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# SUPER TURF

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

**T**he 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 groundskeeper's nightmare. I think we counted 600-plus wheels going over this place...2,000 performers..."

Toma covered the field with a plas-

tic 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. Sports-casters 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





Jack Murphy Stadium before Toma's crew worked on it.

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 someplace. 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 sweepers 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 described as "a pinch of this, a dash of that—about half a shovel-full of Milorganite, a big shovel of pre-germinated Ph.D., then Turface" in Lesco and Scotts spreaders.

The next day, Toma used a Core Master aerifier with  $\frac{5}{8}$ -inch solid tines set for  $\frac{3}{4}$  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  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch tines at a depth of  $3\frac{1}{2}$  to 4

inches. That would have made 142 holes per square foot."

The seeding/coring/seeding process causes turf roots to grow at different 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— $\frac{15}{100}$  of an inch to be exact. Two days later the crew top dressed the field with two parts nitrohumus 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  $1\frac{1}{2}$  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, putting 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."

*continued on page 18*



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) Jazzercisers, 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  $\frac{5}{8}$ ths 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



George and Chip Toma discuss field strategy while Chip paints.

into a van and car and head to Denny's restaurant. "This might be the last time we eat for awhile," warns Chip. George sits by himself, reading the morning paper. The rest of the crew talks about the field, the game and the Pro Bowl (where several will head Monday morning after the game). "Can you imagine what it would be like if could sleep in and pop open a beer, watching the game from the couch?" one says.

### 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  $\frac{5}{8}$  inches with a John Deere greensmower.

At 12:40 p.m., the crew emerges from the maintenance area in crisp



George Toma in front of the pre-Super Bowl field.



Doug Schallenberg and Scott Martin hand-sweep the field to bring the turf upright before mowing.



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



The entire crew is needed to roll the tarps off the field.

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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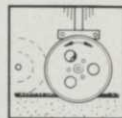
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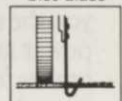
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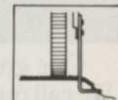
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