

BY STEVE WIGHTMAN

# PREPARING FOR SUPER BOWL XXXVII

**E**ach year on the final Sunday in January one of sports greatest spectacles manifests itself on nearly every television set in America as well as on radios, in bars and at street corners in every town from San Diego to Bangor, ME. It is also watched and listened to in nearly every country on the globe. Nearly half of the preceding 6 months the NFL has scheduled one-on-one competition that began with preseason games, regular season standoffs, and playoffs that have finally left only two teams with the best records in football squaring off against each other in the Super Bowl.

For most, the culmination of the NFL season begins the week before the Big Game when the League champions have been decided. The media frenzy and the ensuing game analysis creates predictions based on yards-per-carry, percentage-of-completions, strength against the rush, yards passing, and the like. The two teams that have earned the right to represent their respective leagues in pursuit of the golden ring have but a few days to prepare for one another. However, there have been other preparations taking place for the Big Game long before the first round of playoffs even began.

As the focal point of the entire game (with hundreds of millions of viewers and countless photographs to follow) the playing field must be perfect in every aspect—from aesthetics to safety

to league specifications.

Under the direction of George Toma and Ed Mangan with the NFL, field preparations for Super Bowl XXXVII in San Diego began at 6:00 PM on December 29, 2002, just 65 minutes following the Charger/Seahawks regular season game. Although 28 days before Super Bowl kickoff, there was much to be done. Under the stadium field lights, the entire field floor at Qualcomm Stadium was sod-cut with all irrigation components marked and capped by 10:30 PM that night.

At morning's first light the following day, fifteen 18-wheel end dumps and a 3 1/2-yard loader began scooping up the cut sod and hauling it away to be recycled into organic mulch. At 2:15 PM the entire field floor was clear of all remaining grass from the disappointing Charger season. Before the last trucks left the stadium, the field was already being laser graded to establish the perfect grade in preparation for new sod.

At 3:00 PM on Tuesday, December 31, the entire field floor had been laser graded to within +/- 1/2 inch in any direction for 100 feet. By 6:00 PM on Wednesday, January 1, all of the irrigation heads had been reinstalled to grade and adjusted for proper operation.

The field was then irrigated to establish adequate soil moisture and to settle and firm any remaining loose soil areas.





The following day, on January 1, the sand-based field was rolled with a 3-ton drum roller to establish uniform soil firmness. The field then was laser graded one final time to reestablish that perfect grade in preparation for sod.

The next 2 days were spent fertilizing the soil, staging and positioning the rain tarps, and receiving all of the grounds and painting equipment that would be necessary to maintain the field over the next 3 1/2 weeks. These 2 days were also taken up with visits and evaluations of the two practice sites that would be used by the two Super Bowl teams when they arrived in San Diego.

On Saturday, January 4, the first 35,000 square feet of sod arrived and the crew of 25 immediately began carefully placing it on the prepared soil. The sod used for Super Bowl XXXVII was improved bermudagrass that had been overseeded with perennial ryegrass and grown to NFL specifications for the past 8 months. Harvesting began at the sod farm 12 hours before placement at the stadium. The sod was harvested in 1 1/2-inch thick cut

rolls 42 inches wide and 30 feet long with each roll weighing 2,000 pounds.

At 4:00 PM on the third day all 100,000 square feet of sod had been securely placed and the long task of primping and manicuring began and continuing right up until kick-off. With the thickness and weight of each roll deep rooting became secondary to a tight dense canopy both ensuring stable and firm footing for the quick and agile 300-pounders now so common in the NFL.

In addition to the stadium field, the two practice sites for the competing teams were also included in the daily routine of cultural practices.

Ten days before the Big Game the initial painting of the practice fields began. Since it was unknown at this time which of the four teams still in the playoffs would advance to the Super Bowl crews painted the typical lines and hash marks. The stadium field's initial painting was done at this time also. Following the final playoff weekend when the two teams were decided the crews added each team's predetermined specifications at the

practice sites. Many teams have special field markings on their practice fields depicting various offense and defensive alignments. The endzones on the stadium field were also painted after that final playoff weekend when it became certain that they would read, "Raiders" and "Buccaneers."

The 7 days leading up to the Big Game were filled with logistical nightmares between the morning dew from the cool humid southern California air, the pregame, halftime, and postgame rehearsals as well as Media Day and team practices. To help protect the stadium playing surface during the 3 days and numerous hours of rehearsals, the field was covered with a protective tarp upon which the crew had painted an entire football field to assist the participants with their alignments and positions.

The day before the game was the final painting of the field that had to be orchestrated around each team's practice. With 25 knowledgeable crewmembers and five spray machines the task of brightening the colors and sharpening the lines and edges took but 7 hours. At the end of the day the entire crew donated their multi-colored shoes to the rafters located high above the main tunnel entrance to the field at Qualcomm Stadium, a longtime tradition at the Q. The shoes remain even today as a fond reminder of an exciting and satisfying experience for us all.

History was made at Super Bowl XXXVII. For the first time there were female groundcrew members that helped prepare the field for this great event. Abby McNeal, CSFM, of the Denver Broncos, and Raechal Volkening of the Milwaukee Brewers, contributed their hard work and expertise as members of the Super Bowl crew. Crew members handpicked for their work ethic from numerous ballclubs across the country as well as Japan worked side by side 7 days a week for 11-14 hours each day to accomplish a truly remarkable feat. Under the guidance and direction of George Toma and Ed Mangan there was not a single detail that was left undone. Toma has prepared every single Super Bowl field and at 75 was hard to keep up with, even for most of the younger crewmembers. Mangan, field director for the Atlanta Braves and the NFL director of fields, provided us all with the professional leadership and detailed planning necessary to accomplish a task of this magnitude. When it was all said and done, Super Bowl XXXVII had the perfect field on a day that reciprocated with perfect weather.

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Photo courtesy of the San Diego QFB. Photographer: Rick Gausler