

Dale Wysocki Keeps It Green for the Minnesota Vikings

By Bob Tracinski

It's not easy being green when fall's first freeze hits on September first and spring rarely arrives before May's football mini-camp. Yet Dale Wysocki, facility supervisor for the Minnesota Vikings Football Club, consistently maintains an upbeat attitude. What else would you expect from a man who describes snow as slow-release water?

The Viking's 15-acre Winter Park is in Eden Prairie, MN, 17 miles southwest of Minneapolis. The facility was developed in 1981 under the team's founder, Max Winter. Wysocki notes, "Max Winter passed away this fall. He was a great man, a great person. He established and maintained a truly first class, truly professional organization in the Vikings.

"For example, Dennis Ryan, team equipment manager, will go out of his way to make sure everything is ready for everyone all the time. We strive to carry that attitude and philosophy over for the outside as well."

On-site are two natural turf, sand-based football fields. In 1991, the Vikings added the field house, a specifically built rigid steel structure that fully encloses the AstroTurf field, and they expanded the parking area. The team offices are on the upper floor of the field house. The building also contains the weight room where players work out following the remarkable program coordinated by strength and conditioning coach Steve Wetzel.

The facilities also are used year-round for the varied program of events other than football that were added last year. The marketing department uses the field house for entertaining clients. Corporate sponsors use it for such special activities as sales meetings and new product roll-outs. There was a punt,

pass and kick competition on October 5, and the Warren Moon Sports Games on the 26th. In November, 200 people converge on the field for a Jazzercise workout. The players sponsor a Christmas party for underprivileged kids in December. These activities aren't revenue-producers as such, but are related to organizations important to the business.

Wysocki and his facilities assistant, Jerry Riley, form the two-man crew that handles maintenance. Wysocki is quick to credit Riley for his dedication to the program. Says Wysocki, "As well as the fields, we're responsible for the facility, including such basics as the heating and air conditioning systems. And yes, we do windows — once a month."

Wysocki calls the Minnesota environment "unique" and winter a "nice blessing" in some respects. There are no mole crickets, chinch bugs or chafers. And though the climate is unfriendly to azaleas and dogwoods, it's ideal for some of the country's most spectacular fall color and beautiful, white winters. Variety in the weather has its own special charm.

Wysocki's natural turf maintenance program makes the best of that variety.

Rigorous Schedule

The 1996 program kicked off on April 8 with an application of a 50-50 perennial ryegrass mix of Nomad and Manhattan II at the rate of eight pounds per thousand square feet to get the natural turf fields ready for mini-camp. On May 1, five days prior to the camp, 13-13-13 fertilizer was applied at the rate of one pound of nitrogen (N) per thousand square feet (M).

Following mini-camp, intensive restoration took place on both natural turf fields in preparation for the regular heavy schedule starting in August. The fields were overseeded at the eight-



Dale Wysocki (left) visits with Jim McMahan of the Green Bay Packers. Photo courtesy: Dale Wysocki.

pound rate with a blend containing 30 percent of the perennial ryegrass mix and 70 percent Kentucky bluegrasses (Nomad, Touchdown and Derby). This was followed by deep-tine aeration to a depth of nine inches using 3/4-inch tines. After dragging in the plugs, the fields were topdressed with 72 cubic yards of 70 percent micro-sand and 30 percent milled hypnum peat.

A week later a Tupersan pre-emergence application was made for crabgrass control.

On May 20, Milorganite (6-2-0) was applied "between the numbers" at the one pound of N rate. On May 27, a 15-0-30 fertilizer was applied at the rate of 0.5 pound of N per M.

In June, more of the overseeding mix was used to strengthen the fields, this time at the five pound per M rate, followed by a 22-cubic-yard-per-field topdressing. On June 6, the micro-nutrient supplement Ironite was applied at the rate of 18 pounds per M. Milorganite was again applied between the numbers on June 10, at one lb. of N per M, followed on the 17th by the regular full-field fertilization of 17-3-17 at the one lb. of N per M rate.

On July 1, another between the numbers Milorganite application was made. The fields were again overseeded with a 70-30 mix at the five pound per M rate on July 8 and topdressed with 22 cubic yards per field of the 70 percent micro-sand and 30 percent milled hypnum peat on July 9. Another between-the-numbers Milorganite application was made on July 22, followed by the full-field fertilization with 17-3-17 at the one lb. of N per M rate on July 23.

A two lb. per M overseeding of the 70-30 mix on August 6 helped build up turf strength. This was followed by another 22 cubic yards of 70-30 top-

dressing mix on August 7 to firm and level the practice fields. On August 9 came an 18 lb. per M micro-nutrient application of Ironite. On August 10, a slow-release 0-0-57 fertilizer was applied at the rate of 1.5 lb. of potassium (K) per M to increase grass plant survival and stress resistance. More Milorganite went down between the numbers on August 12. A general full-field fertilization of 13-13-13 at the one lb. of N per M rate was made on August 19.

Milorganite was applied between the numbers at the one lb. of N per M rate on September 3 and 24. A 12-1-12 general field fertilization was made at the rate of one lb. of N per M on September 10 and again on October 15. A dormant, full-field application of Milorganite at the rate of 1.5 lb. of N per M was scheduled for early November.

