

SODDING A SEEDED VARIETY gets MLB teams up & running quickly



▲ **Busch Stadium**, home of the St. Louis Cardinals

► **Graff's Turf Farms** during the harvest of the HGT Bluegrass.

It's late November 2013 in Fort Morgan, CO and the crew at Graff's Turf Farms stands in a field of HGT Bluegrass waiting for the frost to melt away from the tips of the grass blades. Once the shiny layer of white frost, the telltale signs of morning cold, have disappeared, the crew jumps on their harvester to peel 3/4-inch of sod and soil from the sandy surface of the farm field. The 4-foot-wide strip of turf runs up a conveyor belt and rolls around and around and around, until a 75-foot-long strip of sod is tightly wound into what is known in the sod production industry as a big roll.

From there, the big rolls of turf are packaged onto a climate-controlled truck so that they won't freeze during the trek from Colorado to St. Louis, MO. A short 36



hours from harvest, the big rolls of sod arrive at Busch Stadium, home of the St. Louis Cardinals Major League Baseball team. There they are unloaded and installed as the stadium's new playing field surface. For 3 days straight, trucks make the drive from Colorado to the Midwest, and the process is repeated again.

Two days after the field is completed, St. Louis gets its first hard freeze of the winter. The fragile new sod will stay frozen until nearly March. In April, the Cardinals play their 2014 home opener against the Cincinnati Reds winning 5-3, and the grass doesn't miss a beat, performing as well as the players.

There are about a half-dozen sod farms within 30 miles of Busch Stadium. So why did Billy Findley, head groundskeeper for the Cardinals since 1998, ship sod from a farm some 800 miles away?

"The main reasons we work with Graff's Turf Farms are they're easy to work with and their growing medium is the closest to the sand here at the stadium that we can find. They grow on a very sandy soil and you need that so you don't have a layering effect or interface issue. They have a very sandy soil, they have a great product, they grow great turf," Findley says. "We'd have to truck it in from somewhere. It's hard to find the sandy soil that you need here in St. Louis."

Graff's Turf Farms also grows a new blend of bluegrass, called HGT (short for Healthy Grass Technology) that Findley was eager to have on his field. HGT Bluegrass is a bluegrass blend developed by Barenbrug USA, a turfgrass seed producer based in Oregon. The grass is licensed for sod production through Sod Solutions, out of Mount Pleasant, SC. Findley says that after he did his research, he was interested in grassing his field with HGT because of its reported resistance to summer patch disease and for its wear tolerance.

In tests conducted by the National Turfgrass Evaluation Program between 2005 and 2010, HGT was found to have the lowest incidence of summer patch and fastest coverage rates—in total earning better ratings in 16 key indicator categories—over all other bluegrass varieties tested.

"Summer patch is a disease we struggle with in St. Louis because of the warm, humid months. It's tough to find a cultivar that fights summer patch. Once you have it, you never get rid of it. You tolerate it because it's a soil-borne disease. You can't control it, but you can keep it at bay so it doesn't take over your field. The fact that the HGT was a summer patch tolerant variety was very enticing to us. Having the HGT not as susceptible to the summer patch, we still have to apply fungicides against it, but in the back of your head you know you've got something that's a little more disease tolerant," Findley says.

The grass was also rated to have increased heat tolerance and a quicker recovery from wear. The combination of those two strengths made a big difference to Findley.

"The heat tolerance in bluegrasses is fairly low. One person I heard deem HGT as a 'tropical bluegrass,' so I thought, 'That should be able to grow great in St. Louis!' Heat tolerance is very important. July and August are pretty miserable here. The nighttime temps never cool off and bluegrasses generally stay stressed. HGT's ability to stand up to the heat was great," Findley says.



▲ The back of the 4-foot harvester with two harvested rolls on the back of the machine.

"That's another benefit. You can seed right into it and not worry about any weird consolidation where it will have different patches of color," Findley says. "That's very beneficial."

Prolonged heat can also take its toll on wear recovery.

"During the hotter months, I've found that bluegrasses wouldn't recover as well. Recovery was supposed to be one of the benefits of the HGT. So in the hotter months, late June, July, and August, nighttime temps don't get that cool. Bluegrass usually uses those nighttime temps to recover from the heat of the day but they don't recover as well because we don't cool off. The HGT was supposed to recover on those warmer nighttime temps, and it's done that for us," Findley says.

With all of its benefits, Findley says the decision to plant the field with HGT was easy. Sodding, rather than seeding the field, however, was a matter of timing. Findley says it would not have been practical to try to seed his field. There just wasn't enough time at the end of the season to allow seed to germinate before winter.

“We had a late soccer match in November here after the playoffs. We’d have never had time to get the seed to come up,” Findley says, “so sodding was the only way to go.”

Marty Thiel is co-owner of Graff’s Turf Farms. He says that the story was similar for the Detroit Tigers when they sodded their field with HGT Bluegrass last March. Thiel says Tiger’s head groundskeeper Heather Nabozny, (who was unavailable for comment after having knee surgery for an injury sustained while pulling a tarp during a rain delay), had about a 10-day window in which to re-grass her field at Comerica Park following the Winter Classic hockey event held in the stadium. While the sod for the Cardinals was cut at ¾-inch thick, the sod for the Tigers was cut even thicker, at 1.5-inches, Thiel says, “for instant stability.”

“The Tigers had no time to produce roots before playing time. We had to ship them a ready-to-play surface,” Thiel says. “Sod cut at 1.5-inches thick added weight to hold the grass in place, and provided a stronger horizontal root structure to help with stability.”

Sodding a grass that is also available as seed offered Findley unexpected benefits. In weak areas, or areas needing repair, Findley says the same grass seed can be sown into the existing turf without fear of contaminating a pristine monoculture of grass.

“Down the right side of the field, in first base foul territory, there is this half moon shade line problem during the winter months. For

4 ½ months of the year during winter, this area stays shaded and stays pretty frozen until middle of March. The first week of April is the first home stand,” Findley says. Because of the shade and cold in that area, the sod struggled to establish roots. To help this one section of turf along, Findley let the turf grow up slightly longer than the rest of the field, aerated a few times, and overseeded the weak spot with more HGT Bluegrass seed.

“That’s another benefit. You can seed right into it and not worry about any weird consolidation where it will have different patches of color,” Findley says. “That’s very beneficial.”

In the areas that got enough sun over the winter and established some roots, “the left side outfield did great. Our left side position spot usually gets beat up, we have a very aggressive left fielder, and it handled it really well. We didn’t have to replace left field like we normally we do,” Findley says. “I absolutely would recommend HGT. I think it definitely has a place in the sports turf industry. I can’t wait to see how it’s going to do next year once it’s had time to mature.” ■

Stacie Zinn Roberts is an award-winning writer and president of What’s Your Avocado?, a writing and marketing firm based in Mount Vernon, WA