

Baseball has learned to lighten the load and labor costs for the summer concert season

BY DON MURET

Aluminum Staging Saves Grass, Time and Money

Tenants + Teams

BALLPARK CONCERTS ARE a Major League Baseball groundskeeper's worst nightmare. The natural grass fields they keep in pristine condition over the course of the six-month season can take a beating in one night from thousands of people congregating on the field for those non-baseball events.

In addition, the staging and flooring required to produce these shows doesn't do the teams any favors. After concerts, groundskeepers typically scramble to replace damaged portions of the outfield grass to prevent player injuries and maintain the integrity of the game.

For some teams, those expenses are greater in-season. The Minnesota Twins, for example, pay a higher cost per square foot to replace grass because of higher trucking fees tied to their Colorado turf provider, said Larry

DiVito, head groundskeeper at Target Field.

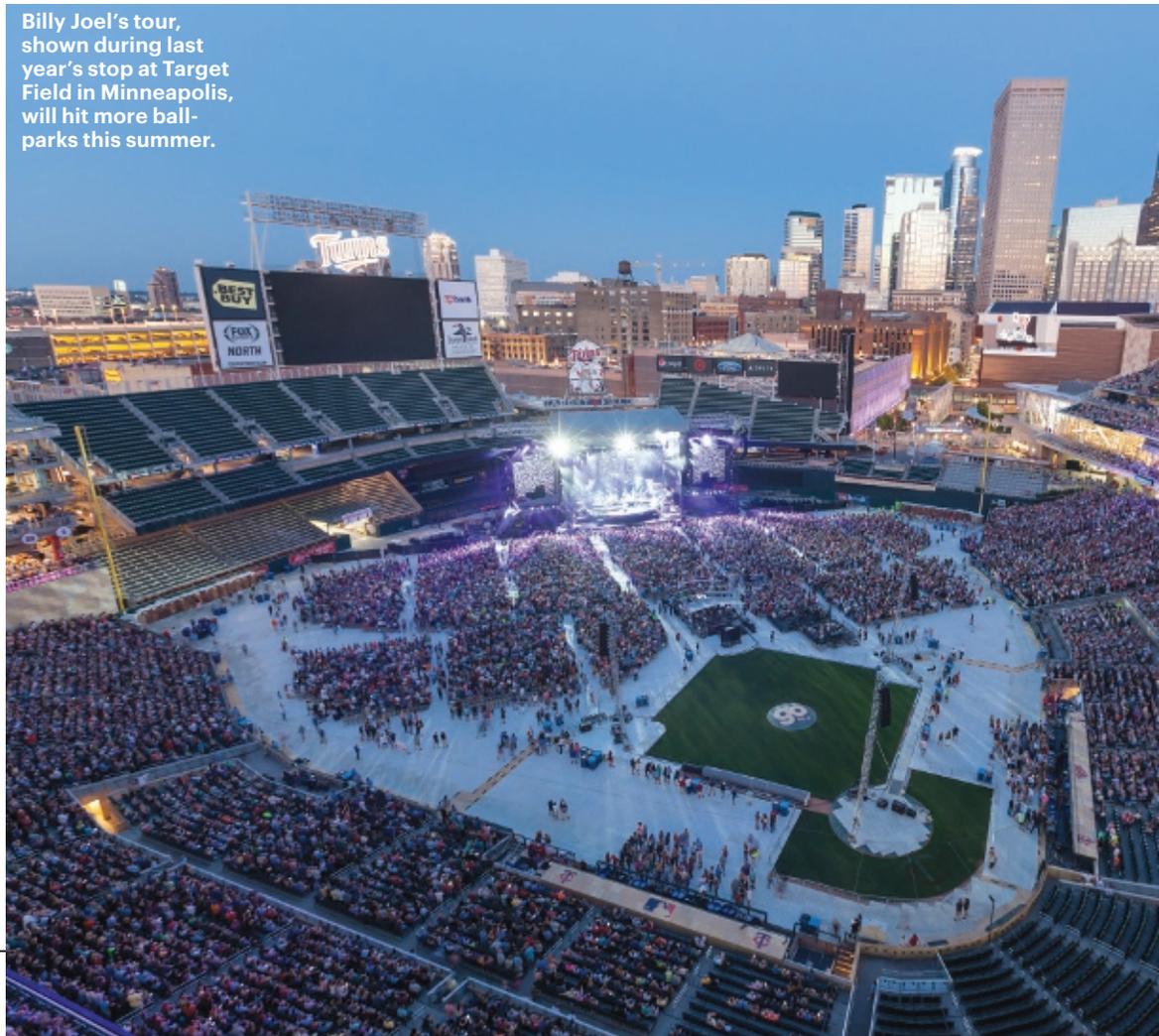
Despite those issues, though, the number of ballpark concerts continues to grow as more teams capitalize on generating income from non-game-day events, which are exempt from MLB's revenue sharing formula. Fenway Park and Wrigley Field have 10 and nine concerts booked this season, respectively, and Target Field has four shows scheduled this summer, the most since the Twins' ballpark opened in 2010.

