

# "and then some!"

By Alan Goforth

**G**eorge Toma titled his autobiography "Nitty Gritty Dirt Man" for good reason. At age 76, at the pinnacle of his profession, there still is nothing he would rather do than take off his shirt, get his hands dirty, and put an athletic field into playing condition.

Toma, a founder of the Sports Turf Managers Association, may well be the most recognizable name in the profession. The basement of his home in Westwood, KS is packed with awards he has accumulated in a career that has spanned more than six decades.

- He has been groundskeeper for the Olympics and World Cup soccer, as well as every Super Bowl ever played.
- In 2001, he became the first groundskeeper to be inducted into the NFL Hall of Fame.
- In an ESPN SportsCenter promotion, he was featured as the "Marquis de Sod."
- His autobiography was published in 2004.
- In perhaps the greatest honor the sporting profession can bestow, he even has his own bobblehead doll.

Those accomplishments are even more impressive when considering Toma's often-difficult road to the top. He was born April 2, 1929 in the coal-mining town of Edwardsville, PA. His father, a miner, collapsed and died from black lung disease when Toma was only 10. He started working immediately to help support his family, and hasn't slowed down since.

A neighbor began taking him to old Artillery Park in Wilkes-Barre, PA to drag the infield. When maverick baseball owner Bill Veeck purchased the Cleveland Indians in 1947, he got the Wilkes-Barre team as part of the deal. The following year, he sent Toma to spring training to learn from the master, Emil Bossard.

"Emil is the best I've ever seen," Toma says. "He could take a rake and lay out an infield that was right on the money. Emil's sons, Gene, Marshall, and Harold all followed him in the business. His



George Toma, center, is flanked by former All-Star hurler Bret Saberhagen, who's now building a field for the high school team he coaches, and West Coast Turf vice president Danielle Marman.

grandson, Roger Bossard, is now the head groundskeeper at U.S. Cellular Field in Chicago."

### Climbing the ladder

After serving in the Korean War, Toma began moving up the ladder in 1955, when he became head groundskeeper at Offerman Stadium in Buffalo. The following season, he moved to Charleston, WV with the Detroit Tigers' top farm team. Then came a call from the expansion Kansas City Athletics. Toma asked his mentor Bossard for advice.

"Son, let me tell you, don't go," Emil said. "I'm in there a few times a month trying to straighten that place out for the manager, Lou Boudreau. There's no drainage or irrigation. In the springtime, it floods you out. In the summertime, it gets so hot that it bakes you out. Stay the hell out of there."

Instead, he took the advice of management in Charleston: "George, the best thing for you to do is go to Kansas City. If you screw up, nobody will notice, it's so bad."



Toma didn't realize what a challenge the job would be. "I had one full-time person to help me, along with a group of local high school kids whom we hired during the season," he said. "Plus, we had to do everything on a shoestring budget, because the front office was so cheap. All we had was a Toro professional mower, an aerifier, and an International tractor. We even resorted to hiring a few winos off the street to pull tarps."

With the help of another mentor, Dr. James R. Watson of The Toro Company, however, he soon turned the field around. The surface had become a favorite of American League players well before Lamar Hunt decided to move his football team to Kansas City.

"I welcomed the opportunity to work on football fields again because of the variety," Toma said. "In baseball, where only three men play on grass, the wear and tear is minimal. In football, however, 300-pound men slam into each other and tear up the middle of the field. Plus, football is played in cooler temperatures in Kansas City, requiring a different approach to growing grass."

### A national stage

Toma's life changed dramatically after the NFL and AFL merged. During a nationally televised game at Municipal Stadium in Kansas City, former commissioner Pete Rozelle remarked, "There is not much difference in the way they play the game, but I have never seen a better-kept field than they have right here."

That led to an offer from Tex Schramm of the Dallas Cowboys to prepare the Cotton Bowl for the team's annual Thanksgiving Day game. That game, in turn, led to Toma being in charge of Super Bowl fields for the past four decades.

"With all of the hoopla surrounding the game today, it's hard to describe how humbly it began," he said. "For starters, I was able to load all of the equipment I would need in an old 3 x 4-foot trunk. Today, the equipment is stored in a warehouse in Newark, NJ and shipped to the stadium in semi-trailers. The crew at the old Coliseum helped me prepare the field; I now have 20 hand-picked groundskeepers on our crew."

Of all of his many accomplishments, Toma is most proud of his work with the Super Bowl. "When I die, that NFL insignia is going to be right on my heart," he said. "That's how much I love the NFL."

If the NFL is No. 1, the STMA is a close second. Toma believes in sharing his knowledge and passion. "I was blessed to have a great mentor in Emil Bossard, so I understand how important it is to pass the torch to the next generation," he said. "In 1981, I sat down at the old Muehlebach Hotel in downtown Kansas City with three great men—Harry Gill, groundskeeper for the Milwaukee Brewers; Dick Erickson, groundskeeper for the Minnesota Twins and Vikings; and Dr. Bill Daniels, an agronomist at Purdue University. Kent Kurtz, a professor at Cal-Poly, also helped us get organized."

"At that meeting, we founded the STMA to support and encourage professional groundskeepers on all levels. From that humble begin-

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# 25TH ANNIVERSARY

ning, we now have more than 2,500 members. An annual award is presented in honor of each of the four founders. I am proud of mine, the George Toma Golden Rake Award. It's a way to honor hard work and then some, to distinguish the mediocre from the great."

Toma included an open letter to STMA members in his book (see sidebar).

## And then some

From coal fields to Super Bowl fields, Toma has had only one gear—overdrive. He has always believed in going the extra mile to do things right but never knew just how to describe his commitment, until he received a letter from a fan.

"My family always taught me to give my employer 100 percent and more," he said. "That has been my philosophy from when I worked on farms in my teens through working on championship fields in my 70's.

"As much as I lived this philosophy of life, I never was able to adequately express it to other people. Then, in 1991, I received a letter from Bob Woolford, president of Shawnee Mission Medical Center in suburban Kansas City. He said he was at a Royals game and admired my crew, because we did our job 'and then some.'

"Those three words clicked with me, and I have been using them ever since. In fact, the STMA award named after me officially is called the 'George Toma And Then Some Golden Rake Award,' thanks to Bob Woolford."

Toma tries to instill that attitude in his crews and even in some of the professional teams with whom he works.

"I was doing some work at old Foxboro Stadium, and coach Dick McPherson asked me to speak to his players the night before their big game against the New York Jets," he said. "I discussed how the field would play, then told the players, 'Do your job, and then some. That is what distinguishes the mediocre from the great.'

"The next day, the Patriots were driving for the winning score, but the Jets held them at the goal line. Some of the players came up to me the next day and said, 'How are you doing, and then some?'

"I said, 'You know what? Bruce Coslet, the coach of the Jets, called me after I spoke to you, and I gave the Jets the same speech. They listened, and they stopped you on four downs.'"

Toma, who is away from home about 300 nights a year, still maintains a pace that would wear out many men who are half his age. In 2005 alone, he maintained spring training fields for the Minnesota Twins, built inner-city ball fields on behalf of Major League Baseball, and will prepare the practice fields and the playing surface for Super Bowl XL in Detroit next month.

The turf management profession wouldn't be quite the same without George Toma. He did everything he could to help make the STMA the thriving organization it is today—and then some. ■

*Alan Goforth is president of Veritas Communications, Lee's Summit, MO, and co-authored of George Toma's autobiography.*

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