



# *In the Shadow, and Spotlight, of Lambeau Field*

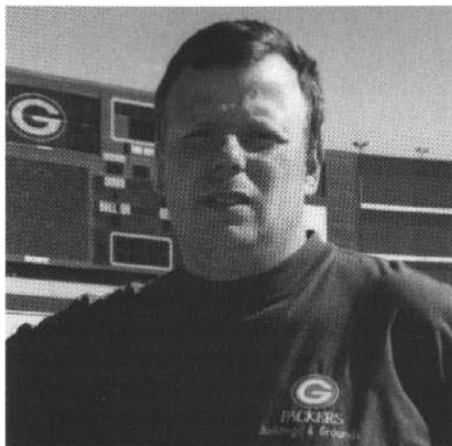
By Lori Ward Bocher

For someone who grew up in the shadow of Green Bay's Lambeau Field, he certainly was thrust into the spotlight this past January when the Green Bay Packers earned home-field advantage on their march to Super Bowl XXXI. Todd Edlebeck, grounds supervisor at Lambeau Field, conducted three national press conferences himself. ESPN dubbed him the "sod god".

"It made me a little nervous," Todd says of the unprecedented attention for someone who usually can be found quietly tending his turf. "The biggest thing at that point was to get the field done. But it was exciting, in some ways, to be a part of something that was so huge throughout the country."

You all remember how "huge" it was.

- The terrific Packer record that gave them home-field advantage for the playoff games.
- The January 4 rain that turned the game against the San Francisco 49ers into the "Mud Bowl" or "Souper Bowl" as it was dubbed in the press.
- Coach Mike Holmgren fielding questions about the turf, as well as his team, during the post-game press conference. Could the field be ready for the next week's NFC championship game? Holmgren had confidence in Todd and his crew.
- The decision to resod the entire field for that January 12 championship game.
- A week during which the sod at Lambeau Field made almost as many newspaper and TV headlines as the team. Headlines like "Sod Story" and "Turf's Up" were the norm.
- Green Bay police forming the "sod squad" to keep exuberant fans away from the pile of old sod that was torn up.



Todd Edlebeck

- Eventually that old sod is packaged in "Frozen Tundra" boxes and sells out at \$10 a box.

In the middle of this exciting sod saga was Todd. The friendly, unassuming, boyish supervisor moved from the shadow of Lambeau Field onto its center stage. The shadow? "I grew up just three houses from the stadium," Todd explains. "They always say that I grew up in the shadow of Lambeau Field."

When he was 15, he began working summers for the city of Green Bay which managed the stadium at that time. After graduating from high school in 1982, he worked for the city full-time for a year with plans to attend a technical school. But in 1983 the Packer organization assumed management of the stadium, and they asked Todd to become a full-time grounds crew member. And he's been there ever since.

"In 1988 or 1989 we divided maintenance into two departments," Todd recalls. "I became the grounds supervisor, and Ted Eisenreich became the maintenance supervisor. Prior to that we worked as one department. We still help each other out, but our responsibilities are divided."

As grounds supervisor, Todd is in charge of the playing field and the

practice facility. Together, the two departments employ five full-time people (including Todd and Ted) and about 50 part-time or seasonal people.

The week between January 4 and January 12 probably will be Todd's most memorable as a Packer employee. With the Packers putting in a new field this summer, the circumstances that led up to the January resodding of the entire field most likely will never be repeated.

Coming into the playoff game against the San Francisco 49ers on January 4, the field was in great shape thanks to the underground heating system that makes it possible to grow grass in January. Due to excessive wear, the middle section of the field had been resodded on December 9. "It held up really well during the Minnesota game," Todd reports, adding that he was confident it would hold up for the 49er game, too.

But then the unexpected happened. Rain in January. And to make matters worse, the 30-year-old field doesn't have a good drainage system, according to Todd. On game day, it was pouring rain in the morning. "We have to uncover the field for warm-ups two hours before the game starts," Todd explains. "It rained throughout that whole period, and it rained throughout the whole game. Because the field itself was thawed out, and everything around it (where there's no heating system) was





frozen, the rain just filled up the whole field. The field was a total mess, like a swamp."

