

Big League Groundskeepers, Dirt of the Sports World?

by Ron Hall, assistant editor

Fiesty George Toma jabs his finger into the air as he decries the lack of respect he feels his profession gets in the high-rolling world of big time sports.

"The groundskeeper is the dirt of the organization," he says. "He's the lowest person of the organization. He's the dirt, dirt, dirt of this whole thing."

Toma, groundskeeper of the Kansas City Royals professional baseball team, may or may not be the best groundskeeper in the

where he started as a 17-year-old for the Cleveland Indians farm team Barons, to the modern Truman Sports Complex with its carpeted Arrowhead Stadium and adjoining Royals Stadium—38 years to be exact, time enough to gain a reputation as the number one groundskeeper in the nation.

Part of this fame is a result of Toma's renovation of the turf in KC's old Municipal Stadium, home of the A's before their move to Oakland. A bigger reason, how-

tion atop the stadium groundskeeping hierarchy which he's managed to maintain by being more than a grass doctor.

"You have to know a whole lot about grass," he says, "but there's a lot more. There are chemicals, then you have to know how to decorate the end zones, to put up goalposts, to repair the sod."

Ironically, Toma's number one responsibility is Royals Stadium with its artificial turf surface, but he takes just as much pride in the condition of the nearby Chiefs' practice field with its mixture of Touchdown, Merit, and A-34 blue-grasses and Derby, Regal, and Elka ("we'll be changing to Derby, Regal, and Gator," he says) ryegrasses. "My feeling is the practice field should be better than the game field. That's where a lot of your injuries are," Toma notes.

In recent years, Toma's 26-year-old son, Chip, has been building a groundskeeping reputation of his own. Working closely with nationally-recognized agronomist Dr. James Watson of Toro, the younger Toma has developed a sand concept system that he successfully used to renovate a bermuda grass field at William Jewell College in Liberty, MO.

Simply explained, the ratio of sand to loam is increased at each of three levels to the playing surface, providing a relatively inexpensive design with good root development and stable footing.

But, the elder Toma remains unhappy about the lack of support many groundskeepers get with their natural turf fields.

"People expect too much of it and in turn give it too little," he argues. "If you have a natural grass field you can't buy a grass cutter and you have fight to buy an aerifier."

That leaves it up to the groundskeeper to call the shots, to push for what's due him and his profession.

"It's not the dirt," Toma says. "It's the man that works the dirt." □



George Toma—the industry's outspoken turf guru.

country, but he is undisputably the best known. He's the guy that draws the impersonal eye of the television camera and the praise of the likes of Howard Cosell between pitches, the fellow that gets the call when it comes time to spruce up the field for the millions-plus viewers of the NFL Super Bowl.

He's also been in the forefront of what's often been a loosely-organized and poorly-defined effort to get athletic field maintenance recognized for something more than mowing grass. The fact that he's nationally-recognized is probably an indication that he's making some headway.

For Toma it's a long way from a rake handle in Wilkes-Barre, PA,

ever, is probably Toma's penchant for speaking his mind.

"The groundskeeper really doesn't get the credit that's due him," he says. "It gets 110 to 150 degrees out on that turf (synthetic) and we've got kids out there painting. You have to feel sorry for these kids sometimes."

Paying dues

Toma pays his dues as well.

Thrown from a three-wheeler and into a tree just outside Royals Stadium several seasons back, Toma directed groundskeeping operations from a hospital room in his office. "I broke a bunch of ribs," he tosses off.

The energetic, 5'5" Toma obviously relishes his unofficial posi-