

F.O.Y.
Field of the Year

Famed Lambeau Field

wins STMA Pro Football
Field of the Year



Lambeau Field's evolution is the product of shared knowledge and experience from STMA members. The Field of the Year Award for Lambeau is an award for the industry.



◀From L to R: Allen Johnson, Bart Bartelme, Derek Paris and Joel Hunt.

A LLEN JOHNSON, FIELDS MANAGER FOR THE GREEN BAY PACKERS, has for 13 years been responsible for one of his community's most prized assets—53-year-old Lambeau Field's playing surface. He and his full-time staff, Bart Bartelme, Derek Paris, and Joel Hunt, oversaw the overall reconstruction of the field in 2007 and won the 2009 STMA Professional Football Field of the Year Award.

Improved drainage was the goal and the Packers spent \$3 million on the project. Before reconstruction, the field had a multitude of layers: compacted clay subgrade, 4-inch layer of pea gravel, 10 inches of 90/10 sand/peat rootzone mix, 5 inches of fine-graded soil, and 1 ½-inch thick sod from Tuckahoe Turf Farms. After the project, the soil composition was 90/10 sand/peat mix over 4 inches of pea gravel, the crown was reduced to a .65% slope, a new heat system (hydronic [circulating glycol] with pex) expanded the zones to include the Mondo surface apron surrounding the field, and GrassMaster fibers were inserted into the rootzone.

The new drainage system is a traditional drain tile, surrounded with pea gravel in the trenches and arranged in a gridiron pattern perpendicular to the field's crown.

Johnson wrote in his FOY entry: "The challenges at Lambeau Field change as often as the weather in northeast Wisconsin. During October 2008, three home games into our regular season, some players were starting to slip [on the surface]. We discovered that the turf canopy was too dense and their cleats weren't penetrating into the soil surface where they could anchor into the sand and GrassMaster fibers for optimum footing.

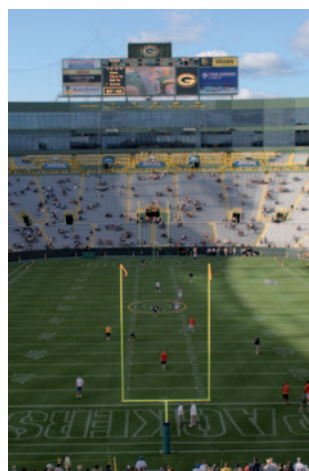
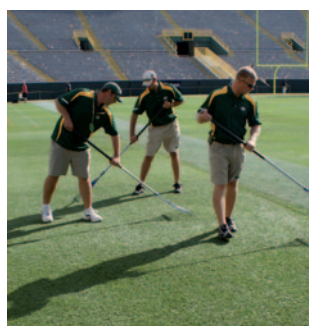
"We decided to prioritize safety and performance over aesthetics after that game and commenced aggressive verticutting to thin the canopy and used a Soil Reliever (Southern Green) with 7-inch solid tines to alleviate compaction and help open up the surface. It was somewhat risky to beat up a high-profile field that late in the season because our growing season was winding down; for the next game, on October 19, Lambeau wasn't quite up to its usual aesthetic standard but performed well and by the next game, in November, it looked great again and played well the rest of the year.

"Our next challenge reoccurs every winter, when night temperatures dip below the mid-20's and we tarp the field for snow, or to assist the underground heat system. Either moisture accumulates on the underside of the tarp, creating a frost layer that ends up on the field surface after the tarp is removed, or the tarp is frozen to the field and has to be torn from the surface, which takes with it a lot of turf. To solve this, we force a warm cushion of air under the tarp to prevent that frost layer from forming. This very laborious endeavor has absolutely improved the surface late in the year.

"Another big challenge greeted us in spring 2009. Being in the third year with the system, it was time to "grind" off the natural turf with our Koro Top Maker and regenerate the surface from seed. This was our first attempt at this, so with nervous stomachs, we removed the natural grass and exposed the fibers April 1, then immediately slit-seeded with a blend of Kentucky bluegrass at a rate of 8.3 pounds/1000 sq. ft., split evenly in two directions. We turned on the underground heat system and covered it with Evergreen turf blankets (Covermaster) for 5 weeks to assist germination, and monitored the surface temperatures closely when the sun came out. It was covered and uncovered often. At 5 weeks we shut off the heat and just used the turf blankets for another 3 weeks. Seven weeks after seeding the bluegrass we added 8.9 pounds/1000 sq. ft. of perennial ryegrass.

"This year we began collecting clippings to prevent snot layers, picking *poa annua* by hand, using the Soil Reliever 2 days before each game to alleviate compaction, and increasing our dethatching activity.

"Many of the practices we employ have been suggested by our peers. Lambeau Field's evolution is the product of shared knowledge and experience from STMA



members. The Field of the Year Award for Lambeau is an award for the industry.”

SportsTurf: Has modern technology rendered the term “frozen tundra” obsolete in Green Bay? How do you keep the field in good condition late in the season?

Johnson: For the most part, I would say yes. On an average winter day, we are able to keep the field completely thawed. However, there are those situations like we had a few years back when we hosted an NFC Championship game and had some extremely cold temperatures; by the end of the game the surface was starting to stiffen up a little, especially in areas where the natural canopy was a little thin. It was so cold during that game that I’m sure the perception was that everything was frozen. I know I was.

The condition of the field late in the season has a lot to do with how much success we have during the month of October regenerating turf in the wear areas. Aside from those early preparations of trying to keep good canopy cover, we use a Soil Reliever on the field a few days before every game to soften the surface, and we cover the field with a tarp the night before, while blowing a cushion of warm air under it to prevent frost and any surface moisture from accumulating on the field.

ST: What changes to your maintenance plans are you making this year, if any?

Johnson: If we can duplicate our success last year I’d definitely take

it. We started soil relieving before every game last year and I think that improved the performance of our field a lot, the process of blowing air under our tarp has also given us a better surface for those late games. Aside from replicating our practices last year, we will be experimenting with some artificial lighting.

ST: What’s the best piece of turf management advice you have ever received?

Johnson: Not specifically turf advice but work-related advice in general: “It is better to be proactive than reactive.”

ST: How do you balance your work and personal time?

Johnson: Luckily, I really enjoy work and consider my crew an extension of my family. Derek Paris, Bart Bartelme, and Joel Hunt are like brothers to me, so that camaraderie really helps when we work the amount of hours that we do. I am no longer married, but a father of an awesome 7-year-old son. I share that time equally with his mother, so when I am not working, I am busy being a single parent; if there is ever a conflict I simply bring Ethan along and put him to work. I also look forward to the off-season.

ST: How do you deal with the pressure of being in such a high-profile position?

Johnson: For some reason, I’ve never looked at it that way and that probably helps. I take a lot of pride in everything I do and hope that it is reflected in what people perceive. To relieve stress I try to exercise and incorporate a little long distance running. ■



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