

# How NFL turf managers built their careers

**Editor's note:** We asked a number of National Football League turf managers who are also Sports Turf Managers Association members three questions: What are 3 important qualities an NFL turf manager must have to be successful? What specific education and/or work experiences best prepared you for your NFL career? What words of advice do you have for younger turf managers who aspire to work in the NFL?

**W**E START with Ross Kurcab, CSFM of the Denver Broncos and hear from Darian Daily (Bengals), Chris Morrow (Cowboys), Ken Mrock (Bears), Troy Smith (Broncos), Sean Vanos (Seahawks), Tom Vaughn (Panthers), Steve Wightman (Chargers) and finish with Tony Leonard of the Eagles.

## ROSS KURCAB, CSFM, Denver Broncos

**What are 3 important qualities an NFL turf manager must have to be successful?**

My initial response would be “if you find out, tell me!” Honestly, the important qualities of success are probably the same as for other sports turf managers. Yet every sports field manager faces a unique set of challenges. Every challenge faced is a lesson learned, I believe. So

here are a few lessons I've learned (hopefully) over the eons:

- You have to be able to deliver the field in the NFL. Football, at all levels, is unique as a sport in this regard: There are no cancellations or weather postponements (except for lightning or other life threatening severe weather). Even ski races get called off for heavy snow! Three certainties are death, taxes, and kickoff at 2:15pm MST Sunday. Or as I like to say, “Rain or snow, it'll go!” Whether on the practice field, or at the stadium, the NFL doesn't tolerate “We can't.” You have to know all your challenges and meet them.

- “People skills” is not a trendy catchphrase. A great man, Dr. Jackie Butler at Colorado State University, would walk into the first lecture in H441-turfgrass science and write on the chalkboard: “There are no grass problems, only people problems.” Sure, I date myself with

## Chris Morrow, Dallas Cowboys

**YOU NEED DESIRE,** to be able to think fast and outside the box, and have good verbal and communication skills. I majored in turfgrass at North Carolina State but basically learned on the job. That's where you get most of your education, just doing the things we do day in and day out.

Pay attention to the details, don't shortcut, it may seem small, but a lot of times it's the small things that turn into big problems later down the road. Take your time and learn as much as possible. I was very green when I started, but I had very good people around me, some I worked under and with directly, but others were the contractors we hired to build or rebuild our fields. Pay attention to the things these people do and have you do, you use what you learned from them to build the basics then as you progress you can start to add your own.



» KEN MROCK, Chicago Bears

the chalk board, but the words ring prophetic. There are many legitimate and often competing interests for field use: marketing, corporate sponsorship, private events, third-party event managers, community use, game-day entertainment, other sports team tenants, suppliers and contractors in the sports field industry, television production teams, worthy charitable causes, youth sports promotions, millions of television viewers, in-stadium guests, politicians, all sorts of amateur sports teams, journalists and media (not always the same thing), and many others I've forgot about.

- Yet all this goes through the filter of what's best for the football team, the elite athletes who may never know us, but are depending on me and my turf team. Add to this that you don't book the events, but you answer for the condition of the field, and you better have a good set of what I call play-nice-with-the-other-children skills.

- You must align your mission with the organizational mission. I know of no organi-

zation that employs a sports field manager that has as its mission statement: A perfect field. Sure, it's a key pillar in any successful facility, but we too often take field use too personally, and lose perspective of the larger organizational mission in our focused passion for excellence. In the NFL, there are no individual goals, only team goals. You learn this very quickly.

- Never compromise on player safety. Never.

- You need vey sharp grass-skills. Turfgrass management is a science, and field preparation is somewhat of an art. Science comes from formal education, and art comes from quality experience and lessons learned. On natural grass, a good playing surface starts with healthy grass. How can you keep it healthy if you don't know how it grows and develops? Grass problems identified in early the stages are often easy fixes, but grow more difficult with time. Good turf eyes are needed to see field issues before they become field problems. I could do a whole talk

about this part, and I plan to at the 2011 STMA Conference in Austin.

- You best learn the basics of the event management business. There are so many events on a typical NFL field; you must be involved **early** in the event planning stage. Often, it is how the event and field use are designed that prevent significant damage to the playing surface, while allowing for the necessary event. Who better than I as the professional sports turf manager to predict potential damage, and create ways to conduct events without damage? I found most field users and groups want my participation because they don't want to damage the field, but they just don't know enough about it. I try to remember that for the valued guest, being on the field likely is a very big thrill for them. I want every one of them to say "wow."

