

Post-storm, Cowboy practice fields back in shape

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DURING A ROOKIE MINI-CAMP in May of 2009 a violent windstorm ripped into the Dallas Cowboy's practice dome making news headlines around the world. The dome's framework and fabric shell collapsed onto the players, coaches and field staff, while sending a sky-full of debris, trash and glass over their two adjacent outdoor practice fields. Miraculously no one was killed. Not surprisingly, both practice fields were ruined. You can spend the money to clean up and remove most debris, but you can't practice on fields embedded with glass shards from end zone to end zone. The Cowboys had no choice but to pull up the existing sod and get rid of it.

Fortunately Chris Morrow, field supervisor for the Cowboys, had already been talking to Gene Dahlen of King Ranch Turfgrass about re-doing his fields. During a conversation in early October, Morrow recalled, "Actually Gene came out about 2 years ago when we first started kicking around the idea of re-sodding. After the dome collapse we got the go-ahead to get it done full-speed-ahead, so I called Gene, went down to their Potet, TX farm, picked out my 5-acres of TifSport, and got them to start duplicating the cultural practices I would be using at our facility. I also

got them to initiate a grow-in fertility schedule to gear it up for being installed here."

Cowboy owner Jerry Jones and his family are famous for their hands-on management style, but they left all of the grassing decisions to Chris. He had been thinking about replacing the original Tifway 419

with new 419, but he liked the TifSport at Potet a little better than the 419 there. "The TifSport was just more mature, by about 10-12 months, and the stolon and rhizome matt was far superior."

With the 2009 season fast approaching, Chris, an army of one, had a lot of work to do. After cleaning up from the storm's



» **Top Two images:** KING RANCH TURFGRASS CREW work new TifSport Bermudagrass sod into place.

» **Bottom image:** Turf was installed using 42-inch center-cut big rolls, which go down and transported easier.

wrath and disposing of the ruined sod, he went to work preparing the two practice fields for the new TifSport. “We had 18-inch crowns out here in the center of both fields, and we knocked them down and brought in 9 inches of sand for our rootzone mix. We sodded directly on top of that. We also put in new underground irrigation. Now we have Hunter heads at 50-foot intervals all the way down both sides of both fields. We’re on city water, so the water quality is pretty much neutral. No problems there.”

They sodded field #1 in late July, followed by field #2 exactly 2 weeks later. So Chris kept the players off of field #2 for 2 weeks longer than field #1. According to Morrow, “The TifSport on field #1 was only down for 27 days before we had our first practice on it. And that was the first week of the regular season. Thank goodness we had such great service from King Ranch, and Gene and the boys. We also wanted a grass grown on a sand base, because that’s what we have here. The TifSport went down really fast. We were installing 42-inch big rolls, which we center-cut so they would go down easier and be easier to move around.”

Chris comes from a turfgrass background. He graduated from North Carolina State in 1995 with a degree in turfgrass management. In the spring of the following year, he was hired by the Carolina Panthers to be on their outside landscaping crew. After about a year he moved inside. His new responsibilities included taking care of the practice fields and helping maintain the game field. Chris adds, “I was basically doing the same thing for the Panthers that I’m doing here. I mow, fertilize and paint. And any cultural practices are my responsibility. I also take care of the landscaping surrounding the fields.” The Cowboys hired Chris in 2002, and he’s been with them ever since. Morrow’s young but impressive career already includes an STMA 2004 “Field of the Year” award.

Chris admits he’s got a lot to learn about TifSport. “Before I decided on TifSport, I went to the website and looked at a lot of the information there. I also talked to Terry Porch, who has TifSport on the Tennessee Titans practice fields. I knew Terry from my Carolina Panther days. We worked together for a couple of years in Charlotte before he took the Titans job. Terry was one of the very first sports turf managers on the professional level to have TifSport. And I talked

to Don Follett when he was with the Redskins. He had good success with his.” Follett is with the Baltimore Ravens now.

“I’ve been working with 419 for about 12 years now, so this is new to me, but I’m a pretty quick learner. Kevin Robinson has TifSport on his field at Keenan Stadium in Chapel Hill, and I know that Kris Harris had it when he was at Georgia Tech. I need to call them and pick their brains a little bit.”

Chris is anxious to see how low he can take his new grass. “When my TifSport was still at the farm in Poteet, I got them to take the height of cut down to ½ inch, and I’m down to 7/16 inch here now. I’d like to go lower, but there’s no way I can do that right now. I routinely used to cut 419 at 5/16, so I know I can get lower than that with TifSport. I watch Georgia Tech play whenever they’re on TV and I love seeing that TifSport field on the screen. I know that in a year or two, I can have my fields looking like that. That’s what I’m after.”

