When there are only 25 days to go from dirt to turf, how do you make a field good enough for millions of TV viewers? George Toma and his crew accomplished it at Super Bowl XXII.

by Heide Aungst, managing editor

The best story to come out of Super Bowl XXII certainly wasn't the game between the Washington Redskins and Denver Broncos. It was the one about the dead pigeons.

Haven't heard that one yet?

The L.A. Times carried an article about dead pigeons on the field at Jack Murphy Stadium. California environmentalists pointed to turf pesticides as the culprit.

It turns out the pigeons were dead long before they even reached the field. NFL athletic field manager George Toma got the frozen birds from a veterinarian to scare live pigeons away from eating the pre-germinated seed.

For the most part, it worked. At least enough to let the Ph.D. ryegrass mixture from International Seeds sprout.

The January 31st game was Toma's 22nd Super Bowl. Toma normally cares for the Kansas City Royals' and Chiefs' synthetic game fields and natural practice fields.

Pre-game pressures

"Hug the wall!" Toma yells at a pre-game performer taking a shortcut across the field. Thousands of pre-game and half-time performers swarm the stadium for rehearsals two days before the game. "This is a groundkeeper's nightmare. I think we counted 600-plus wheels going over this place...2,000 performers...

Toma covered the field with a plastic tarp, under which was Warren's TerraBond to protect heavily trafficked areas.

Toma brought a crew of 12 from Kansas City. Included were the crew's business manager Chip Toma, and foremen Scott Martin, Andre Bruce and Doug Schallenberg. San Diego field manager Brian Bossard and a crew of eight also worked on the field.

The turf was a mere 25 days old for the NFL championship game. Sportscasters blamed a fall in the first quarter by Washington quarterback Doug Williams on the field conditions. "The Redskins complained because they had to use longer cleats," Toma said. "But the Broncos said they had to wear shorter cleats."

When Toma took charge of the
field, it was almost bare after the Chargers and San Diego State football
seasons, a high school football tournament and the Holiday Bowl. Dormant
Bermudagrass covered only the sides of the field.

"It was sodded in the spring with
Santa Ana," Toma explained. "The
Bermuda took a Trailways bus some-
place. My men kept on talking that we
maybe should sod."

Starting from scratch
Sodding would have been simpler but
more expensive. Toma decided to
seed.

The San Diego field has a four-foot
sand base. But clay from a previous
sodding error layered the top inch.
The clay, in essence, saved the day. It
gripped the roots of the seedling turf
better than pure sand.

Toma took over New Year’s Day.
First, his crew removed the paint in
the end zones with Jacobsen sweep-
sters and sucked up the old paint with
a Turf Vac. "We had to take the paint
off the numbers because they weren’t
up to NFL specs," Toma said. "They
have to be 12 inches from the line. I
noticed it on TV. A couple of other
clubs will have to be reminded of it
next year."

They swept the field with a Parker
sweeper about the time they began to
pre-germinate the seed in barrels.
"We usually change the water twice a
day, but some days we’d drain it and
not put the water back in. We pre-
germinated at different stages."

While the seed germinated, the
crew tackled the field. "I couldn’t use
a verticutter or there’d be nothing but
dirt," Toma said. He wanted a Meeker
harrow to prepare the seed bed, but
had to settle for an old Rogers aero-
blade seeder.

"Then we seeded like a golf green
with 2,000 pounds of seed," Toma
said.

Toma’s son Chip prepared the the
seed concoction. His recipe is de-
scribed as "a pinch of this, a dash of
that—about half a shovel-full of
Milorganite, a big shovel of pre-germi-
nated Ph.D., then Turface" in Lesco
and Scotts spreaders.

The next day, Toma used a Core
Master aerifier with 5/8-inch solid
tines set for 3/4 to 1 inch depths. The
tines pushed the seed into the field.

"We put 72 holes per square foot,"
Toma said. "Then we seeded again. If I
had to do it again, I would have used
5/8-inch tines at a depth of 3/2 to 4
inches. That would have made 142
holes per square foot."

The seeding/coring/seeding pro-
cess causes turf roots to grow at dif-
ferent levels in the field. The seed
sprouting in the holes will have young
roots starting at the one-inch depth.

That night it rained just the right
amount—15/100 of an inch to be exact.
Two days later the crew top
dressed the field with two parts nitro-
humus to one part sand.

