

Will Schnell scalps Rose Bowl field under the lights.

Field takes center stage at the Rose Bowl

Editor's note: This article was written by Danielle Marman, director of marketing for West Coast Turf

As Ohio State and Oregon battled it out at the Rose Bowl on New Year's Day, a carefully planned, different Rose Bowl challenge was just beginning about 125 miles away in the California desert. The test? The Rose Bowl needed a fresh new field installed to host the BCS Citi National Championship game—and it had to be ready in just 6 days.

In 2007, a separate BCS National Championship game was added to the BCS system. University of Phoenix Stadium was the first venue to host the new game schedule, with the Fiesta Bowl played January 2, and the BCS National Championship 6 days later at the same location.

This presented a question. How exactly do you get a field perfect enough to accommodate the

most important game in college football less than one week after the wear and tear of another major college bowl game? Arizona Diamondbacks' head groundskeeper Grant Trenbeath was called in to consult. "We didn't have much time to get the field ready or rooted, so we opted to use an 'overlay' technique that I'd used before at Chase Field for the Insight Bowl. With the overlay, you use thick-cut sod and put it right on top of the field that is in there. The sod is so heavy that it stays in place and doesn't move," Trenbeath said.

It worked. The first "stand alone" BCS National Championship game was played on a flawless new field with only 6 days to prepare.

Taking notes

Knowing their turn was coming, the Rose Bowl representatives (including head groundskeeper Will

Schnell) were watching. "Will and I had some conversations," Trenbeath said. "He wanted to make sure he was making the right choice, so he investigated all of the details. You don't want any surprises, especially for a game of this magnitude. He wanted to know exactly what to expect and how to prepare. He did all of the homework."

The Rose Bowl had alternatives, but Schnell was confident that the overlay technique was the right option, and he didn't

have to work very hard to convince others.

The decision was made. "Will is an artist when it comes to our field," said Rose Bowl general manager Darryl Dunn. "We have the utmost confidence in his knowledge and opinion when it comes to the field. I wanted

to be sure that this was the right thing to do to provide the best possible 'stage' for the biggest event of the year. I did ask him quite a few questions, and he provided the right answers. Will, Kevin Ash (chief administration officer of the Tournament of Roses), and I discussed this plan for more than a year and we went with it. I didn't lose any sleep, as I believe you can't trust your people just half the time; I trust Will Schnell."

The Rose Bowl used their regular sod supplier, Palm Desert, CA-based West Coast Turf. "They specialize in big roll athletic turf sod," Schnell said. "They provide a great product."

It also helped that West Coast Turf has had extensive experience in this particular

technique, as they were the growers and installers of sod for all of Trenbeath's projects in Arizona as well as "overlay fields" for Super Bowl XXXVIII at Reliant Stadium, and several other venues. Schnell worked closely with the sod supplier to prepare his strategy. He made regular visits out to the farm, and specified his turf variety, soil medium, and fertilization schedule. He also monitored the progress of the turf by taking soil samples and doing tissue testing monthly.

Being a perfectionist, Schnell even went so far as to do a simulation of the field installation when a U2 concert this past October presented the model scenario. After the concert a new overlay field surface was put in for a UCLA game scheduled 9 days later. Schnell imposed a 6-day timeframe for which to complete the field.

"Putting in a new field then was out of necessity, but it also worked out to be a great opportunity," said Dunn. "It was a great trial run."

But he didn't stop there. Although Schnell researched the overlay at University of Phoenix Stadium, he had a very different situation. In Arizona they have a roof on the facility so they can control the weather. The Rose Bowl doesn't. Even though "it never rains in California" as the old song goes, they couldn't take any chances with drainage.

So in early summer some soil testing was done to see how the Rose Bowl field's drainage system was performing. After the report came back, it was determined that a new complete system was essential. The only time available in the busy Rose Bowl calendar was to start the project November 22 right after the last UCLA game. Two layers of sod had to be removed, a new drainage system, growing medium and sod needed to be installed, and it all had to be completed in 13 days.



Schnell called Dan Almond to help him map out this daunting mission, and assembled a team to pull it off. Just Moving Dirt was contracted to remove the two sod layers totaling 3 inches, and another 6 inches of the old soil medium. GreenOne Industries installed the new drain matrix (their QwikDrain system). West Coast Sand and Gravel provided the new 6-inch, straight sand growing medium that topped the new



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drain system. Bill Barkshire of Barkshire Laser Leveling was the final piece of the puzzle. He laser graded the growing medium in preparation for the sod to be laid December 4 and 5. Work was done around the clock to stay on schedule. This field had time to root, and hosted the Rose Bowl Game on January 1.



Doing the right thing?

The Capital One Bowl, held at the Citrus Bowl in Orlando, was televised just before this year's Rose Bowl game. On a scale from 1-10, field conditions went from a "1" in Orlando, to a "12" in Pasadena.

The Citrus Bowl field had been newly sodded with traditional sod a few weeks earlier. It did not root. Add in another bowl game 3 days prior, cold weather, and a downpour, and it made for a muddy, sloppy and unstable field come game time.

