



Racing the clock, crew members push and pull strips of sod into place. Photo courtesy: Steve Hogben, Valley Crest Inc.

Saving an Olympic Field — George Toma Rallies Forces

By Steve and Suz Trusty

The Olympic Opening Ceremonies the night of July 19 on Olympic Stadium's field were an awesome spectacle featuring breathtaking props and multitudes of people. On July 24, that same Olympic field's perfect turf showcased track and field events. But its perfection did not come cheaply. Between those two dates the field had to be rebuilt, and the Herculean, behind-the-scenes efforts were marshaled by none other than one of the masters of sports turf magic, George Toma. It took every bit of Toma's "and then some" ethic from every member of the team to make it happen.

In June of 1996, Bob Stiles, venue director of Olympic Stadium, asked Toma to come to Atlanta to check out a problem at Olympic Stadium's field.

When Toma arrived, Opening Ceremonies were in rehearsal and he

says, "The field was covered with material that looked like tennis wind-screen and had the oceans of the world painted on it. When we pulled back a section of the cover to check the grass, it was nearly dead — and the sand-based media was bone dry.

"We discovered that the cover had been left on the field for several days at a time. Later we would verify what we assumed, that the in-ground sprinkler system was inoperable due to damage incurred either during the rehearsals themselves, or during the installation of various support equipment for the ceremonies.

"The likely culprit was the lack of adequate moisture in the sand-based field combined with the compaction caused by all the activity of the rehearsals."

Toma is quick to point out that the original field construction by Southern Turf Nurseries/STN Sports wasn't the problem. The 1995 construction project

was completed as planned, giving the turf an ample grow-in period prior to the Olympics. The glitch came in the coordination of needs — those of the turf versus those of the ceremonies.

Field Tests

As Toma, the veteran of past Olympics and all 30 Super Bowls, explains, the whirlwind of activity apparent to everyone watching the Olympic Opening and Closing ceremonies is just the tip of the iceberg. It takes "to-the-second" precision to pull off a successful extravaganza.

"Multi-ton stages and props may be moved hundreds of times in rehearsal to ensure the proper placement — and the timing. One change can prompt ten other changes, and more rehearsal. It's incredibly complex, and all the traffic obviously puts a field to the ultimate test.

A Sod Story

Knowing there would be field problems, Billy Payne, president of the

Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG), contacted Toma again in early July. Toma met with Stiles and Don Roberts and Greg Dent of Southern Turf Nurseries/STN Sports to clarify problems and develop a plan of attack. Since the field had dead grass, a dry sand-base and was one to 1-1/2 inches below the level of the track area, it was determined that all 13,500 square yards of the field would need resodding.

But that winter, cold across the Southeast had been devastating to the bermudagrass turf, tapping the resources of sod suppliers.

Track officials had also noted that in preliminary trials the discus, shot, hammer and javelin had sliced



A veteran of past Olympics and all 30 Super Bowls, George Toma is used to the whirlwind of activity it takes to pull off a successful extravaganza.

through the turf into the sand. The new sod would need some thatch to act as a cushion. Finding accessible, premium sod that fit the criteria in sufficient quantity at a reasonable price required a concentrated search.

From July 7th to the 12th, Toma checked out sod options around the country. Time was the major issue: 13,500 square yards of sod would need to be moved into the stadium and laid on the field within 24 hours.

Miracle Workers

Now Toma has a "Super Bowl team" of sports turf miracle workers from across the country, including Ed Mangan of Fulton County Stadium, Alan Sigwardt of Joe Robbie Stadium, Don Follet of Arizona State University, and Trevor Vance of the Kansas City Royals. But this was July, not January, and each of those pros had commitments to their own fields and teams. For example, Mangan had 48 baseball games scheduled in 18 days.

As Toma and Mohan discussed where to round up the extra crew with the necessary experience to tackle the job, Mohan pointed out the red trucks of Valley Crest Landscape Inc.'s Atlanta division. When contacted, Valley Crest committed their equipment and personnel for "whatever it took" to help get the job done.

Even with help available, Toma determined there wasn't time to strip off the old sod, regrade, soak the sand field with water and allow it to settle.

The new sod would be laid on top of the old sod, after verticutting to get the dead grass out of the field, sweeping up the debris, bringing in five- to six-ton rollers to ensure a smooth surface, aerifying to allow water into the sand, topdressing with sand, and fertilization.

Crews from Valley Crest Landscape spent the night of July 13 working their way around the track, peeling back the field cover, removing the sand and binder material, and installing a 12-inch strip of sod to form a gradual transition between the track surface and the field.

By July 15, plans were shaping up. The Olympic Committee determined that all costs for the project should be billed through one firm, which would serve as the general contractor. This also put one company in the position of incurring all the costs. Scott Clark of Burton F. Clark Inc. of Delhi, New York, agreed to tackle that assignment. So company representatives John Hilson and Paul Young came to Atlanta and brought the company's equipment and personnel to the project.

