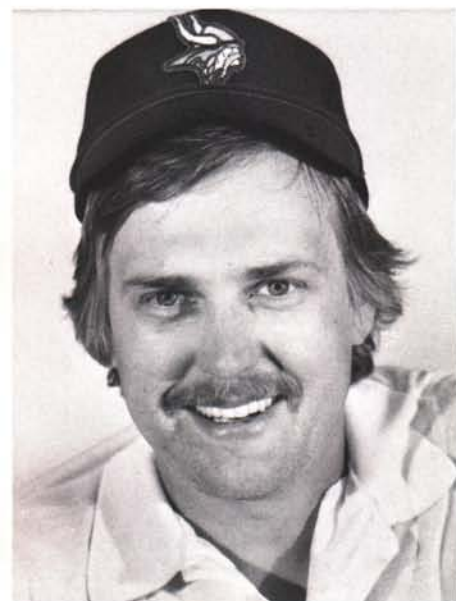




Wembley Stadium ready for more than 80,000 British football fans in August.

Wembley Stadium: “Super Pitch” of American Football



Sam Monson

If you ask a British sports fan to name the most famous American stadium, he'd probably say Yankee Stadium. If you ask an American sports fan to name the most famous British stadium, he'd say Wembley Stadium. Four years ago, the American probably would have had a hard time even thinking of the name of one British facility. The National Football League (NFL), the international press and two groundsmen have changed all that.

For 51 weeks of the year, the pitch and surrounding dog racing track at Wembley are sacredly British. More than half of the stadium's 100,000 capacity crowd stands throughout rugby and soccer matches and dog races. They can't sit down, they don't have seats—just a place to stand. But they do have a roof overhead to protect them from the daily rainfall while the players on the pitch get soaked.

Bookies take bets as they walk through the stands like hot dog vendors. While a

portion of the crowd may be sipping tea and nibbling biscuits, the more vociferous fans are likely to be downing pints of ale. And naturally, the best seats in the house are permanently reserved for the Royal Family.

In 1984, Ralph Miller, the sales and promotions manager of Wembley, thought it would be sporting for the “Yanks” to bring over two NFL teams for “a little exhibition” of American football for British soccer and rugby fans. The British Broadcast Corporation (BBC) had introduced the sport to pubs across the Isle by telecasting the Super Bowl. The patrons of these pubs were intrigued by the rugged but strategic nature of the game. They began to organize amateur and semi-pro teams with their pubs as sponsors.

American brewers saw it as an opportunity to expand the market share of their products in the thirsty nation by supporting the growing popularity of football. With some encouragement from Anheuser-

Busch, St. Louis Cardinal owner William Bidwell agreed to treat his team to a trip to England. Mike Lynn, general manager of the Minnesota Vikings, thought it was appropriate that the Vikings, with their European roots, make a symbolic crossing of the Atlantic to show the British a thing or two about football.

At first the NFL wasn't sure how it would treat such exhibition games. It has very definite rules on how many pre-season games an NFL team can play. The NFL's job is to ensure that all teams derive equal benefit from revenues generated by the league.

William Granholm, assistant to the president of the National Football Conference, explains, "It's expensive for two teams to send 80 players and all their training and coaching personnel to England for a week. The teams needed a way to defray some of their costs. So the decision was made to allow them one extra pre-season game for their troubles."

The teams were ready to go, but Wembley Stadium wasn't. It had one of the best pitches for rugby and soccer, but it had no experience with American football. It rarely had more than four days to convert the pitch from one sport to another since it was so heavily booked. American expertise was required if the event was to succeed.

The Cardinals play on artificial turf at Busch Stadium, as do the Vikings in the Metrodome. But, the Vikings headquarters and training center in Eden Prairie, MN, had a state-of-the-art natural turf field under the care of facility supervisor Sam Monson. When Monson heard the Vikings might be going to play the Cardinals in Wembley, he asked Lynn if he could go to help out on the field marking and preparation. By saying yes, Lynn started a relationship between Monson and the groundsman at Wembley that is entering its fourth year.

It wasn't that Don Gallagher, head groundsman at Wembley in 1984, was a novice at turf management. He was an institution in England, clearly one of the top groundsmen in the country. After 15 years at Wembley, he knew everything there was to know about the perennial ryegrass pitch and how to help it recover from all types of sports and concerts held on it. Since it is the largest stadium in England, it is used for all types of events. The pitch endures the ripping and tearing of cleats during scrums, the huddle-like formations in rugby, the fancy footwork of soccer players, the dancing of punk rockers during concerts, and the rowdiness of soccer fans who occasionally pour out onto the pitch after a match. Gallagher had discovered precisely how to repair the pitch after all these events with sod from Wembley's own nursery, frequent overseeding and a good pitchforking.

If someone slipped and called his pitch a field, Gallagher would quickly explain, "A field is where cows eat. . . a pitch is where sports are played."