- In today's modern stadiums, non-football field uses for revenue, charity, media, and community development are very important parts of the business plan. Again, one must be a team player, and align his/her

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You've got to keep up on technology and advancements in the industry. What passed for an "excellent" field in 1984 when I started would probably get me fired today.

goals with that of the organization.

- It sounds cliché, but you will want to have good communication skills. You have to "sell" your program to the powers that be. Most folks don't really understand the ins and outs of sports turf. In other words, they often don't really understand your job. It's no one's fault, but you must be able to educate them to persuade them. You have to describe the key elements of the daily work to the turf team. The work must be done correctly to be effective. You can choke in an interview, or you can take an opportunity to advance the message of your organization.

- You've got to keep up on technology and advancements in the industry. What passed for an "excellent" field in 1984 when I started would probably get me fired today. But that's ok, because we as sports field managers have a seemingly never-ending supply of new ideas, better tools, and new technologies to make us more efficient, and produce higher quality playing surfaces. Back in the day ("when we used to mow with goats" I tell my crew) we could not have imagined the advances we take for granted today. If you're not riding the technology

wave, you'll soon be washed over and left behind in this business.

- While you have to put in the fullest effort, you can't out-work all of your problems. If you try, you'll end up sick.

**What specific education and/or work experiences best prepared you for your NFL career?** I was formally educated at Colorado State University with a BS in Landscape horticulture/turfgrass management. Yale of the west, I like to say. Every day, I take advantage of, and use my formal education. All of us do, just some more than others. But specifically, I have learned (and often re-learned) how natural grass and soils grow and develop.

I have continually refreshed and reinforced my education through correspondence courses, books, lectures and talks, and other programs. Preparing for the certification exam was a fantastic educational refresher. Today, there are a myriad ways to gain this formal education, and it's more convenient and important than ever. One learns these things from a class or a book, but understands it when they apply it in the field with experience. I cut my teeth on an NFL practice field for 17 years. It's full-out combat turf on an NFL grass practice field! If you can produce there, you can produce anywhere. Since no turf manager's field came with an instruction book, there is no substitute for quality experience. Every sports turf manager should have, or should be working to have, two plaques on their wall: A certificate of formal turfgrass-related education, and a CSFM plaque. I guarantee you will be a better sports turf manager with these two documents in hand.

**What words of advice do you have for younger turf managers who aspire to work in the NFL?**

Be patient. It takes time to gain the skills and education, and who wants all the responsibility in their youth? Go have fun! There are not that many full-time turf jobs with only 32 franchises in the entire league. However, there are a lot of great jobs, with just as much challenge and reward, as a sports turf manager outside of professional sports facilities. Good sports turf jobs are generally at the facilities that generate high revenue. That's the key. High revenue facilities can be found in parks, schools, municipalities, and universities.

Get your formal education in turfgrass science part done now while you are young, it seems tougher as you get older, and you'll have the foundation to build on with experience.

You should make the most of your time and experiences. Do you just do what you are told to do, or do you try to understand the "why" behind the work? Maybe even try to help with some of the planning? Never, ever be afraid to not know something. Ask and learn. You'll never learn all there is in a lifetime, and no one knows it all anyway. Dive into the unknown and try to learn all the skills needed on your field. If you can mow and paint a perfectly straight line, free-hand paint logos with excellence, understand basic irrigation, and run equipment with several key points of monitor (e.g. a tractor while monitoring the PTO, the equipment lift, ground speed, swath integrity, and the bucket while avoiding irrigation heads), you'll always find work. Keep practicing. Closely watch someone on the team that's highly skilled at a particular job.

Network, network, network. How lucky we are to have the STMA. There is no more open an industry, nor more free exchange

of knowledge and ideas than in sports turf. Early in one's career, it's should be more about what one learns, than what one earns. Have patience, it doesn't come over night. Get a broad base of experience early on your career track. Most importantly, learn how to learn! Read that last sentence again.

**STEVE WIGHTMAN, San Diego Chargers**

I think three important qualities that an NFL field manager, or any person for that matter, must have to be truly successful are:

- Leadership. Having the ability to create a cohesive productive workforce through one's own actions. Being a team leader is being a part of the team and allowing the team members to be part of the process. Give staff members responsibilities and ownership of projects. To be a successful leader those that you lead need to have the ability to grow. Give them the room and freedom to do so. They will respect you for it.
- Professionalism. Having the knowledge of one's craft and the willingness to share it with others. There's no greater way to gain knowledge than through experience. Share your experiences with others. Being a true professional is living your life as one.
- Attitude. Getting along with all of the stakeholders is critical in not only helping to promote a successful event but also in promoting one's professionalism and reputation. Look at it as an opportunity to excel, not just as a field manager but in life, as well. Ask the question,

"How can I assist you in helping to make your part more successful?" A good attitude always puts people at ease and opens doors. A good attitude breeds respect.

