

Working Up To

Super Bowl



by Steve Wightman

Television media covered the 1997 Holiday Bowl at Qualcomm Stadium, but the cameras missed the major action that followed. They didn't stick around to see George Toma's 30-second orchestration, "Count Down to the Super Bowl."

The game ended around 8:30 p.m., and within 30 minutes crews converged on Jack Murphy field. Eight of the NFL groundcrew had flown into San Diego on December 27th. All but one came from George Toma's "home" team in Kansas City. They joined our Qualcomm stadium crew for the first stage of Project Super Bowl XXXII.

As the goal posts came down, we ripped 1-1/2 inches into the existing sod with seven 14- to 20-inch sod cutters. By 1:30 a.m., cutting was complete. At 6:00 a.m. the next morning, a large loader and five dump trucks hit the field, and by 2:00 p.m., the sod had been completely stripped and trucked away.

Our crews spent the remainder of December 30 and 31 applying fertilizer, filling low areas and setting the rough grade. On New Years Day, we wrapped the finished grade and made the final pre-sodding fertilization.

The "new" sod had been growing for

ryegrasses. This produced a very mature hybrid bermudagrass to provide a bio-mass with excellent footing. The overseeded perennial ryegrass added color and growth.

We cut the sod to a height of 1-7/8 inches, and started laying it at 7:00 a.m. January 2. The process continued through 9:30 p.m. Sunday, January 4. By now our crews were working 12- to 14-hour days.

On January 5, more groundcrew members arrived. George Toma stepped into the role of hands-on coordinator and organizer. Trevor Vance, Head Groundskeeper with the Kansas City Royals, became co-captain for hands-on field operations with Atlanta Braves Head Groundskeeper Ed Mangan. After preparing playoff sites around the league, NFL

Supervisor of Fields Chip Toma joined the San Diego team on Monday, January 12. The four men pooled their resources to manage as many as 27 groundcrew members from around the



The NFL left nothing to chance when preparing for Super Bowl XXXII. Its complete renovation of the field at Qualcomm Stadium started with brand new sod. Courtesy: West Coast Turf.

over a year at West Coast Turf. In early October, the base of Tifway 419 Bermudagrass was overseeded at the rate of 15 lbs. per 1000 sq.ft. with Ph.D., a three-way blend of perennial

country (and the world), including our full Qualcomm crew.

Our crews mowed the new sod on January 7, and rolled it out the next day. With help from the San Diego City Engineering Department's surveys, we placed all the necessary benchmarks.

At this point, crews began painting the field's perimeter and yard lines. On January 13 and 14 we positioned visqueen stencil templates to apply the first coat of paint to the team and NFL logos. The design of the field's artwork attempted to preserve equality, precision and balance, and we held the variance standard to 1/4-inch or less.

Then the rains came. Our rainy season generally runs January through March, so we expected and were prepared for rain, and we certainly got it. 2-1/2 to 3 inches started coming down every day.

The turf had been thriving on a once- or twice-a-week fertilization schedule. We used small, tailored applications of all the major elements and all needed micro-nutrients. However, the wet weather combined with stretches of tarping to cause pythium in the turf. We started fungicide applications on January 9 and continued them until a few days prior to the game.

At this point, crew activity began to spread beyond Jack Murphy field. Starting January 11, we split 20 members of the NFL Super Bowl crew and seven members of the Qualcomm crew into sub-crews to fertilize, mow, manicure and paint the Broncos' and Packers' practice fields at other Chargers facilities.

The teams arrived in San Diego on January 18. On the 20th we focused our attention on Qualcomm Stadium for media day, and members of each team turned out to meet approximately 5,000 media personnel. Our crew prepared for the event by laying tarp



George Toma (right) has prepared every Super Bowl field since the inception of the championship game. Courtesy: Steve Wightman.

over the sideline area on both sides of the field. We placed 10 different podiums around the field perimeter, and erected scaffolding for the media day team pictures.

The NBC announcers' booth consisted of a platform raised 10-ft. off the ground and enclosed in Plexiglas. We placed it next to the normally open corner of Qualcomm Stadium. The NFL brought in scaffolding and temporary seating from the Rose Bowl to fill the rest of the space and made room for another 600 spectators.

Obviously, with all this construction, layout and in-and-out activity, traffic control was a major responsibility for our crews. Fork-lift movement and overall traffic at the eastern end of

the field and sideline area was intensive and destructive. The extra vehicle traffic had been restricted to turf in the out-of-bounds area, which had been protected with Enkamat, geotextile and plywood. Still, the crew ended up re-sodding about 5,000 square feet of this area three weeks into the month of January.

We mowed the game field at a one-inch height every day with 21-inch walk-behind rotary mowers to keep the grass standing upright. The one-inch height also allowed us to maximize our root structure and turf color. We used four of these mowers, none of which were self-propelled.

Crew members formed teams for each mower. One person mowed

across the field; another person mowed back. Whoever pushed the mower across emptied the grass catcher bag. Using this tag team method we could finish all of the turf in 1-1/2 hours.

A heavy mowing schedule and Mother Nature's ample irrigation put a lot of wear on the field painting. Application of the second coat occupied major blocks of time between January 13 and 18, and during the

week of the 19th.

