



With the temperature below 10 degrees, the crew started laying sod minutes after the first heated trucks of sod arrived from Maryland. Photos courtesy: Jack Kidwell.

Sod & Squad Work Miracle at Lambeau Field

By Jerry May

A phone call at half time of a cold, rainy NFL playoff game last January set off a chain reaction that grabbed the attention of practically every pro football fan in the country for the next eight days.

An NFL representative and the Green Bay Packers grounds supervisor called to ask Jack Kidwell, a Virginia sod grower and installer, if he could completely refurbish and resod Lambeau Field over the next week in time for the NFC championship game on Sunday, January 12.

"My stomach turned about six times when I heard the question," says Kidwell, of Duraturf Service Corporation in Richmond. "First, I was out of bluegrass, and so were all the other Virginia growers I know. But I was sure I knew where some high quality turf was available, so I said yes. Looking back, I guess all and all we pulled off a small miracle."

The NFL knows Kidwell well and probably knew they would be in good hands. Kidwell's firms have had the NFL's nod to sod the Redskin's RFK Stadium for the last 15 years. In December, Duraturf repaired Pro Player Park (formerly Joe Robbie Stadium) in Miami. It also repaired

the center of Lambeau for the Packers-Minnesota game in December. The repair held great, but when the Packers and 49ers met in a rain storm on January 4, they turned the rest of the field into a pigpen.

By late that Sunday afternoon, the contract details with the NFL had been hashed out by phone and fax. And so the saga that was picked up by scores of newspapers and television stations from coast to coast began. For a solid week, Duraturf managers, harvest crew, installation people, and more than two dozen truck drivers and their 18-wheelers would be totally immersed in a time-sensitive, difficult job made even harder by extreme winter conditions of the far north. If anything of consequence went awry, the whole project could end in disaster.

A Critical Path

Kidwell and his managers spent Sunday night lay-

ing out a critical path chart, contacting employees and giving them their assignments for Monday morning.

As in many states, Wisconsin's Department of Agriculture restricts the importation of living flora that hasn't been given a clean bill of health. Japanese beetles are the main villains Wisconsin wants to keep out. Kidwell started the time-consuming approval process; the sod was certified for entry at the last minute.

The sod that would ultimately find



Finishing up the job in a driving snow storm, workers move a tarp in as the last strip of sod is pulled up and rolled.

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When workers discovered low areas after stripping the old sod, sand was brought in (background left) and spread evenly before the new sod was laid.



By late Wednesday night, two-thirds of the field was sodded, but a snow storm was yet to come. Frost areas on the perimeter show the failure of the warming cables.

its way to Lambeau Field came from a grower in Maryland. Kidwell says, "I knew Summit Hall grew high quality bluegrass and had plenty to spare."

At 5:30 Monday morning, harvesters and other equipment set out from southern Virginia for Maryland followed by loads of tubes and pallets. Just three hours later, Duraturf had

confirmations for 28 heated tractor-trailers to transport 600 tons of sod nonstop to Green Bay, 1,000 miles away.

"Installers who do important, time-sensitive jobs have to be sure of transport. We've developed a relationship over the years with a handful of select trucking firms. We know we can rely

on them and vice versa. I couldn't have said yes to the Lambeau project otherwise," Kidwell says.

At 8 Monday night, barely 24 hours after the NFL's call, the first three truck loads of roll sod set out for Green Bay. Kidwell himself took off for Green Bay minutes later.

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Ghosts and Gremlins

Lambeau boasts glorious ghosts, but also lays claim to a nightmare — a nonexistent drainage system. Thus the quagmire the Packers and 49ers stirred up the Saturday of the fateful phone call.

Before new turf could go down, the old sloppy turf had to be stripped off, loaded and hauled away. That job was half done by Tuesday evening. The surface was then leveled and prepared to accept the new sod. The first trucks from Maryland were scheduled to arrive early Wednesday. Ten o'clock came, but no trucks. The NFL contact on-site reported that the New York office was alarmed that the field was being stripped while there was no new sod to replace it.

Weather-delayed trucks finally began arriving at noon one after one, and the shipper confirmed by satellite that six more loads were nearby. The first glitch — but panic was averted.

