

Leader by design

Troy Smith, CSFM, seems to have been destined for leadership in the sports turf arena



IT DIDN'T TAKE TROY SMITH MANY YEARS to figure out what he wanted to do with his life.

As a 13-year-old growing up in Castle Rock, CO Smith, turf manager for the Denver Broncos Football Club's Englewood practice facility and the incoming president of the Sports Turf Managers Association, went to work for the town's parks and recreation department. There, he learned two foretelling things about himself: He loved being outdoors and he loved taking care of fields.

So, take care of fields, he did, beginning in high school, and to this day he continues to do just that. Along the way, Smith benefitted from some chance connections and wracked up a resume that many would

envy; one that has given Smith the ability to combine his multitude of interests in one plum gig.

PITCHING OPPORTUNITY

In high school, Smith discovered that not only was he personally interested in sports, he was also talented in them—and one in particular.

As a pitcher for his high school's baseball

team, he earned the attention of recruiters, which led to a baseball scholarship at Otero Junior College in LaJunta, CO.

Once it came time to evaluate his future prospects, though, his visions turned to another aspect of the field.

"I found out that I wasn't good enough to be a major league pitcher, that I wasn't going to be drafted," he says. "But I knew I wanted to stay close to sports. I had

STMA
PRESIDENT

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thought about landscape architecture, but then I found out that there are jobs where you get paid to take care of fields, and I thought that was really cool.”

So, after his pitching years at junior college, Smith headed to Colorado State, where he learned the science of taking care of fields with a degree in landscape horticulture with a concentration in turf-grass management.

Between his junior and senior years at CSU, Smith landed an internship under the direction of Ross Kurcab, CSFM, with his near-hometown Denver Broncos, another foreshadowing chapter in Smith's life story.



On game days, Smith typically doesn't have responsibilities, but many NFL Sundays he still ends up at the practice facility, mowing, painting or getting fields ready for incoming weather.

The experience was one he'll never forget—for many reasons.

“The old practice facility had native soil fields,” Smith says. “At the time we were building a state-of-the-art sand-based facility, and I got to help maintain an old native facility and see the construction of a new sand-based facility. It was priceless.”

The internship also gave one particular opportunity that may have given him a leg up over some of his classmates.

“I'd go to class in the morning and every afternoon go to the (Colorado State) stadium and get to apply what I was learning,” he adds. “My senior year was better because I was actually able to bring things back that were useable after my internship.”

After college, Smith worked in landscape maintenance in Denver for a handful of months, and then applied for a position with the Milwaukee Brewers.

Thanks to a regional turf conference Smith had previously attended in Denver where he met David Mellor (then with the Brewers and currently the turf manager for the Boston Red Sox), Smith had a connection with the organization. He traveled to Wisconsin for the interview, and got the job of grounds assistant for the Brewers.

In another connection that mattered for Smith, the reason the job was available in the first place originates with the STMA.

“One of the STMA founding fathers was Harry Gill, and he was the head groundskeeper with the Milwaukee Brewers,” Smith says. “He had retired, and because of that, I was able to get a job in the profession. A lot of people knew and respected Harry Gill, and I've always kept that opportunity in the profession to myself.”

In addition to that coincidental opportunity and STMA connection, Smith says the Milwaukee job was the perfect chance to learn the ropes of the industry.

“It was great learning,” he says of the job he held for 3 ½ years. “I learned so much from Gary Vanden Berg and David Mellor about baseball, concert, football, personnel and inventory management, along with equipment maintenance. I still use a lot of the things that I learned in Milwaukee today.”

MILE-HIGH MOVE

From there, Smith circled back to Colorado and went back to work permanently for the Denver Broncos. This last year marked Smith's 17th season with the organization. For the past 11 years, he's served as the turf manager of the practice facility, a year-round venue consisting of two full-size natural grass playing fields and one synthetic field, as well as business offices.

“Our players use the field 10 ½ to 11 months a year,” Smith says of the facility that's 17 miles south of the Broncos home stadium, INVESCO Field at Mile High.

Kurcab, who hired Smith as an intern, serves as the turf manager at the 11-year-old stadium.

“We opened the stadium in 2000, and he's been up there ever since,” he says. “We have two turf managers on staff, which is not very common in the league.”

The practice facility also hosts the team's training camp, which has been on-site for 8 years, unlike many teams who travel far distances for camps.

