

BASEBALL FIELD AND STADIUM GET AN IN-HOUSE RENOVATION

Bobby Moranda's mantra nowadays is a combination of Larry the Cable Guy's "Git-R-Done" and Lowe's home improvement company's "Let's Build Something Together."

Western Carolina's Baseball Guy, who is preparing for his fourth season as the head of the school's proud baseball program, is directing a massive renovation of Childress Field/Hennon Stadium which also might be the script for an episode of Extreme Makeover: Home (Plate) Edition.

Catamount Baseball has reinvented itself several times in the past five decades, but the latest upgrade of its facilities has to qualify for a special place in the history of Western Carolina head coaches taking the bull by the horns.

Ronnie G. Childress Field was built in 1978 in large part due to the generosity of E.J. Whitmire and the tireless efforts of driven baseball coaches. When Jack Leggett was hired in 1983 and soon led WCU to five Southern Conference Championships, a major facelift of the facility occurred in 1990.

Leggett, with a substantial gift from Lamar Hennon of Dalton, Ga., guided a major renovation with the addition of a grandstand roof, permanent bleacher and chair-back seating for 1,500 fans, press box, new scoreboard, concession stands, rest rooms and a new infield surface. The facility was renamed Ronnie G. Childress Field/Hennon Stadium.

Todd Raleigh, a former player who returned as head coach in 2000, provided the impetus for the next upgrade in the 2002-03 academic year. A field lighting system and new sound system were followed by a \$500,000 renovation of the playing field that included a new irrigation and drainage system, a new infield surface, warning track and fencing.

Moranda said the current renovation project "is critical to the future success of our proud baseball program." "The appearance and functionality of the playing field and stadium are what recruits want to see first and use to gauge your program and can be a source of pride for players, fans and the community," he explained. "The legacy of Catamount baseball deserves a first-class facility, and we had slipped from playing in a facility that was the envy of many opponents to a handicap for recruiting," he said. The Catamount's current coach knows from where he speaks, as he played in his first NCAA Division I game at WCU as a player for Eastern Kentucky in 1985.

"When we have brought prospects on campus in the past, we would take them to the new Courtyard Dining Hall, Recreation Center, Hinds University Center and the new residence halls – which are all gorgeous – and then the last stop would be the stadium, which did not make the same type of impression as the remainder of our campus," he explained.

Moranda and his wife of 17 years, Pamela, started the renovation project when they awoke on July 10 and agreed that "something has to be done about the baseball facility." They started later that day in the dugouts, "ripping out the rotting, molding carpet and painting." "We'll never forget that, as it was a 90 degree day, so we put our kids in the car, turned on the air conditioning, put in a movie for them and started cutting and ripping out that disgusting old carpet," he said.

Since then, the project has taken off, with involvement from the corporate level to individuals who have supported it financially and with materials and their time and talents. "I met with our athletics director, Chip Smith, last summer and he suggested we take the "instant successes" approach to my plan. Using that, we came up with a seven-step plan, and the project took off," Moranda explained.

Moranda "has done a superb job in jump-starting these much need improvement to our baseball facility," Smith said. "We appreciate the financial support and leadership roles of the many people who helped make this renovation project a reality."

Following the dugouts upgrade, the entire stadium was painted to make the old block work resemble red brick following a coat of the Boston brick paint and trimmed with ivy green paint that matches the new roofing throughout the stadium. "The painting took 200 gallons and



Before renovation



After power cleaning and new paint



From left, Moranda works with Mackie McKay, a contractor who helped design parts of the project. Renovations included new roofing throughout the baseball stadium. Pamela Moranda, Coach Moranda's wife, puts some finishing touches on the stadium.

35 days of work by my wife, assistant coaches David Haverstick, Alan Beck and Bruce Johnson and myself," Moranda said.

Next was the new lower-level seating as the stadium was moved 14 feet closer to home plate to accommodate two rows of new chair-back seats. A 36-inch red brick wall now stretches between the dugouts in front of the new Yankee Stadium-style slatted seats.

The Major League-style chair-back seats will replace the old chair-backs in the grandstand, and the metal bleachers will be covered with molded plastic seating.

