

Super Bowl XXVI: *Minneapolis Metrodome Takes Sports Spotlight Again*

The Hubert H. Humphrey Metrodome in Minneapolis will take center stage in sports January 26th as it hosts Super Bowl XXVI. Although it is professional football's first post-season trek to the northern town, it's only the second of three national championship sporting events the stadium will host.

Minneapolis is still basking in the glow from the Minnesota Twins' World Series victory. Not even a record-breaking October blizzard could dampen spirits as sports fans look forward to the Super Bowl in January followed by college basketball's Final Four in April. For longtime stadium superintendent Dick Ericson, it has been a year of going to extremes.

"I tell the grounds crew members to enjoy it as much as they can because it's never going to happen again," Ericson said. "

It's a lot of work and a lot of extra pressure, but there is nothing else like it."

After more than 45 years as a groundskeeper, Ericson knows how

to savor the good moments. When he works on the Super Bowl, he will join forces with George and Chip Toma who head up the NFL's official Super Bowl grounds crew. George Toma and Ericson are friends from the late 1940s when they both got their start maintaining minor league baseball fields. Between the two men, they have almost 100 years of experience maintaining sports fields.

"Dick's my idol. He is a terrific groundskeeper. He can do it all. In the old Metropolitan Stadium, he always had the field in good shape despite the cold,"

George Toma said.

Looking back on his career, Ericson remembers being a 12-year-old helper on the old St. Paul football field. By the time he graduated from high school in 1947, he was the groundskeeper at Lexington

in the old Metropolitan Stadium.

"When we first came up in the minors," said George Toma, "[groundskeeping] was very close knit. Dick and I came up together with Joe Mooney. We would have problems and talk about them among the three of us."

In those days, the Twins and the football Vikings played on natural grass. Ericson became an expert at keeping a grass field in top shape despite freezing temperatures. Today, he still maintains grass. The difference is that the 120,000 square feet of Kentucky bluegrass he maintains circles the outside of the stadium.

Minnesota's harsh climate forced Ericson to learn several tricks to removing snow from football fields. Those skills didn't go to waste when the Twins and Vikings moved into the Metrodome in 1980. Now, instead of removing snow from the field, Ericson is in charge of removing it from the inflatable dome. Keeping snow off the dome roof will be one of Ericson's key concerns around the Super Bowl.



Park in St. Paul. He was in charge of keeping the field in good shape for the St. Paul Saints, a minor league baseball team. From there, he moved across town to Nicolett Park where he maintained the stadium for the Minneapolis Millers.

Aside from a couple of stints in the Navy, including a tour in the Korean War, Ericson has always been a groundskeeper. "I've outlived a few stadiums," he joked. His chance to work for a major league club came when the Washington Senators moved to Minneapolis. The team became the Twins and set up shop

The 10-acre roof weighs more than 300 tons. In order to remain properly inflated, the air pressure inside the building must exceed the outside air pressure. Someone is on-duty 24 hours a day to make sure the roof has the correct air pressure. "Someone actually flies the building," Ericson said.

Wind, snow and rain can cause havoc on the roof. A mere inch of snow can substantially increase the amount of pressure pushing down. To help prevent inversions where snow or rain collect in depressions, Ericson has devised a multi-

faceted program.

"We watch the weather just like we do for baseball games. If the forecast calls for snow, we will heat the building to 70 to 80 degrees F," he said. Grounds crew members gather information from the Metrodome's own weather station and local weather reports.

The snow melt system in the Metrodome is designed to blow hot air between the roof layers, melting the snow as it falls on the roof. Ericson monitors the system's effectiveness. If the snow starts to get ahead of the melting system, he sends crew members in groups of two up on the roof for snow removal duty. Sometimes they use fire hoses with hot water to melt and slide off collected snow. Other times they use plastic shovels.

"We try to stay ahead of it," Ericson said.

There are 150 spots on the grid-like roof that are most susceptible to inversions. That keeps the crew hopping. This year, Minneapolis had a white Halloween when more than 30 inches of snow fell in late October. The Metrodome was pressed into duty to help area high schools finish out their football seasons, adding more games to the stadium schedule.

Ericson's crews are accustomed to coming to the rescue when snow hits. Those who have 4-wheel-drive vehicles bring them to the stadium and sometimes provide shuttle service to those stranded by winter storms.

"The football game would never be rained or snowed out [because of stadium conditions]. If it is snowed out, it will be because the players or NFL officials couldn't get here," Ericson said.

The green carpet will be rolled out early for the Super Bowl. The last Viking game is December 26. Ericson will have the rare luxury of leaving the field set up for football. Whenever the Super Bowl is held in a new venue, there is a little uncertainty of what to expect, but Chip Toma said he isn't worried.

"Dick knows what it's all about. He knows the magnitude of the game. Dick isn't scared of hard work," Chip Toma said.

The Metrodome crew will scrub the turf clean, leaving the job of painting the special Super Bowl logos to the Tomas' crew. "Dick is a perfectionist and his crew is the same. They will have a nice, clean field," George Toma said.

Painting the field will be one of the biggest challenges facing the Super Bowl

crew, Chip Toma said. Special logos go on the 35- and 50-yard lines in addition to the endzones. They won't know which team logos should go in the endzones until the final playoff games are completed January 12.

All the field marks must correspond with NFL regulations. In an indoor stadium, you can't be sure of how well the paint will dry. "You never know what the temperature is going to be in there," he said.

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At Super Bowl XXIV, the paint was extremely slow to dry because of high humidity. The Tomas brought in blowers towed by tractors. They ran the blowers just along the edge of the paint designs so the air blew lightly across the top. The extra wind helped the paint dry quicker.

With a little luck, the crew will only have to paint the logos once. It is always a challenge to install the logos and keep

them in good shape through numerous rehearsals by pre-game and halftime performers. The Super Bowl is more than just a football game—it's an event. The grounds crew adapts to the schedule it gets, even if that requires working through the night.

All practice facilities will be indoors this year. One team will work out at Winter Park, the brand new Viking practice facility in Eden Prairie, a Minneapolis suburb. The full-size indoor football field was completed in October 1991. Sam Monson is in charge of the facility that features the latest version of Astro-Turf.

The opposing team will use the University of Minnesota practice facility. It is also a full-size indoor football field with Astro-Turf. Mike McDonald is the groundskeeper in charge of that facility. He will keep the practice fields in top shape for the visiting team.

The clean, well-maintained field fans see on their color televisions Super Sunday will represent hours of work that most viewers won't understand. However, sports turf managers know that the work will begin again as soon as the 4th quarter clock runs out. Then, it is time to scrub the carpet and prepare for the next event.

"It will almost be a letdown when baseball starts again," Ericson said with a laugh. After thinking for a minute, he pointed out that the Twins will be the defending champions, so you never know what October might bring. □



A ten-acre roof keeps fans warm and dry for all events.