

When Fans Take the Field



by Bob Tracinski

On September 17, 1998, over 107,000 people filled the stands of Neyland Stadium in Knoxville, TN, to witness that perpetual football challenge of the Southeast Conference: University of Florida versus University of Tennessee. When Tennessee squeezed out a 20 to 17 victory in the final seconds of overtime, the crowd swarmed onto the field.

Crew members protected the field's water canons by standing on the padded boxes that cover them during games, but they couldn't save the goal posts. Both came down, taking \$110,000 CBS TV cameras with them.

"We thought once the goal posts were down, the crowd would clear out," said Bob Campbell, director of facilities for the University of Tennessee. "Instead, they went after the orange turf — the checkered sections in the end zones and the "T" in the center of the field."

When they couldn't pull it up by hand they used pocket knives, keys — whatever they could find to dig up chunks of orange-colored sod.

Once fans removed one segment of the sand-based field, adjoining sod became easier to scoop up. They carted it away, perhaps with the intent expressed by one souvenir seeker: "I'm gonna take it home and grow it."

Now what?

What do you do when fans take the field? If you're a professional like Bob Campbell, you thoroughly consider all

the options, and the long- and short-term impacts of each.

When the field finally emptied at 1:30 am, Campbell and his crew surveyed the damage and weighed those options.

Most of the playing area was intact, but there were approximately 150 major holes in the end zones and at key spots at mid-field. The patchwork of holes averaged three to four inches deep, and ranged from a few inches to three feet across. The next game was six days away.

Luckily, the holes were scattered and surrounded by good, well-rooted turf. The crew immediate-



ly ruled out filling the areas with sand and covering them with regular-cut sod. There'd be little stability and nothing to anchor the patched sod.

They considered filling the holes with their sand medium and painting it to match the field, but decided areas that large filled with exposed sand would lack the stability to support play. Unfortunately, they didn't have a sod nursery on-site or a sod producer with a growing medium matching the field's soil profile.

They decided to use sod from under the players' benches to make the repairs. It seemed to be the only way to protect the field's integrity and stabilize the surface.

"The sod replacement was a trial and error process," said



Souvenirs of Tennessee's victory left about 150 holes in the field at Neyland Stadium.

Courtesy: Bob Campbell

Campbell, "First, we used a square-point shovel to square off the edges of the damaged section before leveling out the bottom. Then we moved to the area

beneath the benches and used the shovels to cut straight down, four to six inches deep, for sections of replacement sod.

"We tried digging large blocks and cutting sections from it. But they were too heavy to handle, so we lost some of the soil medium in the process and didn't get the fit or stability we wanted. Then we found the solution.

"We'd square off a damaged area, then cut an identical matching section, ease it onto a piece of plywood, put the plywood on our utility vehicle, and bring it right to the spot. Then we'd slip the replacement sod in place, tamp it with the baseball mound tamp, and water it in.

"These pieces were an almost perfect fit and gained the stabil-

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ity of the surrounding turf mass. We set each section a bit high and then tamped and watered it into place to eliminate air pockets or low spots."

The crew worked until dark on Sunday. With the installed sections holding well, they contin-

ued the process all day Monday and until noon on Tuesday.

At that point, preparations and painting for Saturday's game became the priority. Only small holes remained and crews continued repairs on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday.



Crews carved replacement sod from under the players' benches.

Courtesy: Bob Campbell

The crew had taken replacement sod from between the 25-yard lines on both sides of the field. They used topdressing mix to fill these spots, and then seeded them with perennial ryegrass. They overseeded the entire field with the same perennial ryegrass blend to counteract the damage, even though it had been overseeded a couple weeks earlier.

"Safety had always been our number one goal," said Campbell, "By Friday we felt the field was as safe as it could be. We did put some green pigment on it as a final touch up. The fence, bush, and stadium repairs also had been completed. You could only tell field damage had occurred if you knew where to look for it. And, we'd done nothing to challenge the integrity of the field."

The test

Play was the real test. But when the game was over, all the repairs had held and no player had slipped.

With three weeks before the next home game, crews fertilized the field, overseeded with more perennial ryegrass, watered, and mowed. No visible damage remained for the Alabama game.

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With another home game in one week, crews worked tirelessly to patch the holes.

Courtesy: Bob Campbell

dent crew members," Campbell said. "They worked through the baking sun and 90-degree temperatures, determined that the next game would be played here, on a good field. "Every situation is different. We were on the edge of the time line necessary to make the repairs with a process that protected field integrity. With just a little more damage, a less dedicated crew, or even a day of unworkable weather conditions, we'd probably have needed to strip a large portion of the field turf, install thick-cut sod, and deal with the long-range consequences. The bottom line is you've got to play the game and play it on as safe a field as possible.

"I think the field will look the same for fans and feel the same



All of the patched sod held when game day arrived.

Courtesy: Bob Campbell

for the players. But with the repairs and all the compaction from that traffic, it will take a full season of extensive maintenance to get it back to its original condition."

Bob Tracinski is business communications manager for John Deere in Raleigh, NC. He is public relations co-chair for the National STMA.

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