A new Major League-quality backstop net stretches 156 feet in front of the grandstand seating and the rusted grandstand roof has been replaced.

The concession stand and rest rooms have been repainted and roofed following the red brick and ivy green color scheme, and the batting cage roof has been replaced. "The ivy green roofs follow the same scheme as the other new buildings on campus," Moranda noted.

The dugout benches have been replaced and new protective netting has been installed and new bins have been built for field material storage. A 48-inch brick wall will stretch from each dugout to the outfield fence down the left and right field lines. A batter's eye has been attached to the centerfield fence and the "purple monster" in left field has been repainted.

Moranda has several other projects currently under way, in the planning stages or on his "radar." Those include a courtyard behind the third base seats that will include a sitting wall, pavers, planters, outdoor grill and extensive landscaping; refencing of the entire facility; a brick wall around the present batting facility; a new pitcher training area; a wrought iron and red brick entrance; and a earth berm viewing area outside the right field fence for the WCU

students. In addition, the chair-back seats that were removed from the grandstand area will be repainted ivy green placed along the right field line. The history of WCU baseball will be depicted with a series of large mural-type posters that will adorn the grandstand entrance areas.

On the wish list is a clubhouse that will house a locker room, offices, a player's lounge, legacy room, weight room and video room and will be located behind the first base dugout.

"There are so many who had a hand in this project by stepping up to the plate with their expertise, donation of materials, labor, cooperation and financial backing," said Moranda. Key players in the project were Lowe's and Dave Steed '73, retired Lowe's senior vice president for general merchandising. "He was behind the donation of a staggering amount of building material and supplies and, along with Curtis Church and David Vaughn, also got numerous vendors to supply everything from paint to bricks to roofing. I got to know everyone at the Sylva and Franklin Lowe's stores on a first-name basis," Moranda said.

"There were several baseball supporters who have stepped up with significant financial contributions led by Larry Stanberry, who we call the general manager of Catamount Baseball, along with Gaither Keener, Jorge Azor, Van Stayton, Jeff Murphy, Greg Parsons and the 1002 Club, which includes a lot of former WCU baseball players," Moranda added. "And Mackie McKay, one of our all-time fans, supplied us with a tremendous amount of technical and engineering support."

On the WCU front, Moranda worked with Chuck Wooten, newly retired vice chancellor for administration and finance, Fred Cantler, associate athletic director, and the staff at Facilities Management, including Galen May, Wiley Harris, Roger Turk, Joe Walker and Chris Ray. Moranda described May, the campus architect, as "a warrior on this project and on top of everything that was planned, built and repaired."

The Lowe's local associates Matt Stephenson, Steve Allen and Travis Chamberlain in the Sylva and Franklin stores, Roger Bartlett and Don Hensley of Western Builders Inc., Chip Hall and Brandon Hooper of the Jackson County prison inmates program, and brick mason John Ridley also contributed to the success of the project.

"Gary Ayers, the voice of the Catamounts, and Allison Outdoor Advertising handled the repainting of the 'purple monster,' and Norman West, president of the Catamount Club, took care of the transportation for the brick dust for our warning track," Moranda added.

Numerous vendors, including Ken Holland and Travis Chappell of Triangle Brick; Grant Lambert of Valspar Paints, Eric Goza of Land Construction Co., Billy and Johnny Burbank of Burbank Nets, Kevin Sullivan of Quikrete, Michael Ross of Prime Source, Paul Tucker of Tucker Lumber, Frank Deiulis of Trek, Bill Fox and Greg Patton of Union Corrugating, Ray Love of Cemex, Jeff Patton of Universal Forest Products and Richard Fields of General Shale, were major contributors of materials.

Matt Kirsch of Kirsch Trucking, Pete Peterson of Cypress Truck Line Inc., and Jason Bodford of Epes Logistics Services combined to provide transportation that saved \$10,000 in brick deliveries.

"My wife, Pam, was the real driving force, and this project would not have happened without her persistence and support, and my assistant coaches and players have been awesome with the hundreds of hours of off-the-field work," Moranda noted.

"We don't have to have the biggest facility, but we want a first-class facility that everyone involved with WCU and its baseball program can be proud of. I think we are on our way to achieving that goal," he added.