

# Hopewell Valley News

## HOPEWELL VALLEY: With help, Ackerson builds the turf field

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Mike Ackerson and his excavator's scoop.

No wonder the new turf athletic field at Hopewell Valley Central High School will be called Ackerson Field.

Mike Ackerson is building it.

Oh, he's had plenty of help. During the interview for this story, Mr. Ackerson stressed that dozens of organizations and individuals have helped make the million-dollar turf field a reality.

But make no mistake about it — he's the go-to guy on this job. He's the leader and the lead worker, having put in many hundreds of hours of hard physical labor on the field. What's more, he estimates that the time, material and equipment he's investing in it will total about \$550,000 when the field is done.

Among many other things, he bought a new excavator expressly for the turf field job. That's the excavator's scoop he's standing next to, in the photo that goes with this story.

Sheryl Stone, of the Hopewell Valley Recreation Foundation, which has raised funds for the project, has said Mr. Ackerson is "just making a fantastic contribution to our community. We can't thank him enough."

Mr. Ackerson, a Hopewell Township resident who has his own excavation business, works on the field when he's not earning a livelihood for himself, his wife Denise and their sons Michael and Myles.

Last Saturday afternoon's hot humid weather found him installing a drainage system around the edge of the field. "I'll be here all day tomorrow and Monday, too," he said. "Normally, I take Labor Day off. Not this year. I want to have this field done as soon as I can — by late September or early October."

Weekdays, he's been showing up at the field at about 3 in the afternoon, after he knocks off work with his business for the day. He'll work on the field until between 9 and 11 p.m. on weekdays. Then he works long days on weekends. Incredibly, between his business and the field, he's been working about 120 hours weekly for the past 80-plus days, he said.

"I love doing this," he said. "It's fun for me. I love the kind of work I do. The way I look at it is, if you find a job you love, like I have, then you'll never have to 'work' a day in your life."

He believes, passionately, that the field will be a great asset to the community, especially its youth. "Where would you rather have your kids on Friday or Saturday night — at a football game, or hanging out on a street corner? Bringing the community together is what this is about. The events that will be played here will be community events."

He paused and smiled happily. "There's going to be a football game here on Thanksgiving Day," he said. "Can you believe that? I think that's fantastic."

Building the field is a huge job. "First we had to take down the trees and remove the baseball field," Mr. Ackerson said. (A new varsity baseball field will be built on the grounds of Timberlane Middle School).

"Then we had to strip the top soil and cut and grade the land to make it level.. The land here was 4½ feet out of grade. Then there was brining in stone for the under-field drainage system, the drainage system around the field, curbing, lights, and other things."

Trap Rock Industries, which operates two quarries in the township, donated 8,000 tons of stone for the drainage system under the field. IEW Construction hauled the stone to the site, at no charge.

"Chip Grundy, of IEW, was a huge help," Mr. Ackerson said. "I especially want to thank him. Greg Garnish of Greg's Landscaping helped a lot, too. So did Kent Wilson, Ed deClerico and Kurt Pedersen."

Other contributors of time, effort and money he thanked include: the Hopewell Valley Lacrosse Association, Pop Warner Football, The Front Porch, the Gridiron Club, the Hopewell Valley Community Bank, the Hopewell Valley YMCA, Hartel Timber Service, the Pennington Quality Market and the Maida, Wiley, Jantorno and Cusma families.

"It's really a community effort," Mr. Ackerson said. "So many people and groups have done a lot to get this field done. And I really have to thank my wife Denise. She's been holding down the fort at home big-time so I can work here."

Among the athletes who will use the field is the Ackersons' 16-year-old son, Myles, who's on the lacrosse team at Central High. Their elder son Michael, 19, is a Central High grad.

Volunteering is nothing new to Mike Ackerson. He's a longtime member of the all-volunteer Pennington Fire Company. In addition to answering alarms, he's the company's head chef. He works in that capacity at pancake breakfasts and other fundraisers the company holds. He also cooks a meal for members of the company at its regular monthly meeting.

Speaking of cooking for others, helping Mr. Ackerson stay fortified on the job at the turf field is "the lunch bunch gang," he said.

"Every day, one of them brings me lunch or dinner and something to drink . . . It's somebody different every day, they take turns doing it," he said.

Working shirtless in mid-Saturday's hot, humid weather, he connected sections of drainage pipe in a ditch next to the field.

"I'm happy I'm able to do this," he said, smiling broadly. "It 's for the kids, for their school and town, and for our school and town. I think that kind of thing is really important."