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Ricky coaching a child at Proehlfic Park.



NFL GREAT RICKY PROEHL PREACHES THE P.O.W.E.R. OF PLAY

Creates a sports facility for kids, pros & turfgrass research

■ BY STACIE ZINN ROBERTS

Editor's note: The author wrote this article on behalf of her client, Sod Production Services.

Ricky Proehl played in four Super Bowls during his NFL professional career as a wide receiver, winning two appearances in “The Greatest Show on Turf” with the St. Louis Rams and Indianapolis Colts. Earlier this year, as a wide receiver coach for the NFC Champion Carolina Panthers, his team went to the Super Bowl again. Yet even after achieving the highest levels in football, Proehl says his passion remains working with kids through his P.O.W.E.R. of Play Foundation (where P.O.W.E.R. stands for Play, Opportunity, Work, Excellence & Respect) at the sports facility he and his wife, Kelly, built in Greensboro, North Carolina, called Proehlfic Park.

“We started the park to give back, to create a place for the youth of our community to thrive, to have a place to go to where they could realize their dreams,” Proehl says. “My upbringing was so positive. You’re a product of your environment. I had so many positive influences through middle school, high school, in college and in the pros. When you’re around people who want to be successful, who work hard, you become who you’re around. You become inspired, motivated to be successful. I want children to feel that, to understand what that feels like.”

The need for such a place in the greater Greensboro area certainly exists. According to Tyler Wilson, director of the P.O.W.E.R. of Play Foundation, 23% of children in Guilford County, the region served by Proehlfic Park, are food-insecure — meaning they are unsure where their next meal is coming from or when. One in five people live below

the poverty level, and 59% of Guilford County School students (42,708 children) qualify for free or reduced-price meals. This level of poverty can create an atmosphere ripe for crime and drug abuse. But statistics show that children who are mentored are 46% less likely to start using drugs, 27% less likely to start using alcohol, and 52% less likely to skip school. And that's where Proehlific Park comes in.

"The goal of the foundation, what we strive to do is meet children where they are and provide them with opportunities they wouldn't regularly have such as playing on a sports team or providing after school care. We try to support them in any way they need. We work with other non-profits to get them clothes, shoes, food, snacks," Wilson says.

The 22-acre Proehlific Park facility opened in 2008, says Mike Pusey, groundskeeper, and includes 7.5 acres of managed turfgrass over three soccer/multipurpose fields and three baseball fields. It also has three indoor artificial turf fields, plus a gym, fitness center, weight room, kid's club and locker rooms. In all, Proehlific Park serves more than 81,000 annual visitors who participate in league sports, summer and winter sports camps, tournaments and other activities.

Running a facility of this size, serving a population with limited financial resources, "became such a huge undertaking time-wise, financial-wise, it became a strain," Proehl says. "Through God's blessing, I was fortunate to get an offer from the Carolina Panthers to be the receivers coach."

Still, even with the aid of a coach's salary, the park requires the support of contributions from donors and other corporate sponsors. Learning of the situation, members of the turfgrass industry stepped up to help.

In the winter of 2014/2015, the grass on the three multipurpose fields experienced extreme winter kill that looked like "half grass/half dirt every 2 feet" says Mike Kennedy, president of Proehlific Park.

Brian Walker, vice president of business development for Sod Production Services, a division of Riverside Turf headquartered in Charles City, VA, knew of the park's mission. "We kind of adopted the complex," Walker says. Along with the help of Steve Smith of Specialty Turf Services in Chesterfield, VA, they renovated Field 1, and planted it last summer with PremierPRO, a durable, cold tolerant variety of bermudagrass.

"We had a great year as far as wear and tear with the PremierPRO," says Pusey. "They sprigged it and we did not overseed it. It's held up really well."

**To support the P.O.W.E.R. of Play
Foundation & Proehlific Park,
contact www.proehlificpark.com
or call 336-665-5233**



Ricky Proehl coaching the Carolina Panthers.

The renovations on the first field were so successful that Walker enlisted the help of more industry professionals to complete renovations on the other two soccer/multipurpose fields this year.

Field 2 will be renovated with construction help from the Nolan Thomas Company of Oxford, NC. Field 3, which requires extensive renovations such as removing four-inches of soil and re-adjusting the crown of the field, will be completed by Carolina Green Corporation of Charlotte. Both fields will be grassed with PremierPRO bermudagrass.

As an NFL professional, Proehl has found that many of his colleagues coach "through fear and intimidation. I don't. I coach through encouragement, through understanding." This philosophy permeates Proehlific Park, and because of that, what began as a sports facility for kids has grown into so much more. Proehl's reputation as an empathetic and skilled coach draws pro athletes to the facility to train and benefit from his positive philosophies. And turf industry professionals like Walker who, at first were attracted to the facility as donors to the program through field renovation and maintenance consulting, have realized the unique combination of charitable work, high traffic youth athletics, a low maintenance budget, and high-level professional training lends itself to something unexpected — a perfect environment for turfgrass research.



Children playing on the multipurpose fields at Proehlific Park.

“We realized the potential that Proehlific Park has to showcase what natural grass can do,” Walker says. “We could utilize the park as a real life research center, with real traffic, real players, with a low maintenance budget, and that we could track how many hours of play we can get out of these fields.”

Other cooperators like well-known sports field consultant Jerad Minnick agreed to guide Pusey and the Proehlific Park staff through his innovative maintenance protocols to get more out of the natural turf. Todd Jones of GT Air Inject, developers of the Air2G2 aerating machine that injects air into the soil column, also sees the potential of testing and recording the effectiveness of his machine under such strenuous real-world conditions. All play, maintenance and results will be tracked consistently by the park’s staff.

The program is in its infancy but more information should be released soon to the industry about the research to be conducted at the facility.

“We’re starting down the road of finding better ways to maintain natural grass fields,” Walker says, which fits right into his company’s mission.

“We want to show the excellence and versatility of PremierPRO,” Walker says. To do so, Sod Production Services created a team concept, Team PremierPRO, to bring together researchers, sports turf managers, sod producers, equipment manufacturers, and other industry professionals in order to share information and promote the benefits of improved natural grass varieties.

In the end, if the fields are successful, the kids thrive and the park achieves its mission of growing a stronger community.

“The more time kids spend on sports fields,” Walker says, “the better it is for everyone.”

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