

50 Years: Willie Leak maintains TifGrand bermudagrass at RFK Stadium

The iconic Robert F. Kennedy Stadium, affectionately known as RFK, was built in 1961, and was then called District of Columbia Stadium. In 1969, a year after the assassination of Senator Kennedy, the stadium was re-named in his honor. By that time, Willie Leak, head groundskeeper at the stadium, had already been working at the Washington, D.C., facility for 4 years. This year, Leak celebrates half a century of service

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◀ **WILLIE LEAK**, head groundskeeper, RFK Stadium. Photo credit Nick Woodall, Mike B Photography.



▲ **IN 1994**, RFK hosted the FIFA World Cup; this game featured the USA v. Germany. Kea Taylor, Imagine Photography.

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Leak began his career at RFK as a part-time member of the grounds crew. In 1969, he was hired to the full-time crew. In 1997, he was promoted to head groundskeeper. He's held the position ever since. "I haven't missed any games. I've been here for quite a few things," Leak says.

Those few things include 35 years as the home of the Washington Redskins NFL football team and nine years as the home of the Washington Senators Major League Baseball team. Since 2011, RFK has been the venue for the NCAA AT&T Nation's Football Classic, featuring teams from the traditionally black universities Howard University and Morehouse College.

The 45,423-seat stadium was the site of concerts by the Beatles in 1966; Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band in 1985; the Jackson Five in 1974 and 1984; and U2 in 1987, 1992 and 1997. RFK has hosted many religious, memorial and charitable functions. Of note are the 2009 National Day of Service for Our Military when more than 12,000 volunteers joined First Lady Michelle Obama to create 85,000 care packages for troops serving overseas; and United We Stand, a 2001 benefit concert spearheaded by Michael Jackson to benefit victims of the September 11th attacks.

In recent years, RFK has been a Mecca for soccer-related events. In 1994, RFK hosted the FIFA World Cup. In 1996, the stadium hosted nine soccer games over six

days during the Summer Olympic Games. And since 1996, RFK has been the home field of the DC United MLS soccer team.

Field prep these days focuses on soccer for DC United, a 40-game soccer festival for AESA-ONE (the All Ethiopian Sports Association), and football for the Howard vs. Morehouse game. The main difference in maintenance between the two sports the field must service, Leak says, is the height of cut. For soccer, the turf is mowed at 3/4-inch. For football, it's mowed at 1.5-inches.

Two years ago, Leak says the decision was made to regrass the existing Tifway 419 bermudagrass field with a new shade-tolerant turf variety called TifGrand bermudagrass.

"One of the main reasons why we switched over was the shade tolerance that this particular grass provided," says Mike Mohamed, RFK building manager. "We have an overhang that goes around the entire stadium and it creates quite a bit of shade, even in the summer months on the field. The nearside of the field and the corner will be in shade almost year round. We had a lot of issues trying to bring that turf back after play and getting it to recover because it didn't get enough sunlight. So we wanted to use this turf just to test it out to see how the recovery would be since it is a shade tolerant grass. So far, the nearside near the tunnel where we've had a lot of shade issues in the past, it's been a lot better this year. It gets a lot of traffic there. The teams warm up there so it gets a lot of wear. The field as a whole has been able to recover very well. TifGrand has been markedly better than the turf we used before."

Dr. Wayne Hanna, who developed TifGrand bermudagrass at the University of Georgia, attributes the shade tolerance and fast recovery of the grass to its thick, vigorous rhizome structure.

"TifGrand has a good rhizome system right below the surface so even if the tops get damaged, or if it doesn't get a lot of sun, it has a lot of reserve energy right below the ground to keep the grass moving," Hanna says.

Leak says he has noticed an increase in wear tolerance with the TifGrand over the old 419 field. "The divots in the grass grow back really fast," Leak says.

Even though TifGrand is quite durable, every grass has its limits. Each July since

2011, RFK has hosted the AESA-ONE soccer festival. The event consists of 40 semi-pro soccer matches played in just one week's time. Three weeks later, DC United is scheduled to play a league game in the stadium.

"With the amount of games we played, basically from the goal mouth to the goal mouth, if you'd take the 18-yard box and just

extend it all the way down, in between those areas got so torn up that there really wasn't any grass left in those spots because of the amount of games that were played. You've got to remember, it's a semi pro league, so the wear and tear, the sliding that they put on the field is a bit more than the professionals do. There's just nothing to bring back. To have

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Field Science

DC United come back and play a league game on the field would be a disservice. So, we decided to resod the field,” Mohamed says.

Leak adds, “In order for the whole thing to look the same, we just decided to resod the whole field. We figured that would be the best way to go. We only have X-amount of time to recover and we didn’t think we had enough time to make it come back in time for soccer.”

After the tournament, the field is stripped of sod, laser graded and resodded, “everything as if we were installing a new field,” Leak says.

Charles Harris is the president of Buy Sod, Inc., the licensed sod producer that grew and installed the original TifGrand field at RFK. Buy Sod is licensed to produce TifGrand through The Turfgrass Group. Buy Sod has come back each July after the weeklong tournament and replaced the grass, providing the stadium with a brand new playing surface every year. Because he knows the replacement sod will be needed each summer, Harris and his team plan ahead.

“We select the sod field the grass will come from the year before and hold out the grass to be sure it’s at least two growing seasons old so the sod is very mature and will hold together very well. We grow the turf in sand and the rhizomes on the back of the pad are very uniform,” Harris says. “I think that’s the critical component, the quality



JFK FIELD CREW (L-R): Pablo Blanco, Michael Mohamed, Willie Leak, Jeff Hunter, Anthony Jones. Photo credit Nick Woodall, Mike B Photography.

in the farm field. It gets dense and tight and uniform so it plays very well and holds up to traffic.”

The TifGrand sod is grown on sandy soil in North Carolina and some 95,000 square feet of sod is shipped as 42-inch big rolls to the stadium site.

“Now it’s almost routine,” Mohamed says. “Once we have the event in July, we know we’re tearing up the field. It only takes about a week to get the old field up and the new field down.”

Resodding an entire field every year is an expensive proposition but Mohamed says, “fortunately the event in July helps take care of some of those costs.”

Erik Moses is senior vice president of sports & entertainment for Events DC, the entity that operates the stadium for the city. Moses explains his position as the “person responsible for attracting events to our campus.” He says that his clients, including college coaches and event promoters, continuously offer enthusiastic compliments regarding the condition of the field. “We get those kinds of accolades because

of the hard work that Willie and all of the other guys do to preserve and maintain that surface. They make my job easier for me. I would be remiss if I didn’t explain how maintaining the field and the playing conditions in a particular way really impacts our business, the bottom line and how we service our customers. These guys really play a big role in that.”

The stadium “does function as a living monument to Robert Kennedy,” Moses says. “It means so much to the city. That is why we try so hard to maintain it. Fifty-two years and counting.”

Mohamed says he, like Leak and so many others, has a love for the stadium.

“I’ve been coming here since I was 7-years-old. I was a big Redskins fan. It has a lot of history to it. So much has happened here. The Rolling Stones, Michael Jackson, The Grateful Dead. So many people have been in and out of this building,” Mohamed says. “We have a saying around here that RFK’s got you. You’ll be here forever. You just don’t know how long forever is going to be.” ■

Stacie Zinn Roberts is an award-winning writer and president of What’s Your Avocado?, a writing and marketing firm based in Mount Vernon, WA

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