Staggering Order

Toma says, "The sod search continued. Trucking costs from West Coast Turf's California supply were far greater than the sod cost. Limited supply of refrigerated trucks ruled out bringing in sod from Virginia. Then

we found both bermudagrass and zoysiagrass sod at Quail Valley Sod Farm in Little Rock, AR, and enough trucks to handle it. We went with the zoysiagrass to get enough cushioning to hold up to the discus, shot, hammer and javelin."

Now, Toma explains, "The sod had to be precisely cut with a 1-1/2-inch soil base, watered to retain enough moisture to sustain it and let it roll out properly, and mowed uniformly. Trevor Vance flew into Arkansas to monitor these preparations."

Vance would start the sod cutting on the 20th so the refrigerated trucks would arrive in staggered order on the 22nd, just as the sod was needed.

During that last week, Toma and Mangan put in 22- and 23-hour days. Mangan was handling a full load at Fulton County Stadium and then heading to Olympic Stadium. Valley Crest Landscape crews were working round the clock at the field. For example, they launched a massive, overnight cleanup campaign on the area between the track and the stadium, bringing it back to "green space" with five tons of green sand and precisely applied green paint.

Crews Converge

Toma says, "The workforce was coming together. The Woerner Companies had just purchased Warren's Turf and Southern Turf Nurseries/STN Sports and combined them as Woerner Sports Turf International. They brought in the full crews of that new company and those of Rollin-Sod to handle the sod installation. The Valley Crest Landscape and Burton F. Clark companies had their full crews on hand, and then some. Managers and owners of these companies, including Ed Woerner, pitched in themselves."

The equipment was moving into place, too. There were the equipment forces of the companies above, and Mangan brought over his equipment. There were Goossen sweepers from Valley Crest Landscape and Mangan's two Bunton sweepers. Toro brought in more than \$100,000 of equipment for the project. Even with all this, Toma knew it would be a challenge to get everything done in the tight time frame.

He says, "The multi-company crews converged to verticut, sweep, roll, smooth, core aerify, break up cores, sweep again and roll the sur-

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OLYMPIC FIELD

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face. Then came the water issue. Toro and Valley Crest Landscape irrigation crew members were concentrating on getting the system repaired and back to working order.

"In the meantime, we needed lots of water, fast. I'd called in the Atlanta Fire Department and their cooperation was tremendous. We hooked up three-inch hoses to big fire hydrants set into the stadium walls in each end zone. These led into 1-1/2-inch hoses equipped with flooding nozzles."

All pre-sodding preparations were completed in time for the Olympic Closing Ceremony rehearsals on July 21.

Making Ends Meet

At 6 a.m. on July 22, crews and equipment were in place, ready to sod. The 40 truckloads of sod coming from Arkansas were timed to arrive in sequence. Each truck had to be "sanitized" by working its way through the Olympic security system, a 20 to 30 minute process. The Burton F. Clark crews were ready with forklifts to take

the sod from the trucks to the field.

The first roll went down at 8:00 a.m. Now, Toma puts in "seamless" sod. Sod rolls are placed with a six-inch overlap. One piece is cut off straight. The other piece is cut with a one- to two-inch overlap. The two ends are lifted up, then pushed down tight so the sod is "puckered" into place. Ideally, crews work with 25- to 35-foot rolls cut 1-1/2 or 1-3/4 inches thick, which he's found faster and easier to handle than longer rolls, and easier on the equipment.

Besides a crew captain and the two "splicers," it takes five people with "potato" forks to pull the sod; five people with aluminum rakes to push the sod, and two people with hand-held hoses to water. That's a 15-person crew. Toma was running two such crews, one at each side of the field.

"Mangan was captain of one crew; Mike Eagen of Reddi Play captain of the other," says Toma. "Everyone pitched in. It didn't matter what company you worked for, or what your title was.

"Once the sod is in place we 'stand

up' the grass with bamboo rakes. Watering takes a special touch. It can't be too heavy when we'll have to put the roller on it, or the sand will ooze up. But with temperatures in the 100 degree range, too little water means wilting.

"With sodding in full swing, our water demands were hindering the stadium air conditioning system, and they shut us down. We ended up using a single three-inch hose, about 400 feet of it, connected to a hydrant outside the stadium to feed into the 1 1/2-inch hoses. It slowed things down a bit, but it worked."

Finally, the sod was rolled. It's a process Toma prefers not to do on newly laid sod, but with the events moving in, it was necessary.

At 6:00 a.m., exactly 22 hours from the time the first roll of sod went down, the job was completed.

Toma says, "The total focus, absolute 'no ego' cooperation, along with the 'and then some' work ethic of this entire team earned them gold medals in my book." □



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