

NFC Championship site receiving upgrade for Sunday

■ **PLAYOFFS:** Green Bay's Lambeau Field is being completely re-sodded due to a "muddy mess"

The Associated Press

GREEN BAY, Wis. — The frozen tundra of Lambeau Field is getting a face-lift.

Groundskeepers are going to try to completely re-sod the grass torn up in the Green Bay Packers' win over San Francisco in a playoff game Saturday for Sunday's NFC championship game.

More than 85,000 cubic feet of grass, at a cost to the NFL of more than \$100,000, is being trucked in from the Summit Hall sod farm in Poolesville, Md., on Tuesday.

"I don't know at this point if we're looking to grow it as much as we are to get it into place, pack it down and make sure that it's going to stay down," field supervisor Todd Edlebeck said. "We're looking at doing this as a one-game situation. Our goal right now is end zone to end zone."

Chip Toma, a groundskeeping consultant for the NFL, will oversee the project, which Edlebeck hopes to complete by Thursday night, barring a heavy snowstorm. Toma's father, George, is regarded as America's finest fixer of fields.

"We're confident this will get done in time" for Sunday's 11:30 a.m. CST kickoff for the Packers and Carolina, said Bill McConnell, the NFL's assistant director of club relations.

The field was rendered a muddy mess on Saturday, when the Packers slogged to a 35-14 victory over the 49ers in a rare January downpour that lasted all day.

"Oh, it was terrible," said tight end Mark Chmura. "On the outside it was just real slick mud. In the middle, between the hashes, it was like a cow pasture."

Duraturf Service Corp. also re-sodded the middle of the field for the Packers' regular season finale against Minnesota on Dec. 22 and the Packers expected the \$50,000 face-lift to last through the playoffs.

"The idea was to go that way rather than going West, out of fear that if a snowstorm came across the West they would delay the trucks. And they did a first-rate job when they were here," he said.

The problem Saturday, Edlebeck said, was that the rain had no place to go because the ground was frozen beneath the heating coils, which are buried 6 1/2 inches below the surface.

"If it would have snowed, the field would have held up better," he said. "The field was

frozen on the sides and underneath the coils, so it kept the moisture on top.

"We never expected that rain that we got," Edlebeck continued.

"When Dorsey Levens got the big first down and slid about 40 yards, I thought that was pretty funny," strong safety LeRoy Butler said.

Well, maybe he slid 10 or 12 yards, but the NFL was not amused at any rate.

Edlebeck said he was in contact with Duraturf and the league in the fourth quarter Saturday.

The turf was so soggy and muddy in the rain that virtually all of the Packers and 49ers wore one-inch cleats, the maximum length allowed by the NFL.

Edlebeck said the old sod will be torn away as the new sod is unrolled. That way, if a snowstorm or debilitating deep freeze does sweep through, the stadium won't be left with just a big sand box for a field.

"We'll start digging it up and we'll start laying it right behind it," Edlebeck said.

He said he was confident it wouldn't come up during the game.

"Each roll is about 2,000 pounds. It's 42 feet long by 42 inches wide. It's extremely heavy. If you cut two feet off of it, you're not going to pick it up off the ground," Edlebeck

said.

The sod consists of 1/2-inch blades of grass and 3 1/2 inches of roots and soil, which is rolled out and fitted into a loam of sand, silt and clay.

"We interlock them by dividing the rolls up so no seams are ever together. We put it so tight together and roll it down. As you look at the Vikings game, we didn't have a problem with the sod in the center of the field."

Edlebeck said the frigid weather gripping Green Bay could hamper the project, however.

"I'm sure if we got any snow that would be bothersome. Temperature is probably a concern, that we don't get too cold," Edlebeck said. "It probably won't be a round-the-clock thing. It's probably going to be as long as we can until things start stiffening up where we have to quit for the evening."

Packers coach Mike Holmgren said the new sod won't guarantee better footing Sunday, when temperatures are expected to be in the single digits to teens with a 30 percent chance of snow and light winds about 8 mph.

"It might be more slippery. It might be frozen," he said. "This time of year here, it's not going to be an ideal surface."

NBA: Sabonis got Portland off to fast start with 13 first-quarter points

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Dontonio Wingfield, who scored a season-high 11 points and had nine rebounds.

Portland coach P.J. Carlesimo said there wasn't a lot of difference between this game and some Blazer near-misses earlier in the season, including a 120-

119 overtime road loss to the Lakers on Dec. 13.

"What we did that was impressive tonight was fill in for Cliff and play good defense," Carlesimo said.

Sabonis scored 13 in the first quarter as Portland led by as many as 10.

Much has been made of recent on-court squabbling among the Blazers and between some players and Carlesimo. But it's no big deal, said Rider, one of the main culprits.

"We argue and fight," he said. "And then we say, 'Yeah, we can win.'"

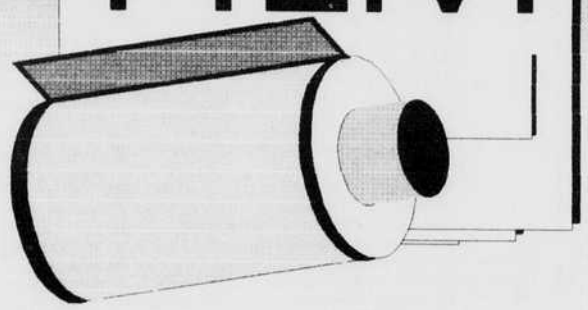
O'Neal made his first seven field goal tries in the second half and scored 15 in the third quarter, but drew his fifth foul when Sabonis sank a soft hook shot over him for a three-point play that tied it at 76 with 6:02 remaining.

Sabonis scored 13 in the first quarter, when Portland led by as

many as 10. The Lakers came back in a sluggish second quarter and trailed just 44-40 at halftime.

Chris Dudley, playing much of the game at power forward in Robinson's absence, had 13 rebounds as Portland dominated the boards 46-35.

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