Duraturf began installing the new bluegrass immediately. With the temperature between 2 and 8 degrees and wind chill well below zero, cables and fuel lines froze. Other temporary equipment failures added to tensions. Work continued through Wednesday and into Thursday. The goal was to have the entire playing surface resodded by 6 Thursday evening. But at 6 that morning, half an inch of snow had fallen, and the weather was getting worse. Because of the lack of drainage, the new sod had to be kept dry. As installation proceeded, massive tarps were extended to protect the part just laid. Moving in the big tarps caused more delays, but with a major snow storm in progress, they were essential to the success of the project.

Forty years of experience has taught Kidwell that good sod properly installed would not budge and would provide outstanding footing for the players. Also, the new sod was cut extra thick, 1 5/8 inches, to withstand the Packers-Panthers onslaught.

Perfect installation was imperative. Installing machines unrolled the sod as close as physically possible to the last row laid. Then to ensure a nearly seamless field, 8 to 10 workers lined up, impaled the newest row with sod hooks and on cue — "Ready? Pull!" — tugged a 3- to 4-foot section to virtually bond it to the neighboring row.

It took plenty of muscle but only minutes to "pull up" a 3,000-pound 50-foot sod strip. By dark Thursday, in a

driving snow storm, the playing surface was entirely installed and resting under the tarps.

"At this point, we knew we had the job licked," says Kidwell.

Class Act

Friday morning dawned and it was obviously still January in northern Wisconsin. Before the tarps could be removed to continue work, snow and ice had to be swept off with tractor

brooms and small trucks rigged with rubber blades. After 40 men peeled off the tarp, clean-up crews scoured the playing surface, removing any debris such as dirt left by the roller wheels when the sod was rolled out. Then end zones and out-of-bounds areas were sodded while the field was being lined.

For a few days, sod had become the most famous ground cover in the country. Kidwell says, "The Packers' own-

Q: What do all of these teams have in common?

Oakland A's
 Phoenix Cardinals
 San Diego Chargers
 Los Angeles Dodgers
 University of Texas Longhorns
 California Angels
 San Francisco 49'ers
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ers, which is everyone in Green Bay, made it a story that everyone grabbed onto. Their support and interest were awesome."

That is confirmed by the story of the club selling over 27,000 patches of the old sod for \$10 each in just three hours. The proceeds went to charity. "It goes to prove what a class act Green Bay is," says Kidwell.

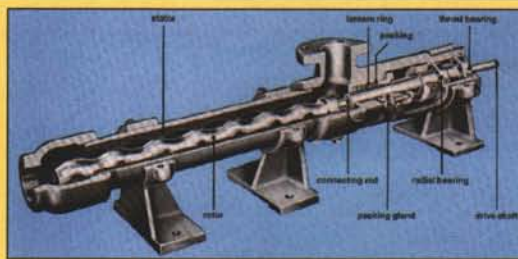
After the NFC championship game, much of the new surface installed during those frantic, frigid days was also stripped, cut and sold to fans. That sale brought in another \$200,000, which will go toward reconstruction of Lambeau's surface. This spring, Lambeau will leap into the 21st century with a state-of-the-art field: drainage, heating tubes and a surface of SportGrass, a combination artificial-natural turf system used in Baltimore that has drawn favorable reviews from NFL players. Kidwell began growing SportGrass last fall, some of which may be destined for Lambeau. It looks like the "sod squad," as the local press dubbed the Virginia crew, may strike again.

Pump for Sprigging

Hydro-stolonization, or "hydro-sprigging," is a method of vegetating prepared soil by applying cut stolons of Bermuda or other warm climate grasses. These "live" stolons or sprigs are combined with water, mulch and fertilizer, then sprayed onto the site. Standard centrifugal pumps are not appropriate for live stolons. The tight clearance at the impeller and wear plate can crush the delicate grass plants.

A progressive cavity pump, or "P.C. pump," is ideal for sprigging. The P.C. pump is made up of a long pump housing containing a rotor and stator that creates pressure, moving a high volume of slurry without risk of damage to the plant. The pump is effective with hoses of 1,000 feet or more.

Since sprigs are very vulnerable, they require the protection of mulch



A P.C. pump consists of a long pump housing containing a rotor and stator that can spray stolons without damaging the plants. Photo courtesy: Finn Corporation.

along with plenty of moisture to survive. For best results, the stolons should be planted immediately after harvesting and be kept cool and moist until application. A strict watering program must be followed after planting, never allowing the stolons to dry out.

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