To ease the groundskeepers' pain, the concert industry works more closely with teams to improve production elements. Over the past five years, staging firms have developed more efficient, lightweight systems that take less time to set up and tear down, reducing wear and tear on grass fields.

"It makes sense that we're going to be in this [concert] business," said Mike Boekholder, director of field operations at Citizens Bank Park, home of the Philadelphia Phillies. "We decided to figure out how to do it in the most efficient and economical manner possible, with the least amount of damage to the playing surface."

G2 Structures is one stage manufacturer making a difference. The Nashville company, teaming with promoter Live Nation, produces staging for most ballpark concerts. This year, G2 Structures will complete 50 "builds" at stadiums, shipping five portable stages across the

Billy Joel's tour, shown during last year's stop at Target Field in Minneapolis, will hit more ballparks this summer.



country, covering multiple shows at Fenway Park, Wrigley Field, Citizens Bank Park, Citi Field and Dodger Stadium, among other MLB venues.

The increasing number of ballpark concerts drove the need to develop a more field-friendly product, said Jim Brammer, co-owner of G2 Structures and a 42-year veteran of live event production. For the vendor, it doesn't come cheap. The cost to build an aluminum stage is \$3 million, double the cost of a traditional all-steel structure,

which is due to the price of raw aluminum and the engineering "artistry" required to form a product more fragile than steel, Brammer said.

But for G2 Structures, which has a revenue share deal with Live Nation, the evolution of staging has resulted in a stronger relationship with MLB teams. Together, they've reached a greater understanding that they're guests coming into the ballpark, and when the show is over, they're responsible for helping prepare the field for resuming

40 feet in width.

"For Garth Brooks at Yankee Stadium (in July 2016), we were wall to wall with the stage," he said.

The K2 system uses four forklifts and one 40-ton crane for installation compared with much heavier cranes to install steel-based stages. Most important, the smaller crane stays perched on the warning track and doesn't touch the grass, which has been a difference maker, MLB groundskeepers said.

Overall, the process elimi-

Efficiency is key, considering MLB's schedule of 81 home games dictates when they can book concerts. In some cases, there's a tight window for squeezing a show or two between homestands, and every minute counts.

"Time is money and when you're on a tight deadline to get these shows in and out of here, that stuff adds up," Boekholder said. The ballpark will play host to Billy Joel on July 27 followed by The Eagles with James Taylor on July 28, "which is challenging because we've only got a day and a half to set it up. Using this system, it will go up a lot faster."

For the teams, scheduling back-to-back concerts adds to the efficiency theme by consolidating productions and having multiple artists use the same stage. Dennis Arfa, Billy Joel's booking agent, and Bobby Thrasher, the artist's production manager, came up with the concept of having acts share production costs, according to Brammer, and it's worked well at Fenway and Wrigley, with minimal damage to the fields.

The Twins, though, are doing something different this year that will provide another test for G2 Structures and concert production at Target Field. They've booked Luke Bryan for July 21 at the stadium, followed by Journey and Def Leppard on July 27. With the six-day gap between shows, the Twins plan to leave the stage in place in the outfield and remove the flooring and speaker towers between events. DiVito's crew will replace 10,000 square feet of grass under the stage after the second concert is over. The Twins return to Target Field on July 30 after a 10-day road trip, which falls right after the All-Star break, providing an extra cushion for converting the stadium to concert mode.

"It's something we're going to try," DiVito said. "That's just how this kind of panned out. Once you're mobilized, you might as well get more than one use out of it. The fewer mobilizations, the better. It's easier on your body and mind." ▣

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baseball, Brammer said.

"It's changed the whole thought process," he said. "The groundskeepers have been instrumental in showing us new ways to protect the turf. It's been a team effort and partnership. A few years back at Fenway, we were out of the park at 10 a.m. and the Red Sox played a game that night."

ABOUT FIVE YEARS ago, G2 Structures produced its first hybrid aluminum and steel structure, called the K2. It has since been upgraded to a system now called the K2I. The K2 series is equipped with smaller pieces that can be carried by four people on the field, which cuts down on the number of forklifts and cranes required to install the system. Aluminum is lighter than steel, but stronger in its strength-to-weight ratio, Brammer said, making it easier for crews installing the massive structures. The K2I stage itself stands 70 feet tall and 80 feet wide, and side "wings" attached to the structure can extend the stage an additional

nates heavy traffic on the grass and reduces labor costs. At Target Field, the G2 system has enabled the Twins to shave one full day off the front end for building the stage and about five hours during teardown, DiVito said.

"It not only saves time but relieves the weight and stress on the grass," he said. "We're able to build the back sides of the stage on the warning track, never building from the front. We're not driving forklifts in the middle of the outfield."

At Citizens Bank Park, G2 Structures' lighter footprint has saved the Phillies a minimum of \$100,000 a year in labor fees since they started using the company's equipment in 2009, Boekholder said.

"It was specifically built to be brought into a baseball stadium environment," he said. "They really have changed the game when it comes to being able to host large-scale concerts in these venues. Put it all together and you've got a system that's more cost effective and everybody walks away with a greater profit in their pocket — the venue, act and promoter."