Minutes after Ohio State celebrated their Rose Bowl game victory, ABC's Brent Musburger revealed on air that the Rose Bowl was going to be getting a new field with new sod that very night for the BCS Championship game. That announcement prompted public alarm. With the current field still looking pristine, no one could quite figure out why they would risk taking a "perfectly good" field out, and put a new one in for a game less than a week away, especially after just witnessing the poor results of the new sod job at the Citrus Bowl.

"My phone started ringing immediately," said West Coast Turf's project manager Tom Stafford. "People thought we were all crazy to replace the field. But what no one understood was that we've all been setting this up for over a year. They also didn't understand that we didn't expect the sod to root and that is why we were using thick-cut sod. We were 100% positive that it would work, and give the championship the ultimate surface for the game.

"Sure, the Rose Bowl field looked great on TV during the Oregon/Ohio State game, but it was also covered with gallons of

paint for logos, and had a lot of pregame, halftime, and postgame festivities on it in addition to the game," Stafford said. "Could they have gotten that field ready again in 6 days? Yes, I'm sure. But that isn't how the Rose Bowl does things. They're famous for that field. It is their brand. Nothing less than perfect is good enough there."

And, it's not all just about how the grass looks. "We wanted to provide a non-used surface, so there's not a cleat mark out there when the kickoff takes place," Schnell explained. "You see a player go out there and put his hand down on the grass and say, 'Is this real, or is it fake?' that's a tremendous compliment. The first thing we want to do is provide a great playing surface for the athletes. Then you want it to look good on camera."

There was also a "Plan B." Had rain been in the forecast, the crew was prepared to replace only the painted endzones with new sod. Luckily, rain wasn't part of the program.

Right after kickoff on New Year's Day, West Coast Turf crews began their own "kickoff" and started harvesting the overseeded hybrid bermuda in the desert. They continued through the night. Rolls were cut 1 1/2-feet thick, 30-feet long, and 42-inches wide. Fifty truckloads accommodated 110,000 square feet of sod. Trucks began arriving in Pasadena just a few hours after the final whistle was blown, and the last remnants of celebration were removed.

At the stadium, West Coast Turf supplied a crew of 24 installers, and the Rose Bowl added another 24, including some "Turf All-Stars." Schnell enlisted the help of Mets head groundskeeper Bill Deacon, Home Depot Center's Kyle Waters, Reno Aces' Eric Blanton, Neal Pate of the Browns, Justin Peliquin, and some of the Dodgers' ground crew. "Most importantly, I had my two assistants, Miguel Yopez and Martin Rodriguez, working hard the whole time, too. They deserve a lot of the credit," Schnell said.

Right after the game, crews scalped the field down to 1/4 inch and started unrolling the new sod right on top.

"It took 21 hours from the time we started putting in the sod and rolling the field, leveling it out to get the pool table effect, as low and level as possible," said Schnell. Workers installed through the night, finishing just before sundown the next day.

The ground crew spent the next 5 days painting new logos, watering the turf at just the right levels, rolling and sweeping the grass, and mowing at exactly the right time and length so the grass would hit its peak condition on game day.

The final score

On January 7, the hard work paid off. The field looked bright green, seamless, lush, and pristine. Playing conditions could not have been better.

"When the field looks beautiful there's a sense of accomplishment amongst those on the inside," said Kevin Ash, chief administration officer of the Tournament of Roses. The millions of television viewers seemed to agree. Headlines read "Rose Bowl Goes Extra Yard," and some of the comments from the press were, "Field at the Rose Bowl is immaculate, not a blade of grass out of place; every BCS Championship should be held there," and "Rose Bowl field looks better than Augusta."

Before the game, Texas quarterback Colt McCoy was on the field and commented on air that he wished he had brought his pitching wedge.

But what did Schnell think? "Every time I do something I always look for ways to make it better. Even before the last play of the BCS, Tom Stafford and I were coming up with ways to make it better. There's always room for improvement. Two days before the game we saw we were going to have a really good field. I told my staff, 'OK guys, it is end of the 3rd quarter, and we're up by 14. I want it to be 21 by game time.' Too many times I have had projects that are going well, and then we back off. Boy, they turned it up a notch! By game time the grounds crew was up by 21 points. The Rose Bowl crew from top to bottom met the challenge head on, and had an incredible victory. Heck, it was a blow out! In my book, it ended up 'Grounds Crew 30, Failure 3.' The '3' is for improvement next time," Schnell said.

"People all over see a field that looks good. We know what it took to make that happen," Ash said.

And now we all know what it took, too. Trust in talented people, quality product, precise planning, clever strategy, hard work, and of course, cooperating weather.

A few days after the game, grass from the endzones and logos was removed from the field and taken back to the sod farm. There it was



laid back down, cut into small rolls, hydro-cooled, and shipped to New Jersey. It was then cut into 3 x 3-inch pieces, freeze dried, packaged into UV glass cases, and sold as "collectable souvenirs" for \$100 to \$250. The remaining championship sod was recycled, and used for repair work in other locations. ■

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