“We've been at this facility for everything over the last 8 years,” Smith adds.

UNDER PRESSURE

Smith doesn't shy away from a challenge, and that's one of his favorite parts of his job.

“I love the pressure of trying to have fields ready all year long,” he says. “I don't enjoy the stress, but I can deal with it. I've gotten better over 10 years of dealing with it. It's a pressure-packed job, but it is very rewarding, particularly when you win the Super Bowl twice. That's what I love about my job.”

Staying on top of the NFL's demands for technology, trends and products means challenging himself to be the best, he adds.

“There’s always someone behind me who can do that job,” he says. “I like personally motivating myself. Might that change in 10 years, maybe. Maybe I won’t want that pressure, or maybe it’s still something inviting to me. Right now, I still love being around sports, so it’s very easy for me to get motivated.”

On game days, Smith typically doesn’t have responsibilities, but many NFL Sundays he still ends up at the practice facility, mowing, painting or getting fields ready for incoming weather.

But on those game-days when Smith is free, you can find him right there at Mile High cheering on his team or watching at home on away-game days.

“I’m a huge fan of all sports, but when the team that you work with Monday through Saturday is on TV and you get to know the players and the coaches and their personalities, you always watch.”

Speaking of players, Smith speaks highly of Denver’s roster.

“Almost every football player that’s come through here is very appreciative of not only my department, but all the support staff,” he says. “They understand that you are trying to help them be the best. About 90 percent of the players get it, and the others are prima donnas that don’t last long in this league.”

“Most of these players are normal people and are appreciative of what you do and that we’re out there with them in the snow, the heat, the cold. They are great guys, and some of them have turned out to be some of my best friends. After they retire, I’ll stay with touch with them by email or text.”

“Do I have to bark at 300-pound players to move? Yes. Mr. (Pat) Bowlen (owner of the team) pays me to keep these fields playable year-round, and if I see something that is detrimental to that, I’m going to tell them they need to move. Sometimes I feel like a sheep-dog with cattle, always nipping at their heels to move them around.”

If he doesn’t, he adds, players will head to the same spot every day. After explaining the reasons why, though, they generally get it.

“Because they know you’re just doing your job,” Smith says.

WEATHERING STORMS

Any Coloradoan will know what one of Smith’s largest obstacles is year in and year out is—the mountainous state’s penchant for blustery snowstorms.

“I know the time of year when certain cultural practices have to take place for the best fields, and the weather is the biggest unknown,” he says. “It could snow in March when we need to get outside, or rain all of June, or we could have a wet training camp in July and August and really put us behind the eight ball.”

“One of the hardest times that I’ve had in this job as a turf manager was in December of 2006, when we had two blizzards six days apart. Our organization does not own an indoor practice facility, and we had approximately 27 inches of snow in the first blizzard and 12 inches 6 days later. We were in the season and trying to get the parking lots cleared and sidewalks cleared, get players to the fa-



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cility to practice, move all the snow and to pull off practice was the hardest 2 weeks I've ever had as a turf manager. I've dealt with blizzards in season, but one at a time. To have two within six days was the absolute hardest.

"We had 16 feet of snow piled up around synthetic field. We had almost 40 inches in a week, and we couldn't even get on our natural grass fields. There was no way. I stayed here and I would plow the synthetic field with our pickup truck after every 4 inches of snow-fall, because we had to get practice in.

"It puts a lot of pressure on me and my staff to have things ready."

GETTING INVOLVED

Smith's involvement with STMA leadership began at the group's local chapter in 1994. He began as the executive secretary and worked his way up to the president in 1999. Due to another member's illness, Smith was asked again to fill in as president of the state chapter in 2001.

A few years later, his involvement broadened to the national level.

"I thought it would be pretty neat to represent the facilities used by professional athletes as a category 1 member," he said. "I was honored and humbled that someone thought of me to represent this group."

He won that election in 2005 to serve as a director on the group's board.

"Then I got a phone call that I had been thought of to run for the executive council, which means you're ascending into the presi-

gency," Smith adds. "And that was just amazing to me that now people really thought that I was smart enough, wise enough and had the vision enough to lead our organization."

Having watched presidents in the board room as a director and ascending to the presidency, Smith says he's learned many valuable lessons he'll apply as the leader this year.

