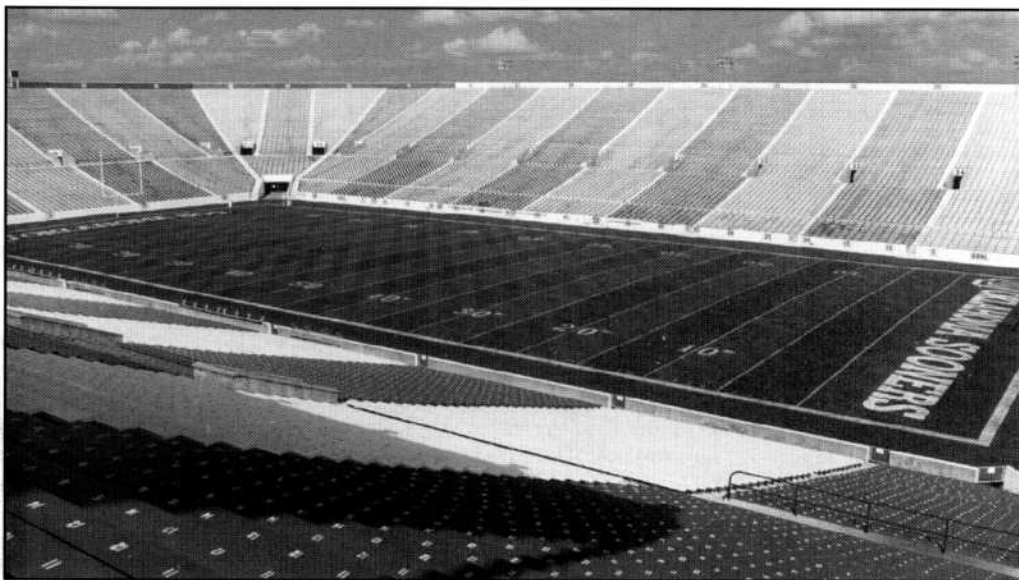


# OWEN FIELD

## WHERE THE GRASS IS GREENER



Photos by Betsy Baker

**I**ts surface has cushioned the side line pacers, from its namesake Bennie Owen to Bud Wilkinson to Barry Switzer. Its yard lines have been crossed by the goal line racers, from the Heisman trio of Billy Vessels, Steve Owens and Billy Sims to the high-flying Joe Washington.

Yet few steps have generated as much statewide interest in the off-season as those that measured, walked, installed and made come true the athletic department's slogan "the grass is getting greener."

Owen Field has a new surface. It's out with the old and back to the basics. The Sooners played on grass this season after more than two decades on artificial turf.

When the 1993 season began last year, one thing was certain. At season's end, the Owen Field surface would have to be replaced. The big question was: replaced with what?

The decision process was a lengthy

one, involving input from the current players and coaching staff, OU's sports medicine personnel, fans and university personnel. The near-unanimous verdict was to remove the artificial turf and replace it with a grass surface.

The loudest proponents of the change were the Sooner players. OU had opened the 1993 season at Texas Christian University on natural grass, and the team was impressed. In Dallas, three games later, OU found natural grass covering the surface at the Cotton Bowl. Again, the Sooner players were thrilled with the grass. The chorus had begun.

One week later, one of the strongest arguments for the change occurred. Quarterback Cale Gundy, leading the Sooners in a comeback attempt against Colorado, was tackled and tossed to the turf after a long gain. His head hit

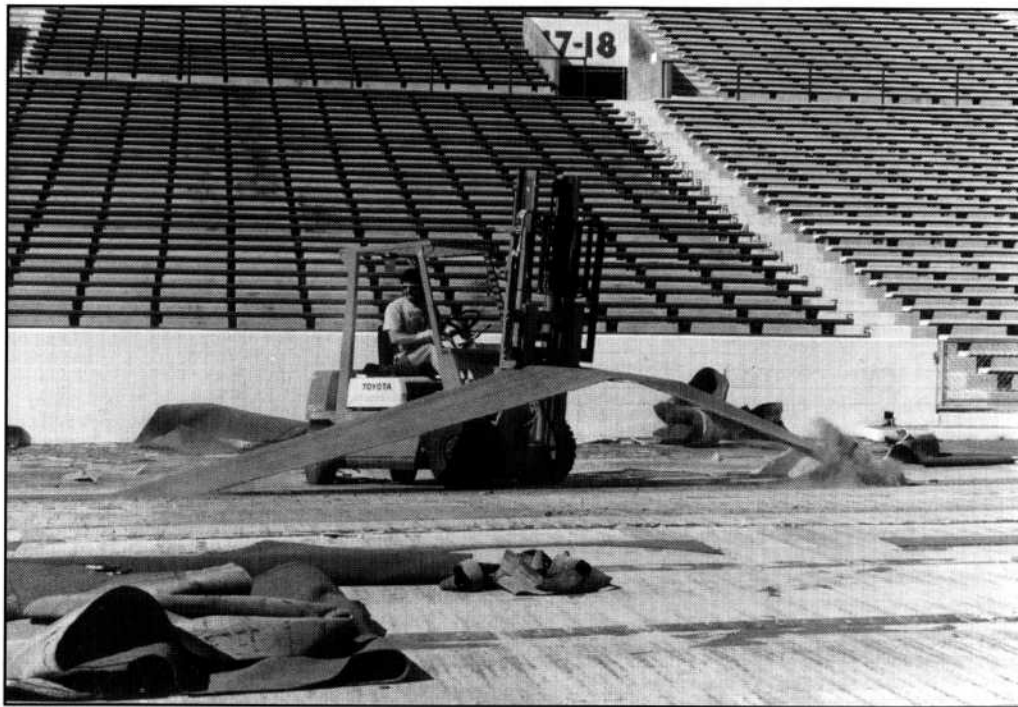
the hard-as-a-rock asphalt surface. When he awakened in the locker room some time later, the ringing in his ears wasn't just from the concussion he had suffered—the chorus had built to a crescendo. Nearly 90 percent of OU's 1993 squad favored grass.