The crew covered the field the next
day with 24 rolls of 40 x 100 ft. six-mil
plastic. Then they pulled a pinspiker
with a three-gang mower over the
plastic to allow the turf to "breathe."

Within six days, the ryegrass had
grown to 1 1/2 inches. "I called up Doc
Watson (agronomist Jim Watson,
Ph.D., of Toro) and he said, ‘George,
slit that canvas from goal post to goal
post and take it off from 10 to 2:30,’”
Toma said.

The seventh day after seeding, the
crew mowed the field. By the week
before the game, they mowed every
other day. They sprayed the field with
Ferromec and Bovura to green-up the
color. "You see a big difference with
iron," Toma said.

The rest of the time was spent with
details such as painting the fields and
sidelines for ABC-TV’s cameras, put-
ting up goal posts, and putting about
2,000 feet of windscreen around the
practice fields to block out fans and
scouts.

The boss
"Off the field now!" George yells
while pulling back the plastic tarp.
"We have a ball game to play."

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LM managing editor Heide Aungst and field manager George Toma check
out how well the field held up after Super Bowl XXII.
The "recipe" of pre-germinated seed, Milorganite and Turface was put on the field by spreaders.

"Give me a half-hour more," the ABC producer yells back. "The show takes 12 minutes, you've got 12 minutes," Toma says.

By this time, it's 8:45 p.m. The crew has been at the field since 6 a.m. and they're eager to return to the hotel.

Thousands of sock-footed (Toma doesn't allow shoes on the field) Jazzciscers, piano players and Rockettes do a final half-time run-through and scurry off the field. The crew pulls the tarp back to reveal bruised turf and a field rutted from the wheels on movable stages. The crew hand-sweeps rutted areas. Around 11 p.m. they finally leave the field, having had only Oreos for dinner.

At 6 a.m. the next day, the crew is at the field again to remove the tarps. "The tires (on the stages) should have been twice as wide as they were," Toma says, slightly upset. "Just one of those weighs 4,000 pounds...two baby grand pianos, two people playing, six to eight girls dancing...These people never did this before. They're used to dancing in New York on a stage."

Next, the ruts are patched. "I take my hat off to the Ph.D.," Toma says. "I also take my hat off to my crew and Brian Bossard's crew. Today they're not walking, they're running."

After mowing the field at 5/8ths of an inch, they roll it with two people on the back for added weight. Next, the entire field is re-painted, using large stencils for the numbers and logos.

George's crew is slowed a bit by an insert sportscaster Frank Gifford had to tape. They can't get in the way of the cameras.

On Sunday, the crew meets in the hotel lobby before 6 a.m. They pile into a van and car and head to Denny's restaurant. "This might be the last time we eat for awhile," warns Chip.

Super day

By 7:30 a.m. they're on the field with the Parker Sweeper and paint sprayers. By 8 a.m., the crew rakes and sweeps the field.

Toma walks the field up and down, over and over again, occasionally shouting instructions to crew members.

After sweeping the field so the turf stands up, they mow it twice at 5/8 inches with a John Deere greensmower.

At 12:40 p.m., the crew emerges from the maintenance area in crisp
The entire crew is needed to roll the tarps off the field.

San Diego field manager Brian Bossard and George Toma oversee the workings of their combined crews.

new red-white-and-blue warm-up-suit uniforms. ABC grabs George for a pre-game interview. Proudly, he talks about the 25-day-old ryegrass before a national audience.

The pre-game show goes well. Kick-off is at 3 p.m.

The crew waits patiently with photographers by the Bronco bench. They can't really enjoy the game, because they must be ready to run onto the field to replace divots as needed.

At the half, with the Redskins leading 35-10, the crew sweeps, rakes, replaces divots and picks up trash.

After the Redskins complete a 42-10 pounding, the crew breathes a sigh of relief. It's kind of like Christmas. All that preparation and then, in a matter of hours, it's over. But they won't have much clean-up: the field will soon be torn up by a motocross event.

Fans clear out. Toma walks the field one last time. "I've never seen 25-day-old grass hold up this well," he says.

The crew leaves the field around nine, posing for a group picture outside the van. "I'm proud of you guys," Toma says.

The Redskins weren't the only winners at Super Bowl XXII. LM

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