



Sultan of sod wins award at S.D. Jewish Academy



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In addition to high school teams, the San Diego Jewish Academy's athletic field — managed by Josh Koss — has been used by the Mexican national soccer team and the NFL's Tennessee Titans.

Even as he was celebrating Thanksgiving with his family in Colorado, Josh Koss had his eye on the skies above Carmel Valley. The Weather Channel may have more devoted followers than Koss, but few others in the Denver metropolitan area were rejoicing over the fact San Diego was receiving its first rain in months.

"I was running around all day Saturday, saying, 'Oh my gosh, 70 percent chance of rain,'" Koss said. "I was on the Weather Channel, I was texting people, asking them if it was raining, so I was pretty happy."

Koss is neither a raincoat salesman nor an investor in umbrella futures. He's the sports turf manager at the San Diego Jewish Academy and oversees an award-winning athletic field that serves as one of the hardest-working strips of sod in the county. As such, he

has a preternatural preoccupation with precipitation.

"Last year, (the field) looked a lot better because of the fact that we had rain over Thanksgiving and we didn't have the water restrictions in place yet," Koss said. "Rain will bring everything together out here."

As a one-man grounds crew (he gets help from the school's maintenance staff, but all turf-related decisions are his), Koss is used to multi-tasking. At the moment his attention is divided.

On one hand, he needs rain. The weather station he installed last year tells him the field has received more than 1.5 inches of rain since the holiday weekend. At this time of year he'll take all he can get. The field's Bermuda grass will be going dormant with cooler winter temperatures, and the overseeded rye grass — designed to keep the place looking positively emerald during the chillier months — needs rain to help it take hold.

At the same time, soccer season is at hand and the field is about to shoulder its heaviest workload of the year: four soccer teams, along with a daily dose of PE classes.

It's a balancing act that Koss, now in his second year at the school, performs year round to keep the Lions' sports teams playing on jade-colored blades. Sometimes it means being the bad guy.

For coaches who have to deal with his strict directives — including instructions about when and where to use the field — Koss has taken some getting used to, but the results are undeniable.

The playing surface draws rave reviews from home and visiting coaches. Last month, the Sports Turf Managers Association named Koss' 4.1-acre baby the top high school soccer field in the nation.

"I've rubbed some people the wrong way here," he said. "Some people think my demands are unreasonable, but the target result is valid. Winning the field of the year award makes me feel like I have some credibility now. My peers are recognizing me nationwide, so it was good to get."

The field has drawn the attention of the Mexican national soccer team, which trained on it in July, as well as the NFL's Tennessee Titans, who requested the space for a Friday walk-through before a game against the Chargers in 2006.

Athletic Director Charlie Wund fields a steady stream of petitions from camps, clubs and leagues. He works with Koss to gauge the feasibility of each request.

"The No. 1 goal for the field and the facilities is use for our own students," Wund said. "But after that it's about getting exposure for the school and getting kids to come."

When the SDJA dropped its outside contractor to bring its field maintenance in house two years ago, they hired Koss, who cut his teeth on minor league baseball and as a member of the Colorado Rockies grounds crew.

"The expectations (at a school) are not as high," Koss said, "but if you bring them high, people love it."

County water restrictions and the possibility of additional sports teams — Wund says the school is considering field hockey and lacrosse — promise to make Koss' job tougher, but he's determined to fend off the use of artificial turf, which now blankets dozens of high school athletic fields.

"I worry about that sometimes, but I know if I can maintain this and keep everybody happy then I should be in good shape," he said. "This isn't Coors Field, but I'm going to try to make it that."

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