



The 1st year at BBVA Compass Stadium in Houston

Bill Brozak works for WinField Solutions, a company that offers turf seed and chemical products from its base in Shoreview, MN.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE to make a first-year field first-rate? Turf, teamwork and a whole lot of know-how. Rodney Griffin took on Texas-size triumphs and challenges at the new BBVA Compass Stadium, home of the Major League Soccer Houston Dynamo. The stadium opened in May 2012, cost \$95 million, and has a capacity of 22,039. The venue will also host Texas Southern University football games. Also, beginning in 2013, the stadium will host the USA Women's Sevens, one of four events in the newly launched IRB Women's Sevens World Series in the sevens variant of rugby union.

Rodney Griffin is no stranger to laying the groundwork for athletic facilities. Griffin is the former turf manager for the Houston Astros' Minute Maid Park and Houston Texans' Reliant Stadium. And now, at Houston's newest downtown professional sports facility, the AEG Facilities-managed BBVA Compass Stadium, he completes a trifecta with the home to an MLS team.

To say that Griffin has "a lot of experience with turf" is an understatement. This former University of Houston football letterman was a groundskeeper for the Houston Astros and worked for four years as part of the grounds crew for Super Bowl XXXVIII. Griffin knows his turf and, obviously, likes a challenge.

So when the opportunity came along to be part of a brand-new stadium, Griffin couldn't say

no. He joined the stadium team in January 2012, as the turf and grounds Manager just a few short months before it opened. Since then, the stadium has hosted four to five events a week.

Griffin knew the first-year field at BBVA Compass Stadium would be full of new challenges, but he knew he had the experience, tools and teamwork in place to make this new soccer pitch feel like it had been there for years.

A new stadium meant the first challenge was selecting and installing new turf. Griffin recommended that TifGrand bermudagrass be selected. "The designers told me light was going to be an issue. The orientation of the stadium means that some of the field is in shadows and some in sun-light at different times of the day."

Other difficulties to consider are the summer heat and Houston's native humidity. "A big challenge to any new stadium is that every stadium has its own microclimate and this stadium, in the summer, is one of the hottest places on earth," says Griffin. "Usually heat is fine and we are using a bermudagrass that is really made for heat. But humidity, that's even more of an issue. The tissue of the field can stay slightly moist, which creates an environment for disease."

SOCCER STAR EXPECTATIONS

A second and interesting challenge for Griffin is the expectations of the players. "Soccer players are extremely picky about their turf," says Griffin. "They like their turf a certain way, so we always have an open dialogue with our players about what they like. They will travel to

another stadium and come back and tell me what they liked about that stadium's turf."

Unlike football or baseball, the movement of the foot or cleat across the turf, and the way the ball travels across the grass, is an important component of the game. Players want their feet to move across the surface of the grass without ever touching dirt. To achieve this, Griffin says, the grass must be mown at three-fourths of an inch or below.

Plus, in soccer, the grass needs to look good. "For football, if the field is strong but doesn't look perfect, that's okay," says Griffin. "But for soccer, the field needs to be strong and look good. The aesthetics are really important. For instance, striping is a part of the rule book in major league soccer and players are very particular about the turf for that reason."

For Griffin, every stadium has new and different challenges but one expectation is always the same—he has to figure out how to solve problems. "Problems pop up all the time; and my bosses at BBVA Compass understand that happens but at the end of the day. I need a team of people who can help me handle the situation. I could have a main line blow up during a game or a mower that doesn't start. Ultimately, it's my

RODNEY'S RULES

Rodney Griffin's keys to success: Number 1, keep it simple. The Guy Who Mows, Knows. Any good groundskeeper knows his or her own field and mows it personally. That way, small problems are evident before they become big ones. Understand it is a team effort. Rodney surrounds himself with people he can trust. Surround yourself with people who can service what they sell. Timing is everything.

staff that needs to help get it right.”

He has put together a team of professionals who help him out in challenging situations.

“I have developed a network of people and relationships who can come help me out. How good is the groundskeeper if his mower breaks down? I have known the guys I deal with for years, and they are dedicated to finding solutions for me. That’s especially important when you have a new field.”

TURF TEAMWORK

The turf at BBVA Compass Stadium is not yet a year old, so Griffin is always alert to new or developing problems. “Keeping bermudagrass healthy and green is a challenge. I focus on the strength of the rhizomes and root system to make sure it stays healthy.”

So far the shadows and sunlight are a daily challenge but one that the turf is meeting. “The benefit of bermudagrass is its strength,” says Griffin. “But it’s not always beautiful. How it performs is something we watch closely as well as how it looks, too.”

To help find the right type of treatments to keep his turf vibrant and healthy, Griffin part-

ners with turf seed and chemical supplier WinField. Together they diagnose any turf problems quickly and remedy the situation before the turf is affected. Griffin has worked with WinField at all of his former venues.

John Cabori, with WinField, is also watching this new turf closely. “While we have seed available, this project involved washed sod and the new TifGrand seed. This system was chosen by the Houston Dynamo because of typical stadium issues such as shade, and TifGrand has some strong advantages in these settings. As with any new variety, I have to be ready for any challenges that might pop up.”

To help ensure the field remains a bright shade of green, the kind soccer players and fans prefer, Griffin uses Mikropak, a crystalline micronutrient that is applied every 2 to 4 weeks to maintain color and vibrancy. Each application creates a wave of green on the field and enhances the beautiful but strong field that Griffin wants and needs for his players.

Cabori adds, “We simply prepared ourselves for the unknown since it was such a new variety. We all learn something in these cases that ends up helping others who decide to use it down the line.”

“For instance, others will be watching and learning from Rodney since he is using a relatively new product, TifGrand,” says Cabori.

“While proven methods were used, some new methods may be needed to maintain the high quality and that’s where Winfield comes into the picture. Rodney is like an experienced NASCAR driver, and I am like his crew chief. He communicates to me what he needs and I work to make sure he gets the best setup for the event.”

So far, the turf and the teamwork are paying off.

“Any good groundskeeper knows his own field,” Griffin says. “I see every square inch of the field and know that any big problem starts out with a small one, so I have a team who can come in and help me approach the small problems too.” The field is performing well, in his estimation. And so is his team.

“A lot can be learned from Rodney and his approach,” Cabori says. “Keep it simple is Rodney’s number one rule. Second is, understand it is a team effort. Rodney surrounds himself with people he can trust.”

For this first year field, turf and teamwork are the big payoff. ■



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