A Packer victory that day meant that they'd be hosting the NFC Championship game in just eight days on January 12. What was going through Todd's mind as he watched the field literally turn into a mud bowl? "I was real, real upset," he admits. "You don't plan for that kind of rain in January. Most of the time it would be snow, and the field would have held up well with snow."

"We thought to ourselves, 'What are we going to do now?' The league office was here at the game. They called and said they wanted to meet us at the 50 yard line after the game," Todd continues. "I knew at that time that, if we won the game, we'd have to replace the field. How much? The whole thing."

So in the beginning of the fourth quarter he called the Maryland sod farm that had provided the sod back in December. They said they'd be able to cut and deliver the needed sod. He also called the weather bureau to see what kind of weather to expect in the next week. "I wanted to have my facts straight before I met with the NFL," Todd points out. "Once we knew that we were going to win, we knew that we'd have to work fast. I told the NFL that my suggestion was to resod the whole thing. Once I did that, I committed myself to getting it done."

The NFL agreed. They didn't even wait for Chip Toma, their field advisor, to arrive on Monday. "He watched the game on TV and said over the phone that he agreed with the decision," Todd says. "He was a little reluctant to do that over the phone. But we had to make the decision and get the sod people ready to go."

The NFL, and not Green Bay, had the final say. "When you have a championship game, it's no longer in the hands of the team but the NFL," Todd explains. "They're in charge of the whole game. They get the game revenue. They also pay all the bills."

They agreed that no more than one-third of the field should be left uncovered at any time, so they couldn't start ripping up the old sod until the new started to arrive. That was on Wednesday. Because of the heating system on the field, the turf came up quite easily with sod cutters. "If the frost had been in the ground, it would have been as hard as concrete and

we never would have been able to get the old grass off," Todd says.

When they began laying the sod on Wednesday, daytime temperatures were back to a more seasonal 15 to 20 degrees. "The sod came to Wisconsin in heated trucks, and it sat in the trucks until we needed it," Todd says. "If the temperature had gotten any colder, we may have had problems with the sod freezing together."

With the cold weather, the sod lost some color. "It will brown real quick," Todd points out. "When we unrolled the sod, it was green. But as it lay there, it got a little browner. Having blades of grass in that cold takes a lot away from the color."

Things went quite well on Wednesday. They worked until they ran out of sod at 2 o'clock Thursday morning. "So we covered the field because they were predicting one to three inches of snow," Todd remembers. "At that time about a third of the field was still old sod. We had almost half of the new sod down."

Sure enough, the snow came on Thursday and it snowed all day. The first sod truck arrived by 6 a.m., and they uncovered only a small corner of the field. "As we rolled out the new sod on the soil that was wet from the snow, it stuck there," Todd recalls. "So we had to have a few extra people pushing it into place. That added more work, but it was also a plus in that the sod stuck to the ground."

As the sod trucks kept arriving, the process continued. Tear up old sod;

lay down new sod; work it into place; roll it; cover it with the tarp as soon as possible to keep the snow off. "The snow kept falling and building up on the tarps," Todd says. "By the time we finished at about 6 p.m. on Thursday, the tarp was actually all covered with snow. The field itself was completed, but we didn't have any of the sides down. We had to come back on Friday morning to finish that job."

The sod was not pinned down. Because of its heavy clay soil and the fact that it was cut two inches thick, each roll weighed about a ton. "If you cut off a piece about a foot long and 42 inches wide, you couldn't pick it up off the ground. It was that heavy," Todd explains.

What did it take to get the job done?

- 28 semi loads, with about 16 sod rolls per semi
- about 448 rolls of sod at 42 inches wide by 42-45 feet long, and 2 inches thick
- 30 to 50 people, many of whom were volunteers, working on the field at all times
- about \$150,000 of NFL money

After all of this work, how did the field hold up on game day? "It was excellent," Todd reports. "Something like this had never been done before. Even Chip's dad, George Toma, who was at Kansas City for many years and is considered the master of turf, a guru, said that what we did in one week's time was an amazing feat."

