profile," he said. "I've always told people of the successes I have seen, and the consistency. Coming from a pro sports field manager, that's pretty good assurance."

– Ken Mrock, Head Groundskeeper, Chicago Bears

Profile's long proven history with the Chicago Bears has led to a number of other root zone projects across professional sports.

"We have a great relationship with turf managers across the NFL," Hamilton said. "Many of the clubs use Profile Porous Ceramics, including on their natural grass practice fields. Now, Major League Soccer has a group of field managers who are seeing the agronomic benefits of PPC as well."