"Sports turf management in England is



Goal posts for American football had to be installed before the first game in 1984.

labor-intensive," Monson describes. "Where we would use a 72-inch riding triplex reel mower, they would take three hours to cut the pitch with a 30-inch walk-behind reel mower that catches the clippings. We'd use a boom sprayer for spraying for weeds, insects or diseases. They use three or four guys with backpack sprayers. Instead of pushing the turf with a pound of nitrogen per month, they use moderate rates of slow-release fertilizers. Where we'd use automatic in-the-ground irrigation, they take hours to water the field with hoses or occasionally a portable sprinkler. It's a whole different attitude about labor."

Monson wanted to give the British fans a pitch that was as dressed up as the Super Bowl fields they had seen on the "television." The Wembley crew never had the occasion to paint large multi-colored shields and logos on the pitch in all its 80 years of operation. "All they ever used was a white chalky emulsion and a walk-behind liner," Monson adds. "They were accustomed to rain washing the chalk off the field during a game. The idea of using a latex paint was not something they had ever considered as proper, since a soccer game might be followed by a rugby match the next day."

American football had never been played in Wembley. The single-post goals had never been erected on the pitch before. One of the first jobs Monson had to do when he arrived in London a week before the August game was to install four-foot-square concrete footers for the goal posts. To accomplish this the Wembley crew had to dig out large holes in both goal areas, pour the footers, and replace the soil and sod in time for the game. Except for one day every August, the Wembley fans are unaware that the foundations of American football lie beneath the surface of their pitch.

There was nothing Monson could do to improve the spectacular ryegrass turf. European groundskeepers had learned the superiority of the improved perennial ryegrasses for sports fields years before the idea took hold in the U.S. Gallagher was a leader in their implementation. He was also a leader in the use of high sand content soil. The Wembley soil was 80 percent sand mixed with cinders, peat and native loam. The dark mix warms with only minimal sunshine, drains well enough for most rainstorms that venture inland from the Atlantic Coast, and can be spread just as easily as sand for top-dressing and divot repair.

It rained nearly every day the week before the game. Monson quickly learned that British groundskeepers don't have tarps. "If

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Tingley wanted to paint the NFL logo himself.



A fork is used regularly to repair divots and relieve compacted spots near goal areas.

Wembley Stadium

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we had tarps, we'd spend all our time putting them down and taking them up with the rain here," explained Gallagher.

Between showers the day before the game, Monson instructed Gallagher's crew as they painted the lines for American football on the Wembley pitch for the first time in its history. Designs were very simple because Gallagher only had a few marking paints. Monson was losing hope as he watched the lines fade in the drizzle and get tracked across the field. He went to sleep that night disappointed.

He awoke early Sunday morning hoping for enough sunshine to touch up the pitch before the one o'clock game. To his delight, it was cloudy, but not raining. Hyde Park was already bustling with walkers as he left his hotel for the stadium. When he arrived, Gallagher had a few extra chaps to help out. By gametime, not only did the pitch meet Monson's expectations, the American flag flew over the stadium for the first time ever. Both were a good omen for Monson.

Only 37,000 fans bought tickets to the first game. For the most part, the local papers were kind to the event, treating it more as a cultural exchange program than a true sporting event. The teams received their guarantees and the experience of London. The promoter, however, didn't get rich. As Monson boarded the plane back to Minneapolis, he wasn't sure there would be another exhibition game in Wembley for a while. A bigger blow came to him when Gallagher, whose health had been failing, decided to retire and leave the pitch in new hands.

Little did Monson know, the NFL was not disappointed. "Magnitude is really a matter of logistics," says Granholm. "We knew that American football was catching on across Europe. There are currently more than 500 semi-pro teams in the Euro-Football League. But, it isn't the kind of thing a local promoter can turn into an instant success. The owners felt the NFL should take

over the project and build the event up over a five to ten year period."

The NFL took more than a year to examine all the aspects of staging the Wembley exhibition game. In 1986, when they were ready to try again, all the chemistry was there. The Dallas Cowboys, the John Waynes of American football to the British, and the Chicago Bears, the colorful misfits pubgoers related to, were paired off. This time the press, both national and international, got behind the contest all the way. It was like a volcano preparing to erupt.

When Joe Rhein, NFL director of operations, checked with Wembley about the arrangements for the pitch, he learned that the groundscrew respected the easy-going, tall Monson from the Vikings. Steve Tingley, the new head groundskeeper, had sought Monson's opinion when the stadium decided to install an automatic irrigation system and sand slits to improve the drainage. He may have been 6,000 miles from Wembley, but he still kept in touch. "I wanted to go back, of course," said Monson, "but I also knew the NFL has its own team of experts it re-



The entire field is mowed by a 30-inch reel mower with catcher.

lies on for big events. When Granholm called and asked if I wanted to go back to Wembley, it was like a dream come true."

"Steve has in education what Don had in experience," remarks Monson. Gallagher was so close to the conditions of the pitch he knew what would happen before it did. Tingley went to school for groundskeeping and mastered turf tennis courts before coming to Wembley. "They are both good managers of people," Monson notes.