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What pleased Todd most about the process—besides actually completing the seemingly impossible task—was the amount of help that he received. "I had voice mail, probably 50 messages a day, from people who wanted to supply something or help," he points out. "The golf course people. Local businesses. The tractor and fork lift companies. It just goes to show how much pride we have in Wisconsin. We don't just follow our team, but we support it when it needs help."

And the team was able to support the community in a way that probably could only happen in Green Bay. Some of the calls Todd received during this eventful week were from charities that were interested in selling the old sod that was being torn up. The Packer organization decided it was a good plan, so the work crews piled the sod in the parking lot until it could be hauled away. "People were just going wild, jumping in front of our equipment, trying to get some sod," Todd remembers. "For safety reasons, we hired a police officer to stand by it."

The sod was packaged in specially made "Frozen Tundra" boxes and sold for \$10 a box. All 25,000 boxes were sold, with \$250,000 raised for local charities.

After the NFC Championship game on January 12, the "new" sod was torn up, too. "We already had problems with drainage, and the new sod had a really heavy clay base," Todd explains. "It would have created a layering effect, with two inches of the clay base, and then our black soil underneath, and then back down to a clay base."

More charities wanted the second crop of sod, but this time the Packer organization decided to sell it itself

with proceeds going toward a new field. "We're going to build a high-tech field, a sand-based field with a drainage system, new heating system and new irrigation," Todd reveals. "And we're looking at sports turf, which is a synthetic field under the natural turf."

During the January resodding, some of the help came from local golf course crews — Oneida Golf and Riding Club, Green Bay Country Club, Thornberry Creek, and Crystal Springs in nearby Seymour. Todd talks turf throughout the year with Randy Witt at Oneida.

With no formal turf schooling, Todd has attended lots of seminars to learn more about the art and science of maintaining turf. "My philosophy is that you can always learn from somebody," he says. "Talking with other grounds people throughout the league and from golf courses, you can always learn from somebody. Their ideas may save you some time, and your ideas may save them some time."

Do the football players pay much attention to the turf? "Sterling Sharpe was always one to give us a hard time in a joking way," Todd reports. "Sterling was always a good guy. He kidded around a lot, like telling us we didn't water the field enough."

"And Chris Jacke (kicker) and Craig Hentrich (punter) are always concerned about the field," he continues. "We talk real closely. They'll come out and talk to me when I'm cutting grass. And they always look me up to see how the field is before a game."

Joining the Packer organization in 1983, Todd worked during some lean years when there were more losses than wins. Working for a winning team is quite a bit different. "Everybody is happier," he says. "The

support from the fans is totally different when everybody is so excited and you see everybody with something green and gold. People recognize you."

"Wisconsin always supported the Packers, even through the lean years," Todd continues. "But the support is more widespread now. You go into the Detroit airport, or down in Florida, and you see people with Packer things. I think the whole country was excited for us and wanted to see us do well."

When not working for the Packers, Todd likes to spend time with his family — wife, Julie, who works as an administrative assistant, and their two sons, Matt (7) and Zachary (6). "I coach soccer and T-ball with my sons," Todd points out. "I like to be involved with their sports." He also likes to hunt. And he's a volunteer for the fire department in his home of Ashwaubenon.

How do his kids feel about having a dad who works with the world champion Green Bay Packers? "I think they're getting more excited," Todd answers. "When they were younger they didn't realize that it was special when they walked into the locker room with me and saw all of the players. But as they get older, they get more excited about shaking hands with Brett or Reggie. And when they go to school, the other kids will ask, 'You've really been in the locker room with Brett and Reggie?'"

Yes, he has. But, more importantly, he committed himself to the seemingly impossible task of making sure that Brett and Reggie, and all of the other Packers, had an excellent playing field for that historic NFC championship game that catapulted the Packers into the Super Bowl for the first time in 29 years. 🍀



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