

# Super Bowl XXIV: NFL Comes Home to New Orleans

**W**hen National Football League Commissioner Pete Rozelle retired last year and handed the reins to Paul Tagliabue, he also transferred the management of one of the greatest sporting events in the world, the Super Bowl. For 23 years, Rozelle was as much a sports producer as he was a management representative for 28 professional football teams.

Super Bowl XXIV on January 28 in New Orleans will be the first without Rozelle at the helm. However, new Commissioner Tagliabue must be relieved to know that New Orleans has served the NFL admirably in six previous Super Bowls. Only Miami and Los Angeles can match New Orleans' record for staging the world championship of football.

To the NFL turf team of George and Chip Toma and their crew from Kansas City, New Orleans is "like coming home." "Once you've been through a couple Super Bowls together, you know what to expect and how to handle just about anything thrown at you," states George Toma. "That's the way it will be in New Orleans."

What you see on television screens on Super Bowl Sunday is only part of the turf team's job. You won't see the fields at Tulane University and the Saints Practice Facility where the AFC and NFC champions prepare the week before the game. You won't see the hard work involved in changing a multipurpose indoor stadium from college football to a tractor pull to college basketball to professional football in less than a month. Each changeover of the Louisiana Superdome requires weeks of planning.

While the game will be played on AstroTurf, the league champions practice much of the week on the natural turf fields at Tulane and the Saints' complex. There are half fields of AstroTurf at both practice sites. Three weeks before the pros arrive, teams from the University of Alabama and the University of Miami prepared for the Sugar Bowl at the same facilities. This is after a full football season at Tulane and camps and weekly workouts by the Saints at their 12-year-old complex.

Some of the most critical judges of both artificial and natural turf will be on hand for one week of "big stakes" football. Meeting their expectations involves truckloads of equipment, dozens of people, and close communication among personnel at three different sites.

Those in charge of the fields at all three locations have worked and planned for



The Louisiana Superdome.

months for the event. Lester Vallet, groundskeeper at the Saints practice facility, is the most seasoned. He retires this year after participating in six Super Bowls and more Sugar Bowls than he can recall. Formerly a groundskeeper with Tulane and the Superdome, Vallet joined the Saints when the practice facility was built 12 years ago.

M.L. LaGarde, associate athletic director at Tulane, is also experienced in bowl games. Sugar Bowl Stadium was located on the campus until the event was moved to the Superdome and the old stadium was torn down to make room for more campus buildings. The Saints also used to practice at the university before building their own practice facility.

The staff at the Superdome has handled all kinds of events since it was built in 1975. Stadium Manager Bob Johnson and Field Manager Jerry Anden have perfected the changeover in the stadium while handling conventions, boat shows, ice shows, basketball, rock concerts, and football. Stadium operations have improved since MCA/Spectacor took over management and added 68 skyboxes.

The Superdome is a fixed-roof, enclosed stadium with mobile stands that will accommodate 75,000 football fans for Super Bowl XXIV. Stored within the stadium are 15-foot-wide rolls of AstroTurf, large sections of the wood basketball court, an ice rink with boards for hockey, and goals for each sport. The concrete floor is left bare for conventions and shows, covered with one of the above surfaces for sports, or buried under tons of dirt for dirt events. Only the ice rink will not be used this month.

The year at the Superdome starts off with the Sugar Bowl Classic on New Year's Day. The game between Alabama and Miami is actually the end of a three-day Sugar Bowl Festival. For two nights prior to the Sugar

Bowl, four college basketball teams will compete in the dome. In less than 24 hours, the basketball court has to be removed, the stands reconfigured, and the sections of AstroTurf put back in place.

During basketball, one end zone remains down. "Alabama" was painted on this end zone turf in December before the area was covered with tarps. As soon as the basketball court is removed, the pad is installed, and the remaining sections of the football field are rolled out from sideline to sideline and fastened together with "zip-lock" type closures. The Miami end zone and the Sugar Bowl logo then have to be painted onto the AstroTurf in time to dry before the game.

The day after the Sugar Bowl, Anden's crew will roll up the entire field and return it to bins in the rear of the stadium. Truckloads of dirt will then be hauled inside the dome for a truck-and-tractor pull scheduled for the 13th.