When Monson returned to Wembley after two years, he found the field in precisely the same excellent shape. "Tingley was very interested in the entire painting process," says Monson. "The first day he said he wanted to do the NFL logo himself. He had saved all the patterns and boards from the first game and was anxious to try them out."

This time Monson brought with him all the paint and stencils he would need for the NFL emblem in the center of the pitch and the helmets and team logos for the end-zones. Tingley had the templates for the

numbers, hash marks and the four-foot-wide sidelines ready for Monson.

After going to so much detail to dress up the field, Monson did not want rain to wash away his hard work. He won a compromise from Tingley that he could use diluted latex paint for the emblems and logos. For the white lines, Monson mixed the Snow-cal chalk with white Mautz latex paint. As a result, the designs weren't as bold as the Super Bowl, but they were just as large.

The week before the game, it rained very little. Conditions for painting were perfect. Tingley spent hours working with Monson learning as much as he could. When the teams practiced on the field the day before the game, the pitch was perfect. This time when Monson awoke on game day, the walkers in Hyde Park carried umbrellas to protect themselves from the drizzle. He wasn't worried about the drainage, it was Tingley's NFL emblem he was concerned about. When he arrived at the stadium he found that the latex paint in the end zones and emblem required only minor touch up. The white lines, however, were tracking. The crew wiped up as much of the errant paint as they could before the game.

More than 80,000 fans packed the stadium this time. A week of frolicking by the Bears had drummed up ticket sales. The Cowboys chose to keep a low profile at the National Sports Center's Crystal Palace where both teams practiced the week before the game. The Dallas cheerleaders made up for the shy Cowboys.

The London weather, which resembled Chicago more than Dallas, tipped the game in favor of the Bears, who despite a certain irreverence to British or American customs, prevailed 17-6 in the rain. There was little doubt that the NFL had saved the exhibition from the throes of indifference. The upcoming contest between the Denver Broncos and the Los Angeles Rams, was sold out two weeks after the tickets went on sale. "We could have sold 250,000 tickets," exclaimed Wembley's Miller.



No sprinkler heads are allowed on the field so Tingley rigged up this Toro head on a stand.



The Wembley grounds crew with Tingley in the center.

"Interest in exhibition games has exploded," says Granholm. "We could put on sell-outs in Germany, France and Italy tomorrow. We have offers from Israel, Sweden, Finland and even Singapore, Malaysia. Still, we are five to ten years away from anything that might resemble a foreign game schedule. Wembley wants us to hold five preseason games there."

The NFL is playing the exhibition game conservatively for the near future. It wants to protect foreign events to the same degree it must protect its franchises in the U.S.

The Tingley-Monson team will be back on the pitch next month trying to beat the rain again. Monson still hasn't convinced Wembley that tarps might not be a bad idea when you paint a pitch to NFL standards.

But rain is not their primary concern this year. Whereas the NFL had the field for four days prior to the game the past two times, this year they have it for a mere 21 hours. The day before the exhibition game, there will be a soccer match on the field.

Monson and Tingley will have from 4 p.m. on Saturday until 1 p.m. on Sunday to wash off the soccer lines, paint the emblems and logos, install the goal posts, and mark all the lines, numbers and hash marks. Furthermore, it might be raining the whole time. By the end of the day on Sunday, the NFL will hand the pitch back to the stadium in condition for an event the next day.

If Monson survives the Wembley ordeal, he may find himself facing two exhibition games next year. NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle has given the nod for a second exhibition game outside of the U.S. next year. Volvo has invited the Vikings to battle the Bears or the Seattle Seahawks in Gothenburg, Sweden. Mike Lynn might ask the NFL if Monson could work on that stadium too.

"It's funny, I hardly know what London looks like even though I've spent more than two weeks there," jests Monson. "It's Gallagher, Tingley and the pitch at Wembley that I think of when I think of England. I just wish we could do something about that rain!"

Back home in Eden Prairie, Monson has one artificial field and two natural sand-based fields to maintain. When the Vikings aren't in England, Sweden or on the road, they are practicing in Eden Prairie. It's his job to make sure those fields are as good or better than the stadiums the team plays at during the season.

He credits Dr. Donald White, professor of horticulture at the University of Minnesota-St. Paul, for guiding him into a sports turf management career. Monson was one of White's turf management students and part of the crew at the university's golf course when the professor designed the university's sand-based Memorial Stadium field. The school needed someone to manage the new field and White recommended Monson.

White also designed the fields at the Vikings training center. Monson was the natural choice when the facility was built in 1980. "It's a constant learning experience to work with Dr. White and Dick Ericson at the Metrodome," says Monson. "We are learning to deal with some of the toughest playing conditions in the country, and now the world. That's the way we will solve injury problems, not by keeping secrets. Steve Tingley has helped me as much as I've helped him. We both have better facilities as a result."

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