

1991 Man of the Year:

The Nitty Gritty Dirt Man

By Holly Gibson

It was a dark and stormy night that sent most of Kansas City's masses indoors for cover. At Royals Stadium, business continued as usual. The bright stadium lights illuminated the incessant rain that was beginning to fall in sheets.

The pitcher twisted in strange contortions as he sought a dry spot on his jersey. The umpire finally gave in, signaling the start of a rain delay.

Even faster than the players scampered off the field, the Royals grounds crew sprinted into action. The sound system blared Bruce Springsteen's "Cover Me" as the crew rolled out the tarp. George Toma, head groundskeeper, worked alongside his crew, barked orders like a field commander. Toma wasn't about to let his carefully groomed infield be ruined by a mere rainstorm.

Less than 60 seconds later, the tarp covered the infield. The crowd clustered under the stadium overhangs cheered the crew's efforts. Toma didn't take time to bask in the glory of the moment. Instead, he marched the tarp, supervising the placement of the sandbags that hold it down. A John Deere AMT slowly circled as crew members tossed out sandbags at even intervals. The operation ran like a Desert Storm maneuver. Every step was efficiently executed.

Once everything was secured, the crew ran for shelter in the dugout. Toma was alone on the tarp with his hands on his hips. Ignoring the pelting rain that pasted down his salt-and-pepper hair, he walked the perimeter. With the detail of a drill sergeant, he inspected every inch. Occasionally, he summoned his assistant, Trevor Vance, to make adjustments. Only when he was satisfied with the tarp did he go into the dugout.

Saving the Day

Coming to the rescue has become routine work for George Toma during the course of his 45-year career. While others fret over the unpredictability of sports turf maintenance, Toma thrives on it. The larger the problem, the more Toma's eyes twinkle. Tell him the situation is hopeless, and he'll be on the next plane to tackle the problem.

For the last 25 years, Toma has been the turf man to call when you've run out of options. Whether he gets it from his head, his heart or his back pocket, Toma manages to perform miracles. For Toma, it's all about sticking up for your fellow groundskeepers and helping them out of jams. Toma accepted the 1992 Golf & SportsTURF Man of the Year Award not just for himself, but for all the groundskeepers caring for everything from elementary ball diamonds to professional stadiums. He said he owes a debt of gratitude to the late Harry Gill, who founded the Sports Turf Managers Association so groundskeepers could share ideas.

One of Toma's greatest achievements was transforming Candlestick Park in San Francisco from an unplayable bog into a first-class field. Perched on the edge of San Francisco Bay, Candlestick Park is one of the toughest parks to try to grow grass. The icy wind, regular fog and salty spray exacerbate any groundskeeping mistake.

In 1981, record rainfall and poor drainage left the 49ers facing a home playoff game on a questionable surface. Toma was the NFL's consultant for playing fields, so he was called in to help.

For nearly a month, Toma moved to San Francisco to work with Barney Barron, then director of parks and recreation, to revitalize the field. In addition to reviving the playing surface, he tried to lift the grounds crew's flagging spirits. The bad publicity concerning the stadium had left them demoralized.

Toma discovered the field's problem was a poor interface between the turf and sand base. He ripped up the turf and applied a layer of Enkamat, a water-permeable layer of geomatrix. The Enkamat helped stabilize the turf on the sand base.

He used about 1,000 square yards of Hawaiian kikuyugrass sod cut 2-inches thick in 18-inch-by-36-inch rectangles. After sodding, he used a solid-tine aerator to punch the turf. Then, he top-dressed with Turface.

As the turf began to come around, so did the grounds crew. There was perk in their step. When the grounds crew removed the tarp before the first play-off game, the crowd cheered the immaculate field, Toma recalled. That further bolstered the crew.

After two playoff games without a hitch, people began calling Toma the Sod God. Then San Francisco Mayor



Toma and crew wetting infield during game preparation.



Toma with relief pitchers Steve Crawford, Mike Magnante, and Jeff Montgomery (L to R).

Dianne Feinstein tried to woo him to the city by the bay.

Toma was content to return to his home base in America's heartland. From there, he is free to take off anywhere and solve sports turf problems.

"I think he is a magician when it comes to emergency repairs on football fields," said Jim Watson, an agronomist and vice president of The Toro Company. "He has total confidence in his ability to make repairs and affect a change. He has courage to go ahead and do it.

"He's sometimes controversial but you have to look at the bottom line. The man has enhanced the image of the groundskeeper. You can't argue with success."

Toma and Watson worked together in one of the hottest spotlights a groundskeeper can be placed under. It was 1984 just before the Olympic Games were to be played in Los Angeles. The Rose Bowl in Pasadena was the scheduled site for Olympic soccer tournament, but it was deemed unplayable by members of the Olympic Organizing Committee. They called Toma. By working day and night with pregerminated seed and extra fertilizer, Toma was able to present the Olympic Committee with a first-class field. When the world watched the Olympic soccer games, the natural grass field was its own ambassador.

