

SUPER BOWL GROUNDSKEEPING CREW BEATS OUTDOOR CONDITIONS



▲ **Snow at MetLife Stadium** in East Rutherford, NJ before the Super Bowl.

In an otherwise empty MetLife Stadium near midnight on February 2, several t-shirt wearing, helmetless Seattle Seahawks players and their loved ones raced joyfully along the sidelines, reveling in the team's 43–8 demolition of the Denver Broncos in Super Bowl XLVIII.

The celebratory confetti dotting the green field would have looked just an hour earlier like unseemly dandruff needing to be promptly scraped off for marring the playing surface's otherwise handsome mien.

For the approximately 30 groundskeepers who'd lovingly tended the pasture over the previous weeks, its pris-

tine condition for the game was a source of pride—all the more so, given concerns over this being the first Super Bowl scheduled for an outdoor, cold-weather venue.

But the unseasonably warm day that produced an evening temperature of 49 degrees at kickoff did little to diminish the crew's satisfaction at having readied the turf for winter's worst.

Among most groundskeepers' first tasks upon arriving in New Jersey in mid-January was unloading snow plows and snow-blowing and -clearing machines from several tractor-trailers packed with equipment to prepare the stadium's field, as well as those at the Jets' and Giants' prac-

tice facilities, where the two Super Bowl teams trained for what routinely is television's most-watched American sporting event.

Regardless of the climate, the crew was composed, as it normally is, of groundskeepers who've been on Super Bowl duty for many years and even decades and who, much like the athletes, are team players.

They included men and women recruited from the National Football League, Major League Baseball, college football, an Alabama turf farm, The Toro Company, and even two professionals from Japan and an Iowa State University senior majoring in horticulture.

"The Seahawks won the game, but the crew members, in my book, were also Super Bowl champions," said George Toma, who knows of what he speaks, having now worked every Super Bowl since the inaugural one in 1967.

Toma is retired from a long, full-time groundskeeping career, primarily with the Kansas City Royals. But he's drawn back to the turf for baseball's spring training and such highlight events as the Super Bowl, whose crew he once supervised. That job now belongs to Ed Mangan of the Atlanta Braves.

"This year was probably the most challenging [Super Bowl] on so many fronts, and they did an unbelievable job maintaining that field and getting it to perform the way it did," said NFL director of event operations Eric Finkelstein.

The league, he explained, selects crew members who are "the best of the best."

While it's the biggest of the big games, the Super Bowl has company at the NFL's summit. Other important dates drawing the cream of the league's landscaping crop include the annual Pro Bowl exhibition and the regular-season contests played overseas. For 2013, that meant two games in London's Wembley Stadium; three are scheduled there for 2014.

Absent conflicts with their full-time jobs, most Super Bowl crew members work those special NFL dates, too.

Everyone must be a jack-of-all-trades, doing "a little bit of everything" to help whip the sites into shape, said Lee Keller, the University of Vermont's athletic turf manager for whom New Jersey was his 15th Super Bowl.

For the Super Bowl, that means, primarily, tending to the turf throughout the weeks of preparation, along with a heavy dose of

painting: of the yard-lines and their numerical designations; team names; and NFL, AFC, NFC and Super Bowl trophy logos.

Getting it all done involves emptying much of the warehouse where the equipment is stored for shipment to the Super Bowl site. The items include standard gardening and carpentry tools, like rakes, shovels, brooms and drills; machines, such as motorized carts and sod cutters, and even end zone and sideline pylons.

The artistic-design side requires an abundance of supplies, too, such as multiple 5-gallon pails of specialized field paint, rails, boards to mark the lines, stencils of the numerals and hash marks, and turbine blowers to dry paint. Painting the teams' names and the conferences' logos in the end zones means having four stencils on-site, not two, since the shipment typically reaches the Super Bowl venue before the AFC and NFC championship games.

The frigid temperatures and snow in the days leading up to the Broncos-Seahawks matchup necessitated unusual measures. Heated tents were put up to prevent the paint from freezing as it was being applied. The Saturday night before Sunday's game, the artificial turf field was covered and heat blown under the tarpaulin to assure excellent on-field conditions.

The planning began as far back as last year's Super Bowl in New Orleans's weather-neutral Superdome, several



▲ **Left:** Lee Keller, University of Vermont, painting an end zone. **Right:** Terry Lee, George Toma, Gerald Anderson, & Randy Baker in frigid New Jersey.

groundskeepers said.

The preparations also included such micro issues as preparing the supply list, since departing and re-entering the game and practice sites involves security-related, hours-wasting delays.

"To leave the stadium to get a gallon of paint striper, paint rollers or sandpaper takes so much time, so we bring a lot of that stuff with us. If we need 'em, we got 'em," Keller said.

Getting the field ready is complicated by other Super Bowl-specific schedules. While sports' great appeal lies in its unscripted nature, so much about the Big Game's sidelights is choreographed. The pre-game, half-time and post-game shows are the products of rehearsals—not just of the musical performances, but also to swiftly erect and deconstruct the television, trophy-presentation and concert stages.

Sometimes, faux fields for that purpose are painted with precision in the host park's parking lots. At MetLife Stadium, that wasn't the case, so the field guardians had to work cooperatively with the entertainment and television producers.

When rehearsals ended, the groundskeeping staff put their powerful vacuums and magnets to work, scooping up such debris as errant nuts, bolts, paper clips and safety pins to prevent injuries and unsightly litter. That routine also is followed in-game.

In New Jersey, “there were probably more rehearsals” than at other Super Bowls, said Arizona State University’s facility manager, Pete Wozniak, who would know, having now worked 19 Super Bowls. But the other crews, he added, “work well with us,” including by taking care to stay off the freshly painted logos during rehearsals and on game day.

Another member of this year’s grounds crew, Josh Lenz, is now just 18 Super Bowls behind Wozniak. From a national pool of 62 applicants from 40 colleges, the Iowa State student was selected by Toro and the NFL to work the game on the basis of an essay-writing contest on why the profession appeals to him.

The week-long Super Bowl internship program is an effective way to cultivate the next generation of talent, said Toro’s sports fields and grounds sales manager, Dale Getz, CSFM.

From the moment he reached New Jersey the Sunday preceding the Super Bowl, his turf-management professors were plenty understanding of his absences from class, he said, Lenz kept busy handling whatever tasks he was assigned at the practice and game-day fields. He

spent one day doing only snow removal, another primarily painting.

And he took smart advantage of the continuous networking opportunities.

“I tried to interact with as many [professional groundskeepers] as I could during the week. It was really cool to meet George Toma.”

George, it turned out, wasn’t the only Toma on duty. His son, Ryan, took time off from his job as an airline pilot to lend a hand, too.

As they departed the stadium hours after the game and after all the post-Super Bowl packing and clean-up was done before the snowstorm due Monday morning, the Tomas smiled.

For while Ryan’s dad now has a 48-year Super Bowl streak going, XLVIII marked a first for George, since none of the previous 47 had been played on a Feb. 2.

On the enormous, end zone scoreboards appeared the elder Toma’s likeness, along with the message, “Happy 85th Birthday, George.”

Despite the first outdoor, cold-weather Super Bowl’s failure to produce a single snowflake or hint of wintry pigskin magic, it was, for Toma and his colleagues, a singular experience. ■

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