My college business degree has been valuable in giving me much of the organizational skills and financial tools necessary in my work as an NFL field manager. However 37 years of experience, mentors I've had along the way and the networking opportunities afforded me through STMA have taught me the craft of sports turf management. I've been very fortunate to have had bosses who have given me the latitude and support to grow and learn. All of my friends and colleagues with STMA have helped me learn the meaning of what a sports field manager should be.

As one who has spent most all of his working life as an NFL field manager I would offer to those who aspire to be in the NFL to look deep inside yourself for the passion that you will need. Having the responsibility of an NFL playing field and all of the fear, heartaches, sweat, tears, joy, humiliation and satisfaction that come with it can be difficult to bear. But, like anything else that's worth having it's extremely gratifying to see the fruits of your labor on Sunday afternoon! If you enjoy an 8-hour work day, having free evenings, weekends and holidays then you might look for work elsewhere. But, if you enjoy challenges, hard work, long hours and impossible deadlines to create a product that very few have the opportunity to attempt, then this career is for you.

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However, I don't believe anyone can go it alone. Align yourself with others in the industry and ask questions. Reach out to someone whom you respect and admire and ask them to be your mentor. Join the STMA, if you haven't already, and take advantage of all the things that the association has to offer. You will get to know those in the industry and, perhaps even more important, they will get to know you. Get a degree in sports field management because a formal



» VIEW OF DOWNTOWN Charlotte from the Panthers' practice fields

Gaining experience in ornamentals and landscape maintenance as well as sports field management was important. You will in all likelihood have to do more than just manage sports fields.

education will open doors for you. Become certified through the STMA; more doors will open and higher salaries will follow. But, above all, I think the things that will push you to a successful career as an NFL field manager are leadership, professionalism and the attitude that you carry with you everywhere you go.

## **TOM VAUGHAN, Carolina Panthers**

**What are 3 important qualities an NFL turf manager must have to be successful?** 1. Dedication 2. Good managerial skills 3. Technical knowledge and a willingness to continue learning throughout your career.

**What specific education and/or work experiences best prepared you for your NFL career?** I graduated from Clemson University with a B.S. degree in Horticulture with a turfgrass management concentration, minor in ornamentals, and interned and later

worked on the maintenance crew of a PGA Tour golf course. It enabled me to gain valuable experience quickly. I started as an assistant manager in the NFL before moving into my current position.

Gaining experience in ornamentals and landscape maintenance as well as sports field management was important. You will in all likelihood have to do more than just manage sports fields.

**What words of advice do you have for younger turf managers who aspire to work in the NFL?** Earn post-high school education. Get a degree in an industry-related major. Be willing to start at the bottom and work your way up. You will gain valuable experience and contacts along the way that will pay off in the long run.

## **ALLEN JOHNSON, CSFM, Green Bay Packers**

**What are three important qualities an NFL turf manager must have to be successful?** 1, Be extremely detail oriented; 2, Be humble and willing to learn, accompanied with the ability to adapt and try new management techniques to "make something work"; and 3, Possess savvy communication skills.

**What specific education and/or work experiences best prepared you for your NFL career?** Being raised on a dairy farm.

**What words of advice do you have for younger turf managers who aspire to work in the NFL?** Get as much work experience as possible via internships, summer jobs in related fields, etc. Also be willing to move anywhere to gain that experience. Because football opportunities are limited, don't hesitate to work in other sports. Be proactive in getting your name out there—network. If you are an exceptional employee you are more likely to get a positive reference.

## **SEAN VANOS, Seattle Seahawks**

Three important qualities an NFL turf manager must have to be successful are organization, a good work ethic, and good communication skills.

**Organization:** Being in professional sports and managing a stadium or practice field means that there are a lot of dates/times to keep track of. It is important to know everything that is going on that involves the field and when it is going to happen so that you can have it prepared, painted, and ready to go.

**Good Work Ethic:** Professional sports are very demanding. Weekends tend to blend in with the workweek and you work a lot of hours. During certain times of the year when you are in the regular season or hosting training camp you may not get a day off for months!