We started dealing with on-field tarps on the 12th. As rain dominated the weather system, we covered the field every night until the 22nd. Fortunately, the weather finally broke, and it remained good during the big weekend. The crew initiated dry down efforts to prepare for the game.

We fanned across the field: brushing, brooming and cocoa matting away



In the middle of game week, the crew switched from push mowers to triplex reel mowers and set the game day height of 13/16 of an inch. Courtesy: Steve Wightman.

surface moisture. A helicopter joined the battle from the 21st to the 24th. This extra drying power came twice a day in one-hour sessions. It helped minimize disease potential and dried the turf for painting.

To tackle the painting, our crews used airless sprayers, each of which required a team of four people to operate. We filled in the fine detail work on the logos with three or four hand-held compression sprayers. Once the initial layouts were completed, the crew was able to paint the entire field, including all logos, lines, hashes and numbers, in about five hours.

By now everyone on the crew was putting in 10- to 14-hour days. There had been no breaks, nor would there be any before the Super Bowl.

Our routine became: mow the grass, dry the grass, paint another coat. And then, two days later, paint again so we didn't lose the outlines and have the time-intensive job of resetting each feature. In the middle of game week, we dropped the mowing



The crew used hand-held compression sprayers for fine detail work on the field's logos. Courtesy: Steve Wightman.

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

- Oakland A's
- Arizona Diamondbacks
- University of Texas Longhorns
- San Diego Chargers
- University of Southern California Trojans
- California Angels
- Arizona State University Sun Devils
- San Francisco 49'ers
- San Diego State University Aztecs
- San Francisco Giants
- San Diego Padres
- Los Angeles Dodgers
- Oakland Raiders
- Arizona Cardinals

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height to 13/16 of an inch and switched to triplex reel mowers. This helped reduce some of the under-tarp moisture during the rehearsal period and set up the game day height.

Of all the pre-game events, half-time show rehearsals caused the most extensive turf damage. George Toma presented a strong case for saving the turf for game day, but on-field rehearsal was not a negotiable point. To minimize the damage, crews had painted an exact replica of the field on the parking lot to host rehearsals.

600 people took to the field for the first on-field rehearsal, and the number doubled for the second. The 23-ton stage put further stress on the field, and rehearsals for the pre- and post-game shows brought even more trampling feet.

To prevent some of the damage, we took the six sections of tarp that covered the field, pieced them together and again painted the field on them. This allowed the field to be covered during on-field rehearsals, and the groups could still find their reference points without a problem.

The crew used the tarp for all on-field rehearsals. Each time we removed the cover, we dried the field with a combination of people power and helicopter force. We painted whenever an open time period presented itself. At times, wet paint had to be covered to accommodate rehearsals.



By the time the event actually arrived, the crew had been stretched beyond their limits, but the NFL was able to present a top notch field to the world. Courtesy: Steve Wightman.

We dyed the field for the first time after rehearsal on the night of the 23rd. The turf had looked good going into the rehearsal cycle, but it showed poor coloration when the tarp came off. However, the overall plan had worked. The mature bermudagrass reinforced with the overseeded perennial ryegrass blend provided the dense bio-mass and good footing needed to support play.

Finally, the crew followed favorable weather reports on Friday the 23rd, and rolled up the tarps. Saturday, January 24, we dyed the field again and painted it to give every blade of grass the appropriate color. The crew left the stadium at 7:00 a.m. on Saturday, and returned exactly 24 hours later to give the field its final, game-day coat of paint. We finished everything at noon, with little time to spare before the 3:20 p.m. kick off.

At 9:30 p.m. that night, after all the festivities had finally come to an end,

most of the groundcrew went home to some much-deserved relaxation. However, some were not as lucky. Chip, George, Trevor and Ed headed directly to Hawaii to get things ready for the Pro Bowl. Only a core of seven stayed through Tuesday morning to pack up and load trucks for shipment back to the NFL offices in Kansas City. By Tuesday afternoon, all that was left was the aftermath.

Thanks for the Opportunity

Super Bowl preparation is a complex interaction of multiple forces all focused on the same goal: a top-notch game played on a top notch field. Coaches and players on the two competing teams, media representatives, and the world-wide audience demand and deserve it.

The groundcrew of this endeavor is just one piece of the massive puzzle. Our crew knew this was our home field, but they also knew it wasn't "our show." We were there to do whatever we could to fill assigned links in the master plan. That was what happened.

It was a long haul of hard work filled with cooperation, great camaraderie and a good measure of humor. It was a lot of fun at the start, but by the time the event actually arrived, we were spent. We stretched our humor and our energy to the limit, and it was worth every minute of it.

Every single member of the groundcrew team was ready, willing and able to do whatever it took to accomplish the job, however it needed to be done. George Toma's "and then some" ethic kept us going throughout. It was an exciting and unforgettable experience

and we all were honored to play a part in it.

We say thanks to George Toma, Chip Toma, Trevor Vance, Ed Mangan and all the other NFL groundcrew players in Project Super Bowl XXXII.

Steve Wightman, Stadium Turf Manager; Bill Gibbs, Assistant; and crew members: Matt Balough, Victor Castenada, George Cubero, Doc Donovan, Resti Estacio, John Flores, Frank Garrido, Aaron Reyes, and Marty Reyes. □