

# George Toma does Super (Bowl) job on turf

BY VERN PUTNEY

Sports Illustrated dubs George P. Toma "The Nitty Gritty Dirt Man," but the head of field operations at the classy Arrowhead Stadium and Royals Stadium at the Harry S. Truman Sports Complex in Kansas City, Mo., does a Super job.

Super as in Super Bowl.

He's supervised the setting for all 23 Super Bowls. Plus four Pro Bowls.

His handiwork is the first view for anticipating millions as the stage is set for perhaps TV's greatest sports attraction.

Toma takes a workmanlike approach to what he believes is his sole responsibility—providing the athlete with the best possible playing conditions—something golf course superintendents can identify with.

To cope with the variety of elements encountered, Toma and associates have developed what is called "Super Bowl Grass." The grass is a combination of Derby, Regal and Gator Rye. They complement each other. Derby and Regal harmonize with 70- to 90-degree weather, while Gator can contend with the cold of Canadian climes.

PAT in football stands for point-after-touchdown. In the turf trade, it's the abbreviation for "Prescription Athletic Turf." This type of playing surface has given Toma four field headaches.

When Super Bowl grass was put over PAT sod at Chicago's Soldier Field in August 1988 to prepare for a pre-season game, roots didn't take. It looked like a land mine had exploded there.

Toma and Jim Dugan, supervisor with the City of Chicago Parks District, cut out a two-inch strip 60 feet wide from goal post to goal post, and resodded. Four nights later, the Chicago Bears and Los Angeles Raiders played in presentable footing. Not one piece of sod came up during the game.

While PAT has been a difficult problem, Toma believes improvement will follow product modification.

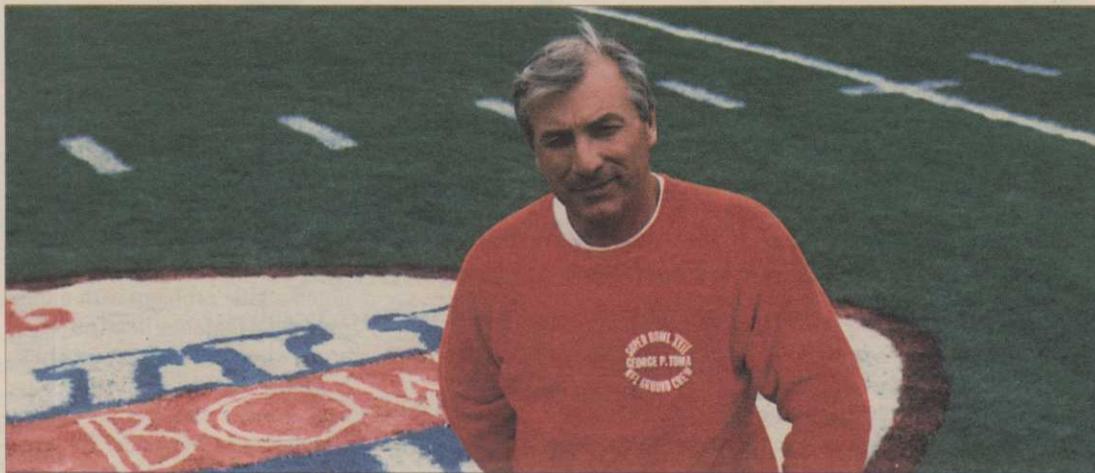
Toma has experienced a couple of near-calamities in California.

He recalls with pride "The Miracle of Jack Murphy Stadium."

That San Diego site was barren of grass. That situation was overcome in 25 days and nights of loving labor. It was a good field but needed overhaul desperately. Pregerminated grass was soaked and resoaked. The field was seeded 25 days before the scheduled playing date. Topdress, water and spray followed. Voila!

Then there was the swirling Candlestick Park controversy in 1981 at San Francisco. Mayor Diane Feinstein and City Hall officials had been under intense pressure for a field that resembled a disaster area. Her Honor, termed by Toma "General Patton," donned hip boots, entered the stadium work force and turned around the deteriorating situation.

"The City by the Bay"



George Toma stands in front of one of his fields.

celebration knew no bounds when Dwight Clark clutched Joe Montana's last-second pass for a division playoff title preliminary to a Super Bowl crown.