"When you have a bad natural grass field, it's a good advertisement for artificial turf," Toma said.

Nitty Gritty Dirt Man From Pennsylvania

No matter how long the list of Toma's accomplishments grows, he still likes to tell people he is the nitty gritty dirt man. He takes pride in how far he has come from humble beginnings.

Sports were born in Toma's blood. As a poor youngster growing up in the shadow of Pennsylvania's coal mines, he was a small, scrappy athlete. Although he never grew more than 5-5, he made the most of the talent he had. He played football all winter and baseball all summer. When there wasn't money for proper equipment, Toma improvised. He even made his own baseball gloves. Toma never learned the word impossible.

When the neighborhood kids didn't have a proper baseball diamond, he built his own field of dreams on a spare patch of dirt in the backyard. "As a kid, I used to build pitching mounds in the backyard. I would take an old bedspring and pull it around to level off the infield. I took some hayseed from the barn to seed the outfield. The lines were white ash left over from the black coal burning," Toma recalled with a chuckle.

Money came hard in Toma's family, so there weren't many chances for a young boy to see the local minor league team, the Class A Eastern League Wilkes-Barre Barons, play ball. That didn't stop Toma from hanging around the field. Stanley Scheckler, the Barons' groundskeeper took the teen-ager under

his wing. He showed Toma the right way to drag the infield. In exchange for a free ticket to the game, Toma prepared the infield for play.

Toma didn't give much thought to the future. He was in sports heaven. Not only did he get into games for free, but he also got to be out working on the field.

Destiny struck in the form of the late Bill Veeck. When Veeck bought the Cleveland Indians in 1946, he came to Pennsylvania to reorganize the Barons. He saw something in 17-year-old Toma and named him head groundskeeper. Scheckler became the team trainer and bus driver.

Toma threw himself into his new job. If he needed equipment, he found someplace to borrow it. His mother and uncle encouraged him to do his best. His mom even brought his lunch to the stadium.

The young groundskeeper learned through trial and error. "I didn't know how far this thing (groundskeeping) would go," Toma said.

Cleveland's highly respected groundskeeper Emil Bossard became Toma's mentor. In 1948, he took Toma with him to build two baseball fields for minor league teams in Driver, Va. A year later, they constructed two fields in Marianna, Fla. In 1950, they put in five fields in Daytona Beach, Fla. Three winters of installing baseball fields followed by summers of field maintenance were a crash course in sports field management.

"It's an experience that everyone should have. Anyone who has a major league job should know what it's like to be in a minor league job," Toma said.

Groundskeeping had to take a back seat when Toma was drafted into the Army in 1950 during the Korean War. His leadership skills gained him the rank of sergeant first class.

Upon returning to civilian life, Toma's career resembled that of a minor league ballplayer. He drifted from team to team on the east coast, proving his skills on a series of fields and hoping for a chance with a major league team. In 1957, his call came. Both the New York Yankees and the Kansas City Athletics wanted him. The Yankees planned for him to start on their minor league team in Denver before coming to the house that Ruth built. Charlie Finley was prepared to sign on Toma to take care of Kansas City's old Municipal Stadium.

Municipal Stadium was known

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Man Of The Year

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through out the league as the worst field. Toma's mentor Bossard suggested he avoid Kansas City. Toma decided to see for himself. On Labor Day 1957, he visited the notorious field. There were so many weeds in the turf that the players would pull out weeds before they took their positions, Toma recalled.

"It was bad. I said to myself, 'George, if you mess up this field, no one will notice.'"

Toma decided to take the position in Kansas City. It turned out to be even more than he bargained to take on. There was no irrigation system to help battle summer temperatures in the 90s. Instead, he dragged hoses around trying to distribute water evenly. The tarp was made from canvas, and Toma swears it weighed 2,000 pounds.

A year of frustration had Toma shaking his head, but not giving up. "Sometimes you have to take a step back before you go forward," he said.

Consulting with Dr. Jim Watson, an agronomist, helped him devise a program to turn around the turf. He decided to plant common bermudagrass instead of Kentucky bluegrass. Kansas City is in the transition zone, so turf managers are constantly wrestling with the advantages and disadvantages of warm season grasses versus cool season turf.

"He had some of the worst conditions someone could hope to grow grass in," remembers Watson.

Watson introduced Toma to pregermination. It was a match for life. The bermudagrass was the first of Toma's turnaround successes. "People were amazed how good it looked," Toma remembered.

Before long, people were saying Municipal Stadium was the best field in the league. Toma got along well with the controversial Finley. He took what ever Finley threw at him in stride whether it was turning around a field after a rock concert or tending a zoo on the slopes past the outfield.