Wysocki adds, "This maintenance schedule was supplemented by mid-season aerification and bye-week aerification, seeding and topdressing. Normally, after each Friday's practice, the end of the field where the team practices will be aerified, seeded and fertilized. The fields are also sliced and rolled weekly.

"Most fungicide applications are made on an as-needed basis. It makes no sense to spray for turf disease when the disease is not there. The 1996 season was much more humid than usual here. Dew points in excess of 70 were common, and in July the dew point surpassed 78. We faced nearly constant disease pressure.

"After an April 15 preventive application of 26019 at the rate of four oz. per M, and a June 3 application of Pace at 6.4 oz. per M to prevent turf diseases such as root pythium, we fought back with an aggressive multiple-fungicide program. Using one oz. of Banner, one oz. of Banol and four oz. of Daconil Ultrex per M, we made applications on June 18, July 2, 16 and 30, and August 13 and 27. We wrapped up the season with an application of PCNB in late October at the rate of 12 oz. per M for prevention of winter turf diseases."

Wysocki also launched an aggressive attack for *Poa annua* seed head suppression on the west practice field, applying four oz. of Aqua-Gro L per M on May 16 and 30, June 13 and 27, July 10 and 24, August 8 and 21, and September 4 and 18.

And drought hit the area hard. Wysocki says, "From June 22nd through early October we received only 1 1/2 inches of rain. Obviously, our irrigation system got lots of use."

Viking coach Dennis Green shares the belief that natural turf is a player benefit, so Wysocki's goal is to keep the natural fields going as late into the season as possible, allowing the team to practice outside on a "supple surface." Management practices include "liberal" tarping and use of pre-germinated seed, switching the seed blend to 70 percent perennial ryegrasses and 30 percent Kentucky bluegrasses after September 1. Still, as winter approaches, Mother Nature calls the shots.

Maintenance on the artificial surface is less complex. "We sweep the AstroTurf with a four-foot-wide, ride-on sweeper immediately following each indoor practice," notes Wysocki. "The surface is cleaned once a year. We hire it done by a company which uses a special, truck-mounted device."

The artificial surface is a definite step up from the situation the Vikings sometimes faced before Winter Park, while they shared Met Stadium with baseball's Twins. When scheduling wouldn't allow for practices to be held on the natural turf fields of area high schools or colleges, they took place on the parking lot at the Met.

Best of Both Worlds

Wysocki started his business career on golf courses, working first as a caddie in 1973, then moving to the golf shop, and then to the grounds crew, which also allowed him to hold down the night shift cooking. He paid for his first car at age 18. With his eye on a golf course superintendent position, he majored in agronomy at the University of Maryland, earning his degree in 1979.

He worked at Congressional Country Club for two years, then went to Shakopee, MN, to serve as landscape mechanic for a major amusement park. In 1984, he moved on to the Fairbault Golf and Country Club, in Fairbault, MN, 40 miles south of Minneapolis. He joined the Vikings on April 1, 1995.

Wysocki says, "I really wanted the Vikings position. I'd been talking with Ken Mrock (grounds superintendent for the Bears), another Chicago 'Polish kid,' about the special challenges of sports turf management and how he ran his two-man operation. I've loved the green industry since those early mornings sharing the golf course with deer, ducks and other wild critters while striving for the ideal environment for the golfers. The Vikings give me the best of both worlds."

Winter Park was built down in a hollow. It's surrounded by a 50-foot hill, green "berming," native woodlands and native wetlands. Deer, foxes, squirrels, "lots of" birds, including red-tail hawks, are as much at home there as the native plants. Wysocki is documenting species and enhancing the site, making it even more "critter friendly" with such touches as bluebird houses. He's working toward the first Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary designation for a professional football facility.

Wysocki is quick to credit his "home" team support group. His wife, Twila, has a real understanding of the demands of the job and the long hours. She's a horticulturist who has faced her own challenges in such roles as head gardener for the Congressional Country Club and her current position as manager of greenhouses for Little Six Inc.

At eight, son Steven is getting his first taste of tackle football, defining his defensive tackle position as the "best ever." Daughter Annalyse is "busy being a three year old." Even with two demanding jobs, the family routine includes baseball and Cub Scouts, as well as football.

Despite all this, Wysocki still finds time for photography. He's had photos published, including in the *USGA Green Section Report*, and he supplied the shot for this article. In addition, he's serving his third run as editor of *Hole Notes*, the official publication of the Minnesota Chapter of GCSAA. He even used to fit in a little hockey, "until my knees gave out."

With a December 22nd away game scheduled with the Green Bay Packers, Wysocki will likely find it necessary to plow away some of that "beautiful snow." The team traditionally practices on the outdoor surface prior to a late-season, open-stadium game in northern regions.

"In 1995, we moved snow from the turf fields twice," Wysocki says. "Players hustling through a full workout on the frozen, dormant turf obviously creates a few problems. Thus the field restoration early this past season. But, we are the problem solvers. They come to us with many requests. Our job is to make things happen. We live for 'em." □

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