The attention then turned to the kind of grass surface to be installed. One of the reasons for the early '70s change to artificial turf was the traction that surface provided for the speedy runners who were as much a part of the Sooner football tradition as the Sooner Schooner. With the improvements in natural grass surfaces, however, options were available that provided that same kind of traction, yet were more forgiving when a player hit the ground. The newest trend in grass at TCU was just such a fast-track field.

Another concern in Midwest areas like Oklahoma is weather, particularly rain. The '93 OU-Texas clash gave an

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by Debbie Copp



*A fork lift operator goes after the remains of the old artificial turf, the good parts—end zones, logos, yard and hash markers—having been hauled off by fans under cover of darkness.*

indication of how the new grass surfaces would respond when a heavy rainstorm hit Dallas less than 24 hours before kickoff. As the teams took the field, there was no evidence of the downpour, and again, the traction was great.

In November, the OU Board of Regents approved the replacement of the artificial turf with natural grass. The regents' decision made OU one of eight NCAA Division I-A schools to put in grass fields since 1990. Since the OU switch, other schools have announced plans to do the same. By next year, more Division I-A stadiums will have natural grass surfaces than artificial turf.

The decision began paying off even before the old artificial surface had been removed. According to Sooner coaches, several 1994 recruits mentioned OU's return to a grass field as an important factor in their choice.

This is no ordinary grass; appropriately, it is Sooner born and bred, having grown for five years near Tulsa. And the coordination of the project kept the eyes of all Sooner fans, players, coaches and athletic administrators on Norman last summer.

The regents authorized a budget of

\$750,000 for the removal of the turf and the installation of the grass. The OU Touchdown Club provided \$500,000 for the project, the balance

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coming from athletic department funds.

The bids for the project went out in February, and when returned, an exhaustive evaluation process took place. In April 1994, the regents approved the selection of Randall and Blake

Inc., of Littleton, Colorado, as the firm to handle the project. One of the national firms cashing in on the trend to natural grass, Randall and Blake installed the new field for baseball's Colorado Rockies and playing surfaces for TCU and the National Football League's New England Patriots.

Removal of the artificial turf had begun even before the contract was awarded. Shortly after the 1993 season ended, Sooner fans found their way onto the field and left with their own personal souvenirs. First to go were the end zones and the logos. Next were the yard markers and hash marks. The rest of the turf was removed by the athletic department's maintenance staff.

Heavy equipment then was brought in to break up and remove the old asphalt base that was nearly six inches thick. Truckload after truckload of worn-out turf, hardened padding and old asphalt were hauled out of the stadium.

Excavation began when the old surface was gone. The crown on the field had been nearly three feet high, a necessary evil of the artificial surface to promote runoff when the autumn rains hit Norman. But the crown also distorted—and at times obliterated—the view from the sidelines. The new surface would not need that high a crown, so the demolition team had to remove the soil that had created it.

The next step was the installation of a sub-drainage system. Unlike the other popular grass field—Prescription Athletic Turf (PAT)—the surface at Owen Field uses a gravity-based draining system. (A PAT field uses a system of pumps and pipes under the surface to suck or pump water in and out of the soil.) The Sooners' grass is laid over a system of sub-surface pipes, but there are no pumps; a naturally occurring force—gravity—removes the water.

The sub-drainage system at Owen Field includes rows and rows of plastic pipes filled with gravel. Installed

in V-shaped rows dug under the surface, the drain pipes essentially cover the field. The sub-surface system can process 10-to-12 inches of rain an hour from the field.

Once the drain pipes were in place, the entire field was covered with gravel, then a digital sprinkler system was installed on top of the gravel. This system includes ground sensors that monitor the surface for changes in moisture levels 24 hours a day. That information is analyzed by specialized computers that can make the necessary adjustments by signaling one or more of the radio-controlled, subterranean sprinkler units. The automated system has a manual override so that unscheduled watering won't happen on game day.

