

SUPER BOWL RETURNS TO TAMPA FOR 25TH ANNIVERSARY



Tampa Stadium during Super Bowl in 1984.

The countdown to Super Bowl XXV has begun. The National Football League's turf team and the staff at Tampa Stadium started counting the days this past spring and are now counting the hours until the National and American Conference champions face off for the 25th time on January 27th.

Tampa hosted the "mega-event" once before in 1984. That year it rained during most of the week preceding the game. Rick Nafe and his staff at the stadium are hoping for better weather this year. Weather is the one thing about the Super Bowl they don't have under control.

The NFL turf team headed by George and Chip Toma and Nafe have worked together during each of the last seven Super Bowls. Nafe is the NFL's coordinator of facilities for the event as well as for the practices required by the two best teams in American football.

This year the game is in Nafe's own territory, the stadium for which he is director of operations. For this reason, the condition of the stadium and the two practice facilities, the University of Tampa and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers Training Complex, is about as perfect as he can make it. If the

weather cooperates, Super Bowl XXV should be one of the smoothest productions in NFL history.

The field in Tampa Stadium is one of the simplest, yet most reliable playing surfaces in professional football. "There's nothing sophisticated about it," says George Toma. "Tampa has always had one of the best fields in the NFL. Players love to play on it. I think that will add a lot to the game this year."

Toma has been in Tampa since New Year's Eve, pregerminating perennial ryegrass (Ph.D), arranging last-minute details for field marking, and helping out at the practice facilities. "Chip is really the head of the NFL grounds crew," explains George, "but he had to stay in Kansas City because the Chiefs are in the playoffs." If the Chiefs go all the way, Chip may have a game in Kansas City the Sunday before the Super Bowl.

In the meantime, George is the field general managing the use of two truckloads of equipment shipped down from Kansas City and the experienced Super Bowl crew. It's a familiar job, one he began 25 years before at Super Bowl I in the Los Angeles Coliseum. And it's a familiar site. Both

father and son worked Super Bowl XVIII in the city between the Los Angeles Raiders and the Washington Redskins.

Tampa Stadium was dedicated in 1967, mainly to host the University of Tampa and other local events. In 1976, the facility was instrumental in helping the city obtain its own NFL franchise, the Buccaneers. At that time, endzone seating was added to boost the seating capacity to more than 74,000. For the past few years, the stadium has hosted the College Hall of Fame Bowl on New Year's Day and been the home field for the Tampa Bay Rowdies, a professional soccer club.

The field has a conventional sand/muck rootzone, underground drainage, and an 18-inch crown. Over the years, the original drain tile and irrigation system have been overhauled.

Each year, the percolation rate of the field is tested. Consultant Dan Morgan tracks any reduction in drainage. This past spring, in preparation for the Super Bowl, Morgan recommended the addition of four inches of sand to the top ten inches of the soil profile. The work took place last April following a Super Cross event and a week

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long workout by the Detroit Lions. Tifway 419 sod from Central Florida Turf was then laid.

The Rowdies played a dozen games in the stadium between April and August. The turf also survived concerts by Paul McCartney and the Rolling Stones this past summer. Despite precautions, an area in front of the temporary concert stages had to be resodded. By the time the Bucs played their first preseason games, the field was back in form.

Nafe didn't wait for the Bucs' last home game to start preparations for the Hall of Fame Bowl and the Super Bowl. Supervisor of Buildings and Grounds Jim Carter and Field Foreman Kevin Dawkins resodded part of the center of the field in November and began to work ryegrass into the bermudagrass between the hashmarks.

Carter used as little paint as possible on the endzones to prevent any buildup that could affect the growth of the turf. Nafe made arrangements with the Buccaneers and the directors of the Hall of Fame Bowl to forgo painting insignias in the center of the field after mid-December. "A new logo will be used for the first time during the Super Bowl," Nafe said. "We want the center of the field to be a perfect canvas of natural green turf for the new insignia." As in past Super Bowls, Mautz Paint from Missouri Paint Co. in Kansas City, MO will be used because of its safety and brightness when applied to turf. The company also supplies the stencils for the event.