"Going to the national board, I didn't know a lot of the things that I know now about scholarship, finances, outreach, audits and budgeting for staff, but a lot of those things come with the process," he says. "I've very much enjoyed my journey and my time to represent the organization."

But those rewards of getting involved in STMA leadership don't happen naturally.

"It takes becoming involved and getting to know people," Smith says. "You have to network. You have to get out there and let people see that (you) might be a good board member. It's very fulfilling."

BIG TO-DO LIST

Looking at the year ahead, Smith has a full plate of accomplishments he'd like to make for the association.

He lists member benefits, educational bulletins, information outreach and the website as areas he'll focus on.

"Anything that we can do to help educate our members, I want to see that stay very strong," he says. "And in this economy we must be even more fiscally responsible. We have to stay judicious in our responsibility to our membership on that."

Doing what's best for STMA membership comes naturally for Smith, according to Abby McNeal, CSFM, director of turf management at Wake Forest Athletics, who served last year as the board's past president.

"He always has what is best for the association and the members at the forefront of his thoughts," McNeal says, adding that he's not afraid to offer thoughts in the board room that are different than others on the board.

During his time on the board, Smith also has had a good presence with several committees, including chapter relations, certification, and finance and audit, McNeal says, and that will help him continue to provide membership benefits and strong education programs through a variety of vehicles.

Smith adds that focusing on outreach and education can help ensure that younger STMA members will have long careers ahead of them.

"This is such a high turnover profession," Smith says. "People that just get into the industry, if they can last 5 years, they'll last for 20 years. The 1st through 5th year is really tough. We need to keep education going for those groups."

Progress in environmental stewardship is also a top priority for Smith. The association needs to show that the profession is good for the environment and end-users, he adds.

Smith also says he sees great opportunities ahead through international growth and partnerships, especially in shared online resources with other countries' sports turf management groups.

Finally, Smith would like to redevelop the current strategic plan for continuity of new programs and services for STMA's next five years.

“With 1-year presidencies, I feel that it’s important that if a president begins something in their term in the strategic plan, that it’s communicated to the president-elect,” he says. “That the strategic plan is there to lead us. To create a strategic plan for the next 5 years is one of the big things that I have on my plate for the year.”

A strategic plan will be no problem for Smith, adds McNeal.

“He has a great vision for the organization as well as a strong understanding of the strategic plan,” she says. “He truly knows the direction that the organization is headed and he will be successful in helping continue to raise the professional of the STMA and its members.”

McNeal isn’t alone in her accolades of Smith’s abilities as a leader.

“When Troy Smith talks, people listen,” says Kim Heck, CEO of the STMA, who adds that he has a calm and disciplined manner of bringing forward ideas and reactions to issues.

“When he chaired the Certification Committee, he created and communicated his vision for the certification program,” Heck says. “He helped committee members understand why this is so important to STMA, and then he got everyone working to achieve that vision. That’s exceptional leadership.

“And that’s definitely his style inside and outside of the board room.”

As McNeal rotates off the board, she says she’ll miss working with Smith.

“He has taught me many things that have benefitted my personal and professional growth,” she says. “He’s a great teacher and will continue to teach those around him to be better professionals and sports turf managers.”

“Troy Smith has perfected many of the leadership qualities that sports turf managers work our whole career to develop,” adds Mike Andresen, CSFM, facilities and grounds director at Iowa State University, who rotated off STMA’s board last year. “Most of all, Troy is always exceptionally informed and prepared. (He) accounts for every detail. He has vision, focus and a deep passion for this association and where we need to head...With all those qualities, Troy may still be the most humble sports turf manager I know.”

GETTING BY WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM HIS FRIENDS

Humility is a common thread to the words Smith himself uses when he talks about the honor of serving as STMA president.

He says he could never have achieved this goal without the support of his staff, which includes his assistant, Kyle Bauman, one seasonal employee and one intern, as well as his family—wife, Bobbi, daughter, Brianne (21) and son, Brian (18).

“My wife,” he says, “Thank God she loves the NFL.”

“I want to say how honored and humbled I am to be elected to lead the organization,” Smith adds. “That I was thought of highly enough, it’s been very rewarding. I have a friend who says this many times, that I will never be able to put into this association what I get out of it, ever. As hard as I work to guide this association, I’ve gotten so much more out of it than I’ll ever be able to put into it.” ■

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