After all the old had been removed, the crown lowered, the drains and the digital sprinkler system installed, a 12-inch growing zone—a mixture of sand and peat—was put down. Building the proper growing zone was much like mixing a magic potion—peat was brought in from special peat farms across the country, then combined with sand to get the perfect mix.

Finally, the grass itself was laid on the sand/peat mixture. The Tifway 419 Bermuda was cut from a sod farm near Tulsa and bundled in 30-inch-by-50-foot rolls. The grass had to be put down on the growing zone within hours of the time the turf was cut and rolled.

The first roll of grass hit the field on Thursday, July 7, to be greeted by a small crowd of fans, department personnel and media representatives. Video tape rolled and cameras clicked as if it were a season opener. Each roll

of turf was unloaded and carefully moved to the field to be put down one at a time. As a tractor specially constructed to unroll the grass moved slowly along the surface, the carpet-thick turf was manually placed on the field, pulled together much as a

carpet layer does in a private home.

Within 48 hours, the entire surface was covered with the new grass, and the project, while not yet finished, was well on its way. The grass truly was getting greener.

The OU athletic department's



*Heavy equipment is called in to break up and remove the old asphalt base, which was nearly six inches thick. Truckload after truckload then were hauled out of the stadium.*



*The gravity-based sub-drainage system consists of V-shaped rows of plastic, gravel-filled pipes leading to drains that can remove 10-to-12 inches of rain an hour from the field.*



*A specially constructed tractor unloads the Tifway 419 Bermuda that just hours earlier had been cut and rolled at a sod farm near Tulsa. Bundled in 30-inch-by-50-foot rolls, the grass had to be in place on the growing zone within hours of being cut.*



*The ground crew manually wrestles the 50-foot-long rolls of turf into place as the sprinklers apply an immediate soaking. The surface was covered in 48 hours.*

maintenance crew is in charge of caring for the field. Don Hatcher and other members of his team traveled to Kansas City to watch the Kansas City Chiefs' staff paint that field for a July preseason NFL game. Painting the yard lines, sidelines, hash marks and end zones was the final step in preparing the field for the September 17 home opener with Texas Tech.

Converting the field to grass was the first step in the redesign of Oklahoma

Memorial Stadium. The regents, in their June meeting, approved a comprehensive master plan that will take the stadium into the 21st century while retaining its classic style, an appearance first envisioned when Bennie Owen proposed a joint stadium/student union project in the 1920s.

The master plan will be completed in phases. The next phase will include renovating the third floor of the stadium's north end into an academic

## **A comprehensive master plan will take the stadium into the 21st century while retaining its classic style.**

student life area. Adequate space will be provided for the 300-plus OU student-athletes to hold required study halls, work with tutors and receive special instruction in computers, foreign language, mathematics and writing. A Career Resource Library, included in the plan, will assist student-athletes in determining career directions. These improvements are part of the emphasis on academics that Director Donnie Duncan has made a top priority for the athletic department.

Improvements in the athletic team areas will include a strength training center to replace the present weight room, designed in 1979 as a state-of-the-art facility to meet primarily the training needs of Sooner football players. Today, the strength training process is year-round, involving all the student-athletes at OU.

The construction of a strength training center will allow for the expansion of the sports medicine and football coaching quarters in the stadium's south end zone. Like the weight room, the present one-room training area was built primarily for use by the football squad. When the sports medicine efforts for male and female student-athletes were combined prior to the 1993-94 school year, the current facility was stretched to its limits. The master plan calls for a significantly enlarged area with more treatment and rehabilitative space, additional staff offices and physicians' exam rooms.

The football coaching facility will provide squad meeting areas and an



Maintenance chief Don Hatcher took his crew to Kansas City to learn the fine art of painting the yard lines, sideline, hash marks and end zones.



Workers apply the final touch in the Owen Field conversion with a red-letter outline for the "Oklahoma Sooners" in the end zones.

expanded locker room that can house the entire team. Within the plan are proposals to renovate the Jack Santee Lounge and construct stadium suites on the first level of the present press box. The suites would vary in size and would be available for individuals and/or businesses to entertain clients and guests.

Fan amenities in the master plan include renovation of and additions to restroom and concession areas; an enlarged and improved ticket box office and improvements to the scoreboard, stadium signage and walkways/concourses within and around the stadium.

Another proposal of particular interest to Sooner fans is the construction of an Athletic Hall of Fame. Currently, no central place exists to display all of the trophies, awards and other mementos associated with the Oklahoma athletic tradition—the Heisman and Orange Bowl trophies and other pieces of Sooner history. The plan calls for the hall to feature photos, videos and memorabilia that will enhance a game-day trip and draw visitors throughout the year, allowing long-time fans to relive past triumphs while introducing newer members of the Sooner family to their heritage.

The natural grass has brought a new look, a new feel to Owen Field and Oklahoma Memorial Stadium, but the vestiges of the past remain. Each fall, as a new group of talented young athletes takes the field, they will be walking in some footsteps that are mighty tough to fill. Yet you can almost imagine old, one-armed Bennie pacing the sidelines beside them, cheering the new Sooners on. 