**Good Communication Skills:** We are providing a safe and playable surface to a multi-million dollar product that is performing on the field. It is critical that we communicate to the entire football staff what is going on outside. In addition, it is important to be able to communicate upward so that you have the resources to provide the safest and most consistent playing surface possible.

Working in the golf industry and Major League Baseball provided me with the opportunity to see the industry from different points of view. Those experiences also gave me the opportunity to see how important the playing surface is to the game. Most importantly I learned what it means to work hard, long hours to make an event happen.

Preparation for a PGA Tour event or an All-Star Game happens months in advance of the actual event taking place. My experience working in that atmosphere showed me how important it is to be prepared and organized well in advance of game day.

My advice to younger turf managers who aspire to work in the NFL is to maintain a solid network of turf managers. It is through that network that you will get into the job that you want or that you are looking for. Also, be ready to work! You have to put in some time to get to the "top." Your experience working your way up will provide you with resources and knowledge of things you like and dislike as you get into your first management position.

**DARIAN DAILY, Cincinnati Bengals**

**What are three important qualities an NFL turf manager must have to be successful?** Patience. Often major decisions affecting your area (i.e. budgetary considerations, construction projects, etc) are made at a higher level than you- and often their timetable doesn't necessarily jive with yours. Just keep your calm, try to keep your administration informed/educated on all supporting information so they don't have to go "searching" for facts, and be ready to go when they are.

Organization/Preparedness. When you are organized and have a plan for the worst possible scenario, then you can be ready for anything thrown your way.

Flexibility. Practice schedules and locations, weather, and coaches will change things constantly so you must be flexible and ready for anything. The only thing that is a given is on Sunday there will be a kickoff.

**What specific education and/or work experiences best prepared you for your NFL career?** I think all the previous jobs I've had have prepared me for my career in the NFL. Working in parks and recreation and while in college, I learned to allocate resources to the most pressing need at the time, how to prioritize/multi-task, and how to deal with all types of personalities.

My time in Minor League Baseball, Division I, and Major League Soccer taught different field layouts, machinery and techniques that allow us to be prepared for multi-

ple events here in Cincinnati. And even in everyday maintenance I've borrowed ideas from past venues I've worked in. A specific example is where we have integrated crushed brick from baseball's warning tracks in our high traffic walk areas and as mulch in landscaping to cut down on weeding.

I truly believe that each step in your career provides invaluable experience and learning opportunities that will prepare you for success in the future.

**What words of advice do you have for younger turf managers who aspire to work in the NFL?** I would suggest getting as much experience as you can. Don't specialize in one sport. You can learn a lot from working in other disciplines and working with different types of sports fields, techniques, and personalities. Also, take every opportunity to learn from others and build relationships within the industry. In any adversity you face in your career or even in your job, chances are someone has been through the same thing and can share what did/did not work for them.

**KEN MROCK, Chicago Bears**

Patience

Be a good listener

Be ready to change your schedule at a moment's notice

I have been fortunate to have worked in turf since my 16th birthday, from golf courses to the park district to the NFL. That career has spanned 43 years but it doesn't seem that much time has passed. I hope to continue for many more years to come; this field that we are in offers us variety, daily sense of accomplishment, and the joy that so many people can use and admire good-looking turf. The safety and the meaning of natural turf being the true time tested GREEN INDUSTRY.

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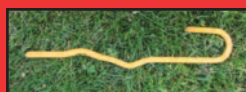
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The best advice I can give is: be patient; never stop being a hard worker; volunteer; be the first one to want an additional task; ask questions if you are stumped; don't look for any pats on the back.

The best news is when you don't hear any comments about your turf, because then you know you are doing your job. I will repeat myself with the listening part, and above all be honest; some times you have to tell people things that they don't want to really hear, there is a way to do that and make them aware they are part of the solution not part of the problem.

Finally to all the young folks, us old timers will not be here forever, and seeing all these young hard working turf folks we know our profession will be in great hands forever.

## TROY SMITH, CSFM, Denver Broncos

**What are three important qualities an NFL turf manager must have to be successful?** The ability to grow good grass, good communication skills, and the ability to be flexible with job scheduling due to weather conditions.

**What specific education and/or work experiences best prepared you for your NFL career?** A 4-year degree in turf management from Colorado State University, a college internship, working at CSU while enrolled as a student on their athletic fields, working for the Milwaukee Brewers before starting with the Broncos.