In Toma's mind, producing a top-quality field was always priority one. One day in 1963, he was on his hands and knees putting some finishing touches on the field. A man started to walk across the field. Toma barked at him to get off the field.

Later, Toma discovered he'd thrown out businessman Lamar Hunt. Hunt was looking at bringing a professional foot-

ball team to town. Rather than offending Hunt, the episode secured Toma's football future. Hunt said if the groundskeeper is that tough, I want him working for me, Toma recalled.

When the first Super Bowl game was scheduled for Los Angeles Coliseum, the NFL hired Toma to prepare and paint the field. They were so pleased with his work that Toma has been the man at the Super Bowl ever since. In 1972, he became the NFL's playing field consultant and took on responsibility for the Pro Bowl as well.

In 1968, the Athletics moved to Oakland. A year later, the Kansas City Royals expansion franchise signed on Toma to take care of their field. Herk Robinson, Royals general manager, came on board six months after Toma. The groundskeeper's loyalty to the Royals organization has been special, he said.

"The pride in what he does is tremendous. He's a relentless worker," said Robinson.

Father and Son

The life of a professional groundskeeper left little time for family. It was not unusual for Toma to be at the ballpark past midnight. One of son Chip's earliest memories is of going to Detroit and running on the field with the Detroit Lions.

"What I thought was glamorous was being around the football and baseball players and being able to play on the tractor," Chip said of his youth hanging out at the stadiums.

When it came time to settle down to a regular job, Chip Toma caught on with the Chiefs' grounds crew working for his father. Chip's younger brother, Rick, also served on the grounds crew before joining the Army. Rick is currently a first lieutenant stationed in Germany.

At first, Chip Toma just thought of the grounds crew as a job to bide his time before he settled on a career. The more he worked, the more he concentrated on making groundskeeping his career.

As the son showed an interest, the father taught. Toma's values of hard work and dedication had been instilled since childhood. As Chip worked, Toma educated him in the art of groundskeeping. The son doesn't remember receiving favoritism.

"He expects more out of me. He wants me to do better than everyone else," Chip Toma said.

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Field Maintenance

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Now, Chip Toma has earned his own place among the ranks of professional sports turf managers. He is in charge of grounds care operations for the Kansas City Chiefs, who play at Arrowhead Stadium. He and his father work together on the Super Bowl and have their own turf consulting business.

Like his father, Chip has an abundance of energy. He is forever doing three things at once. Chip laughs at the comparison.

"We both get antsy very quickly. We're hyper, high-strung people. When you are so much like another person that you are almost a clone, then you are bound not to get along with that person all the time."

What father and son have is a mutual respect for their abilities. "His biggest strength is that he was never scared to try something he thought would work, even if people told him it wouldn't work," Chip Toma said.

For example, when George Toma looked out over the Super Bowl playing field in Tampa last year the night before the game, he didn't like what he saw. He ordered his crew to resod the center of the field. They worked through the night to get the job done.

"We were so tired the next day," Chip remembered, "but it looked so good."

Trevor Vance also helped that night in Tampa. Like Chip Toma, George Toma has been his teacher and mentor. Vance has been his assistant for the last seven years. At first, groundskeeping was just a summer job where you got to meet some ballplayers. Then Vance became caught up in "Toma Pride."

"You put a rake or a float in his hands and he's incredible with it. He's such a perfectionist. There's only one way to do it and that's the right way," Vance said of George Toma.

"George is willing to teach anybody. Every day I come here, I learn something from him. He's like another father. I feel like I'm getting a degree from George Toma," Vance said.

Helping and teaching are a way of life for Toma whether it's a high school kid on the grounds crew in Kansas City, a charity in need of a spokesperson or a grounds manager in Japan. Toma wants to help them all.

"George is one of the kindest gentle-



From the turf beside the outfield fountain at Royals Stadium sit Trevor Vance and Toma.

men whom I have ever known. George has spent his life helping others and expecting nothing in return," said Robinson.

At 62, Toma sees himself mellowing. When he was in Berlin a couple of years ago to help prepare the field for a Kansas City Chiefs' football exhibition, he let his wife, Donna, and eight-year-old son, Ryan, talk him into visiting the Berlin Wall that was being torn down. As a general rule, Toma remembers cities more by their stadiums than their tourist attractions.

"I try to pass the knowledge down to help people internationally," Toma said.

"Everyone wants to give him a farewell party," Chip Toma laughs. He can see his father cutting back, but he can't envision him retiring totally.

Toma's blood runs Royals blue. The pull of the stadium is too strong. There always will be youngsters to teach, pitching mounds to perfect and tarps to supervise.

"Like Herk Robinson says, they'll bury me in front of the scoreboard," Toma said. □

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