The Superdome crew has six days to remove the dirt and install the basketball court for a game on the 20th between Notre Dame and Louisiana State University. Toma's crew moves in to prepare for the Super Bowl on the 22nd.

The first order of business will be to wash all paint off the AstroTurf. To accomplish this, the turf is unrolled in the parking lot. After being wet down with hoses, a mild solution of ammonia and water is sprayed on the turf with a boom sprayer. The paint, made by Products Research Service of Belle Chase, LA, is designed specifically for artificial turf.

As the ammonia dissolves the paint, a Tennant sweeper is used to scrub the turf. Finally, the paint residue is blasted off the turf with high-pressure hoses and the carpet is squeegeed. "Since our turf is indoors, it is rarely exposed to ultraviolet light," says Johnson. "It doesn't fade, but the white

paint can dull the green fibers if the turf isn't washed and rinsed well."

After washing, the turf is brought inside to dry. Toma has shipped two large leaf blowers from Kansas City to speed up the drying process. The turf must be absolutely dry before the new lines and logos can be painted.

Stencils for the NFL logo and the end zone designs must be made in less than one week after the conference championship games on Jan. 14. Calvin Sign Corp. in Kansas City, MO handles this assignment every year. Calvin Autry constructs the six-mil plastic stencils based upon information he has gathered from each NFL contender during the final weeks of the season. The templates will be in Toma's hands by January 22. All new lines with professional hash marks will be sprayed on the Superdome field and the half field of artificial turf at Tulane.

The work on the natural practice fields began in November. Both fields are Tifway 419 hybrid bermudagrass. At the Saints practice facility, Vallet has enough room to reconfigure the field three different ways to distribute any wear. This field surface will not be overseeded. Instead it will be dyed green the week before the NFC champion arrives.

The AFC champs will practice on perennial ryegrass (Ph.D.). LaGarde started working seed into his field in November. However, heavy rains and colder-than-normal temperatures slowed the establishment of the ryegrass. Another 1,500 pounds of Ph.D. were pregerminated and sown on the field between Christmas and New Year's Day. The field will be covered with tarps (black side up) each night from 3 p.m. to 10 a.m. to keep the field warm and the grass growing.

During pregermination, 100 pounds of seed are placed in 55-gallon drums. The first day the seed is soaked for eight hours in water containing Bovamura and Aquazorb wetting agent. This solution is removed and the barrels are refilled with fresh water every eight hours. Within four days the seed will sprout. Toma then mixes it with an equal amount of Milorganite or calcined clay in a cement mixer. After aerifying the field lightly, this material was broadcast as soon as the Sugar Bowl teams completed practice on New Year's Eve.

"Pregermination has come a long way since the '60s," Toma reveals. "We pay a lot more attention to the temperature of the seed in the barrel and how long it sits in water. The seed needs air and moisture and must stay within a certain temperature range to pop quickly."

After the Super Bowl, Lester Vallet will retire from the Saints after 25 years in professional football. George and Chip Toma must quickly clean up and repair all three facilities in New Orleans before rushing off to Aloha Stadium in Honolulu, HI, to prepare for the Pro Bowl. Then Chip will return to Kansas City to begin planning a

new practice facility for the Chiefs, while George heads for the Royals' spring training complex at Boardwalk and Baseball in Orlando, FL.

Preparation for Super Bowl XXV in Tampa, FL, has already begun. It will be the second Super Bowl at the natural turf facility under the direction of Rick Nafe. Dick Ericson at the Metrodome in Minneapolis, MN, will be the groundskeeper for Super Bowl XXVI.

New NFL Commissioner Tagliabue is aware that he has much to prove to match Rozelle's record of 23 successful Super Bowls. But with experienced groundskeepers to back him up, the job will be

considerably easier than the first world championships in Los Angeles and Miami.

"Every year we learn more about both natural and artificial turf. It's up to the next generation of groundskeepers to take what we've learned and apply it," says Toma. "I think the next decade will prove that the playing surface deserves more attention and skill to manage than in the past. With more \$2 million players on our fields, it is our responsibility to make sure injuries are kept to a minimum. But everything we do for pro athletes can also be done at the college and high school level. All it takes is a commitment to quality turf and a willingness to hire the best groundskeepers available."

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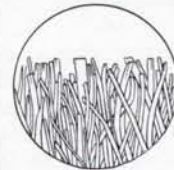
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