**What words of advice do you have for younger turf managers**

**who aspire to work in the NFL?** Take the time to get your education, either a 2-year or 4-year degree. While enrolled in school take the opportunity to perform an internship. This will give real world experience for you to learn from. Don't be afraid to learn about grasses you are not comfortable with. To really round out your resume, experience with cool and warm season grasses is helpful. If you have the means and ability, don't be afraid to move around the country to gain experience. Become involved in the STMA and use the contacts you make through the association as a network of peers. Who knows? One of these contacts may have a job opening one day that you will be prepared for.

## TONY LEONARD, Philadelphia Eagles

### Understanding of Demands/Dedication

I think this is the most important quality we all need to have as turf managers, not only at the NFL level, but at every level. In the NFL, as we bring on more and more team sponsors and as the game grows, the demand for field use is high as is the quality of the playing surface on game days. Throughout the year, we try to satisfy all requests for field usage, whether it's a Punt, Pass, and Kick, or a Fantasy Camp, but at strategically selected dates. Our marketing department does a great job of working with clients and selecting dates that we give to them. As we move closer to the football season, we scale back on such events.

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or playing throughout the fall. In order to do all this, you, as well as your staff, needs to be dedicated. Fortunately in Philadelphia, I have always had a phenomenal staff that does what it takes to make sure all of our playing fields are safe and playable at all times.

### Be Patient

More and more students coming out of colleges and universities, as well as others in the green industry want a career in sports turf management. In the NFL, as supply out numbers the demand, some individuals need sacrifice and take smaller roles on grounds crews in order to work their way up the ladder to an assistant or the head job. Baseball is a little different in that there are many minor league stadiums to work for, along with MLB. Sometimes joining a grounds crew as a foreman, a landscape staff member, or whatever position you can get to have one foot in the door will pay off in the end.

### Communication

As in any business, communication is essential. Whether it's with the coaching staff, players, front office, or colleagues, you always need to be in constant communication with each other. There are many moving parts daily in the NFL, and whether its email, a daily meeting, social networking sites, or simply phone calls, allowing people to know and understand what you are trying to accomplish and knowing and understanding what others are trying to accomplish will allow you to be successful.

Sometimes over communication appears to be too much, but it's

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better than the alternative, not knowing enough. This will also allow for you to cut off any potential problems when notifying the proper people before someone else catches it. I think one great example of this is with the media. A few years ago, we were taking a lot of criticism about the appearance of our field, not the play. Our PR staff suggested that on the Friday Production meetings, held before every home game, I would answer any questions the announcers or producers of the broadcast had about the field. I would also try to use this time to explain the field condition, weather, or if we hosted a college game the previous day. This meeting would not happen before every game, but when I felt it was necessary to let them aware of what was going on at the time. This allowed all of us to have a better understanding of each other and what I was trying to accomplish.

All of the places that I was fortunate enough to work at, I was able to take a little bit away from each. Working with Dr. Andy McNitt at Penn State on soil inclusions was interesting and then taking that a step further while working for Hummer Turfgrass Systems on their GrassTile project. While there, I was able to play around with different grasses such as seashore paspalum and bermudagrasses on the tray systems. That was a great experience to learn a little more about the warm season grasses.

While at Penn State, working on the grounds crew and Bob Hudzik was a great learning experience. That is where I was first introduced to Sports Turf Management and it could not have come

from a better person. Mark Kresovich was another important role model for all students working on the Grounds Crew at Penn State, establishing all the fundamentals and work ethic within the crew.

Students in school and young graduates should be willing to be “portable.” I was very fortunate to grow up in central Pennsylvania and to work for the Baltimore Ravens and the Philadelphia Eagles, teams very close to home. However, this is not always the situation. Having 32 teams in the NFL makes it difficult to pick and choose your locations. Keeping an open mind, being dedicated and willing to relocate will go a long way. This will also allow one to grow professionally and be able to experience different climate conditions and different outlooks on field management.

Never stop learning and think outside the box. NFL stadiums are continually finding more and more events to support the high costs of building a new stadium. Just this spring we hosted a private scrimmage between the Philadelphia Union and Ecuador on Tuesday, a High School and youth All Star game on Thursday, and then a regular season Philadelphia Union MLS match. We ended up painting the soccer lines for the scrimmage in gold, used an aerosol chalk for the football games, and then repainted the soccer with white for Saturday. By Saturday, the chalk had washed off and no one ever knew we had hosted 2 other events that same week. Using some of the newer technology that’s in our industry will allow you to become an asset to your organization. ■

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