In Toma's book, the Candlestick grounds crew members also were world champions.

Some other game preparations have not gone smoothly, despite the pleasant-to-the-eye product the camera conveyed.

Last December, for instance, 60 million British Thermal Units (BTU) were required to heat Soldier Field for the divisional playoff game.

In 1969, the year the Kansas City Chiefs defeated the Minnesota Vikings in the Sugar Bowl at Tulane University, there was no grass on the field. Wood chips and sawdust were used. Shavings were painted green.

And how about the media menace? Try sprucing up the field, painting the goal posts and other workaday chores on a Tuesday while up to 2,000 members of the press scurry for stories and try to line up pictures.

Wednesday through Friday, as Toma huddles on the field with those involved in pregame and

halftime activities, footballs are flying overhead.

Thankfully, Toma has excellent working relationships with such standout stadium managers as Rick Neff at Tampa Bay; Bill Wilson at Jack Murphy, and Connie Burg at Aloha in Hawaii.

He's also worked closely with Dr. James R. Watson, executive vice president of Toro Company who is, according to Toma, "the greatest agronomist I know."

#### Supers a special breed

Of golf course superintendents, Toma says, "They are a special breed."

He accompanied Dale Sandin, groundskeeper at the Orange Bowl in Miami, Fla., to an evaluation proceeding in Miami. City Hall sentiment seemed to be that "all Sandin does is cut grass."

Toma interjected, "How about considering these attributes? Farmer, course babysitter, doctor (diagnosing the best grasses); pharmacist (remedies for unwanted grasses); mechanic, gas station overseer, plumber, machinist, supply clerk, paymaster and paymaster—among basic duties of golf course superintendents."

Sandin then was seen in a different light.

Further relating to superintendents, Toma observed that the true test of value is an ability to obtain maximum results from money allotted.

He cites success of Dr. Watson and Toma's son, Chip, in building two fields for \$25,000 each at William Jewell College in Liberty, Mo. They have absorbed up to 4.75 inches of rain a day without practice shutdown, Toma noted.

The NFL Kansas City Chiefs use the fields for six weeks, the college and Liberty High School the remaining period. After seven years, the fields referred to as the "Chip Toma-Dr. Watson Milk Shakes" are in excellent shape.

Though he's in a business paralleling course supers, Toma admits knowing little of golf.

The Edwardsville, Pa., native, now 60, plucked tomatoes, not golf balls, as his first job. Pay was 10 cents an hour.

A neighbor, groundskeeper at a nearby baseball field, was his next employer. When famed baseball entrepreneur Bill Veeck bought the franchise, he named high school senior George as field supervisor.

"I didn't know blue grass from rye grass," confesses Toma.

He learned quickly, thanks to apprenticeship under turf legend Emile Bossard at Cleveland from 1948 to 1950. Toma rose rapidly up the baseball ladder, from Wilkes Barre, Pa., to Buffalo, N. Y., to Charleston, W. Va., then to Kansas City, a post Bossard advised against because of harsh growing conditions there. Toma's dealt nicely with flood and baked conditions since Nov. 1, 1957.

#### Offers abounded

While weaving his way through baseball's path to the major leagues, Toma turned down flattering offers from such as Detroit slugging great Hank Greenberg, then Tiger general manager, and a dozen major league stadium officials.

Most tempting, perhaps, was the pitch of New York Yankee players Tony Kubek, Bobby Richardson, Moose Skowron and Hank Bauer. "Come over to us," they chorused. "Not only will we guarantee you a World Series share, but we'll pay your dollar a day fare over the George Washington Bridge."

Appealing as that last sweetener might have been, Toma pled preference to remain a small town boy. He's comfortable in KC.

However, what cosmopolite is as well traveled? After the Super Bowl, Toma winged his way to Hawaii's 80 degrees for the Pro Bowl. Then it was back to KC and two days of a chill factor of minus 17 degrees. The overcoat didn't get a decent fitting before spring training with the Kansas City Athletics at Orlando, Fla., beckoned.

Return to KC to prepare for the baseball-football seasons came in late March.

Soon, it's Super Bowl time again. Not a bad routine.

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