



The Biggest Race of All

L.A. Coliseum turf team races against clock to solve turf problems at 1984 Olympics site.

by Stephen T. Cockerham, consulting agronomist

The year 1984 is going to be a big year for the grand old lady, the Los Angeles Coliseum.

Built for the 1932 Summer Olympics, 52 years later, she will play hostess to the Summer Olympics this year.

Over the last 60 years, the stadium has hosted numerous events. The Billy Graham Crusade brought in one of the largest crowds back in the '60s. The University of Southern California and UCLA have played most of their home football games there. The Los Angeles Rams also played most of their home games at the Coliseum until just a few years ago. Now the Los Angeles Raiders are the NFL home team.

There have been rock concerts, motocross, soccer, track and field, movies, TV shows, TV commercials, and political rallies. Its uses have been many and varied for the City of Los Angeles over the years.

Getting ready

Refurbishing in several areas was necessary for an Olympic-caliber facility. A new and slightly relocated track was installed as well as a new television screen-type scoreboard, and a new field. And with that new field, the agronomists were called in.

In 1981, the decision-makers decided on the type of playing field to be built. They went with a state-of-the-art sand basin field. These are usually an excavated site with a network of drain lines, filled with a uniform medium sand. The turf is sodded, often with the soil washed off of the roots. And presto - there is an uncrowned, flat sports field with super drainage.

There are several companies which install the sand basin fields. The Coliseum contracted with Hy-Play Systems Inc., Aurora, OR.

There are two factors in construction which differentiate this system from the others. First, there is no poly liner to the basin and, second, the excavation is not

filled with uniform medium sand.

Whether to use poly liners is not a particularly controversial subject. However, the growing medium used is more widely discussed.

Growing grass

The Coliseum field has the drain lines (plus several miles of TV cables) which are covered with coarse gravel, then a layer of finer material, and successive layers until the top, about seven inches, is a sand. There is some concern over the layering and the effects of perched water tables, however, not everyone believes that to be a problem. Whether it is a problem or not, it certainly is not going to be changed, so the job at hand is to grow grass on what is there.

With the installation of Santa Ana Hybrid bermuda, in the Spring of 1982, the field was complete. During the fall and winter, the traffic was heavy, but, due to the NFL Players strike, not as intense as normal. The turf was overseeded with PhD perennial ryegrass blend in the fall. Some

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overseeding was done in the wear areas. In the Spring of 1983, the new USFL franchise, Los Angeles Express, began playing. In the past, this period had been used for maintenance.

By May, the Coliseum management had become quite concerned. The bermuda was not emerging through the ryegrass. General Manager Jim Hardy, Assistant General Manager Jerry Nielsen, and Supervisor Bob Williams started looking for help. Dr. Jim Watson, vice president of the Toro Company and well known turf authority, was the man that was suggested. After looking at the field, Watson suggested that a local consultant be retained. This would permit frequent observations of the surface.

Bermuda loss

The problem was that as much as 80 percent of the bermuda had been lost over the winter. The roots of the remaining bermuda were nearly gone and the ryegrass roots weren't in much better shape. In all fairness, the field still looked better than most, but it was ryegrass, not the desired hybrid bermuda, and that was not the way it was supposed to be.

Soil samples were taken as well as samples of about every thing else. Then a team of experts was put together. Because of the importance of the field to the Olympics, there was a feeling of urgency by all participants. The team consisted of William Davis, turf specialist, Dr. Robert Endo, plant pathologist, Dr. Victor Gibeault, turf specialist, Jewell Meyer, irrigation specialist, John Van Dam, farm advisor, and Dr. Victor Youngner, professor of turfgrass and creator of Santa Ana Hybrid Bermuda--all from the University of California. Also participating were Dr. Watson and myself, the local consultant.

Keeping in mind that growing high traffic turf on pure sand media is a relatively new thing, the team went back to the fundamentals of growing turf. The nutrition analyses were brought up to levels that were considered appropriate. Bioassays were run with no solid conclusions.

The irrigation system and program were evaluated and both were found to be satisfactory. Meetings and discussions were held where the situation and data were debated. What was concluded was that Bob Williams and his crew really weren't doing anything wrong. However, something was definitely wrong.

Meanwhile new stolons were drilled into the existing turf. As time permitted, the center of the field was resodded--after all the Raiders and USC were going to play in the fall. Through the summer there was a track meet, several international soccer games, a movie, several dozen commercials, and USFL football.

Success story

The stolon job was pretty successful as was the sod installation. By fall, the field was more than 85 percent bermuda and looked gorgeous. TV announcers, newspaper writers, and football players complimented the Coliseum management on the condition of the field. It really was a success story.

However, the tale doesn't end there. Something is still wrong. Although the turf looks good and plays just fine, the roots don't seem to be as healthy as they should be. No one wants the same thing to happen as happened last year. Unfortunately, the question as to what did happen still is not answered. The turf team is still meeting and samples are still being analyzed.

Is it a pathogen, a toxic substance, a deficiency? One thing is pretty sure, management practices have been eliminated as being the culprit.

The Olympics are coming on fast. The field will be under the world's microscope. Many suggestions have been put forward from various sources. However, nothing can compare to the heartfelt emotion brought on by the verdant perfection of an emerald turf. Can you imagine what the hammer throw would do to an artificial surface. They would probably have to use a "claw" hammer to keep it on the field.

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