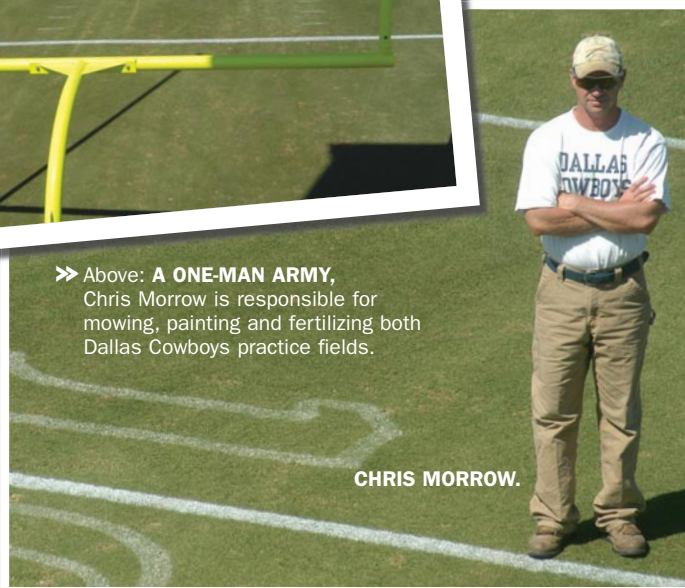
TifSport has a finer blade than 419, and a darker green color. Morrow has also noticed that the stolons don’t seem to move as fast as 419, “When this grass gets sheared, it grows back into the divot very quickly. It grows more from the bottom up rather than laterally, at least right now.

“I’m still debating about whether to overseed or not. Normally I would overseed if it were 419, but with this being new sod, I don’t know how much competition I want next spring. So I may just not overseed, or I may overseed very lightly. I don’t have any experience with how TifSport will handle overseeding. That’s one of the things I’m going to have to learn. I do know that when Kris Harris was at Georgia Tech he overseeded his TifSport very heavily, and he started early. Jon DeWitt, who’s managing the fields at Tech now, does the same thing. But I want a quick green-up next spring, and I don’t want much competition.

“I’m also hoping that I can get a little further into the season before I start to see a decline in my TifSport’s growth. I’ve heard it will go a little longer than 419. I’m going to keep up my fertilization program for as long as I can, for as long as it keeps growing and staying green.”



» Above: **A ONE-MAN ARMY,** Chris Morrow is responsible for mowing, painting and fertilizing both Dallas Cowboys practice fields.



CHRIS MORROW.

When Chris was in the grow-in mode, he was pouring the coals to his new TifSport. "I was feeding it constantly. Now I'm starting to change gears into the maintenance mode. I still hit it with a foliar every 7 to 14 days. And I hit it with a granular in between to keep the color up and keep it growing. Right now I need as much growth as I can get on the top and bottom. Like I said, it's only been down 6 to 8 weeks, so I'll be paying close attention to see if I can figure out what it likes and dislikes. I'm excited about it though. It's a new frontier for me."

Chris mows his fields 6 days a week. "I give them the day off on Sunday, because Sunday is my day off too. But next year is when the real fun begins, because that's when I get to start aerifying it and topdressing it more. That's when I get to start putting my own fingerprint on it. That's when I'll find out if I can get my field mowed down shorter than Georgia Tech's."

"Even though this is a very young turf, the coaches and players like it a lot! There's better footing because of that healthy mat underneath. That's a lot easier on the players and their joints."

Dallas Cowboys head coach Wade Phillips likes to be outside, so the Cowboys practice outside regardless of whether they're going to be playing on real or artificial turf. "Phillips prefers grass, and I know the players like natural grass."

On a typical Monday after the Cowboys play on Sunday, which they do 98% of the time, the players come in and do film study, then head to the weight room. The strength coach comes out at about 3:15 and runs them for about 20 to 30 minutes. Tuesday is the player's day off. Wednesday is when practice really starts. They normally come out at 11 AM for a walk through, and then they're back out again at 1:00 for a full practice. This routine is duplicated on Thursday.

Friday is a little easier day. They're out on the field by 11:00 but don't have a walkthrough. Friday is normally about an hour and a half practice. On Wednesday and Thursday they go hard for about 2 to 2-1/2 hours. Saturday is a walk-through-only day, and that takes about 45 minutes. So the players are on the fields at least 4 days every week. Chris has his own routine for keeping the fields' wear and tear in check, "We try to rotate the players as much as possible to keep the wear down. For example, "If we're on the southeast corner of field #1 in the morning, we'll move to the northeast corner in the afternoon. The same holds true for field #2."

"Actually we use both fields during every practice, but we spread the players out. We only film on one field during any given practice though, and that's where we get our most severe wear. That's where the seven on seven and team drills are conducted. Again, we try to spread things out over both fields to keep the wear and tear to a minimum."

Except for the cheerleaders. "Right now the cheerleaders are using field # 1. And they're worse than the players. I can get the players to move around, but the cheerleaders won't move. They do their little spins and turns right in the same exact spot. Over and over. Cheerleaders can actually inflict more damage on the grass than the players. You wouldn't think that a 90-pound girl could hurt a football field, but she can! But who cares? ■

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