

Welcome to St. Looie

Local green industry experts teamed to give the professional football Rams a field that should make them feel right at home.



PHOTOS BY KEEVEN PHOTOGRAPHY

by RON HALL / Senior Editor

Creating a new field for a professional football team takes the coordinated efforts of a team of green industry pros. In St. Louis, which promised the sun and moon in luring the Rams from Los Angeles, that team included landscape contractor Munie Outdoor Services, sod supplier Emerald View Turf Farms, and Rams' groundskeeper Scott Parker. The NFL's "Sultan of Sod" George Toma personally oversaw all of their efforts.

While St. Louis is yet to deliver either the sun or the moon, it did come up with, perhaps, the best practice facility in the NFL.

The complex is located in the suburb of Earth City about a 25-minute drive north of downtown St. Louis and the city's new domed football stadium. The Rams' new headquarters consist of a 90,000 sq. ft. office building, with attached indoor practice area and training rooms.

The heart of the facility, though, is a 405-by-410-foot bermudagrass playing surface. It's the size of two football fields and can be lined east-west, or north-south. If needed,

Joe Munie (left) built the field; now Scott Parker, the Rams' groundskeeper (right), takes over. Parker is a St. Louis native and has worked several Super Bowls with George Toma.

the Rams will be able to use an adjacent, crowned tall fescue field. It's also new.

"When the Rams come back, they're not going to believe how good a field they're going to have to play on," says Scott Parker, the Rams' groundskeeper. He joined the club on its move a year ago.

Parker, a St. Louis native, learned a lot of his grounds skills from Toma, the nationally recognized groundsman formerly with the Kansas City Chiefs. Parker worked a couple of Super Bowls and a Pro Bowl with Toma, who, along with his son Chip, regularly advises and works with the National Football League concerning playing fields.

Says Parker, "With all the players and the money involved with this football team, they want the best field they can get."

Munie Outdoor Services of Belleville, Ill., built the practice fields. The company started last October and worked through a cold but relatively dry winter. The goal was



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to build the practice field with the same care and precision as a putting green.

"I took it upon myself to run this project because I knew what had to be done," says owner Joe Munie. "I wanted it to come out perfect, and we got pretty close."

After grading the field (Munie used a laser in the process, as he also did in setting Toro sprinkler heads), Munie crews covered four inches of pea gravel with 14 inches of sand/peat/topsoil rootzone mix. Unlike a putting green which is often just sand and peat, the mix contains 5 percent topsoil for stability. Drainage was installed in a herringbone-pattern on 20-foot centers running to 15- and 18-inch collector pipes.

In July, Emerald View Turf Farms installed the 18,403 square yards of fine-textured bermudagrass, a variety known as Baby Bermuda. Emerald View is the licensed grower for the grass in Missouri, Illinois and part of Kansas.

"Baby Bermuda is a very aggressive little



Tom Keeven of Emerald View Turf Farms says the Baby Bermudagrass put down three inches of roots within a week of being installed in July.

grass. It has fine texture and it can actually be brought down to putting green height," says Tom Keeven, who runs the family sod operation with brothers Ed and Jim.

"Around here I think it's going to make a great grass for athletic fields, especially those that have summer and fall play."

Because it is a relatively new grass, at least in the Midwest, sod for the Rams' site was trucked from Texas, 25 loads. Then it was laid in rolls, 42 inches wide, 32 sq. yds. to the roll.

"In seven to eight days in that sand, the rootzone was already down at least three inches. It was phenomenal," says Keeven.

With sod in place and rapidly knitting, Munie's crew rolled the field in two directions, sprayed Bovamura on it and a couple of days later topdressed it.

"We've got to start aerifying it and getting the water to perk down, but actually the water's going through it pretty fast right now," says Munie.

When Toma walked the practice field and presented Munie with a sweatshirt with his thanks scribbled across it, the veteran landscape contractor was pleased and relieved. **LM**

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