Another first for both Tampa and the Super Bowl was the use of Toro's HydroJet aerifier in December. Instead of pulling cores of soil like a conventional aerifier, the HydroJet uses small jets of water to blast through the turf surface. "Chip wanted to disturb the integrity of the surface as little as possible," explained Dr. James Watson, chief agronomist for Toro and consultant to the NFL. "It's the first time we've used the new aerifier for something beside golf greens."

The advantage of the machine, according to Toro's Ben Street, is that the hole is only 1/8 inch in diameter at the surface and expands as it goes deeper. The sidelines were aerified to a depth of six inches in a three-by-three-inch pattern. The actual playing surface received a three-by-five-inch pattern. The entire field was aerified in slightly more than three hours. The goal is to maintain a high rate of infiltration and drainage in case of rain during the game.

Full sets of tarps are ready for pregame weather at the stadium or either of the practice facilities.

The biggest threats to the field the month before the Super Bowl were the Bucs' final home game on December 30th and the Hall of Fame Bowl on January 1st. The two games took place just 44 hours apart. They required switching the lines from pro to college and back to pro. "The damage between the hashmarks was a little more than we planned," admits Dawkins. Pregerminated seed was planted by the NFL crew within hours after the Hall of Fame Bowl.

"Everyone has been extremely cooperative about measures to protect the field."

Having a bermudagrass base is a great advantage, Watson points out. "Bermudagrass is the very best of the sports field turfs," he states. Furthermore, the Tifway has escaped dormancy for the most part, thanks to above-average temperatures in the 80s in December and January. The heat has also accelerated the establishment of the ryegrass. With both types of grasses green and growing, there will be little need for touchup with green paint to satisfy the fans and the television cameras.

The cameras won't show the two practice facilities in Tampa. The NFL crew goes to great lengths to keep the teams separated and the curious public from seeing the closed workouts. Thousands of feet of security fence have been installed around the soccer stadium at the University of Tampa and the Buccaneers Training Center. The AFC champion will work out at the University of Tampa. Since the school no longer has a football program, goals must be added and the field marked to professional specifications. The NFC champ will be the guest at the Buccaneers' complex.

Nafe has also arranged sites for rehearsing the pregame, half time, and post game shows. Bands from Florida A&M and Cookman College will have just two days to practice on the stadium field the week before the game. "Everyone has been extremely cooperative about measures to protect the field," Nafe says.

The grounds crew also has limited access to the field. Carter plans to complete the first coat on the lines on Sunday. On Monday, the NFL crew goes to work on the base coat of the new center logo and the endzones after mowing. The irrigation will be shut off Monday night to let the field dry down.

Tuesday is picture day, during which the stadium will be a backdrop for photos of the players and teams. Wednesday is the last full day the grounds crew has to work. Thursday and Friday are reserved for rehearsing the three different entertainment segments of this year's production. Saturday morning the teams work out in the stadium. That afternoon, the field is mowed for the final time and the finish coats of the insignias, endzone, and lines are applied. Sunday morning, Toma and his crew make the finishing touches.

After the game, the field is swept, divots are repaired, and the irrigation controller is switched back to its normal schedule before the NFL crew starts reloading the trucks. "We try to leave the field in good condition," says Toma. "We want to be welcome when we come back."

If the Super Bowl goes without a hitch and the Chiefs play in it, the year will have been a banner one for Chip Toma. 1990 was his first year as the Chiefs' head groundskeeper. He also supervised construction of the fields at the team's new training center in Kansas City. But he'll have to wait until after the Pro Bowl in February before he can sit back and absorb everything that has happened to him in the past 12 months.

After the Pro Bowl, George Toma flies back to Florida to the Royals' spring training center outside of Orlando. The pitchers arrive the end of February. In between stops, he has to help find a way to make 12 stadiums in this country meet specifications for World Cup Soccer '94. The governing body of world soccer, FIFA, requires full-size natural turf fields for its events. Toma has devised a way to build such fields on scaffolding, above artificial surfaces.

Nafe has his own project to keep him busy, construction of a 20,000-seat arena for a new National Hockey League franchise in Tampa. He, too, turns to baseball in February as the Yankees' farm teams arrive at his complex for spring training.

When you turn on your television Sunday, January 27th, to watch Super Bowl XXV, you will know more about the event than the announcers. There is a lot more than meets the eye, and a big part of it involves turf. ●