

THE ORGANIC CANVAS

Mike Hebrard never received formal art training, but give him an hour, a few cans of aerosol paint and a patch of grass (or mud, for that matter) and he'll free-hand a high school football



PAINTING WITHIN A GRID.

team's logo with little difficulty. "I couldn't draw the thing on a piece of paper to save my life,"

admits Hebrard, who has painted thousands of sports team and special event logos on horizontal canvases both organic and inorganic since launching his Clackamas, Ore.-based company, Athletic Field Design, 11 years ago.

In this age of turf aesthetics, Hebrard is often called on to perform his craft after mowing patterns are in place. But he can also go where mowers don't dare tread — infield dirt and synthetic turf. In fact, he once painted a facility's faded carpet to look as though it had been striped by a mower. A softball catcher was once spotted consciously sidestepping Hebrard's art in pursuit of a foul ball. That's the kind of pride a multicolored Skyhawk head stenciled in dust can instill in the home team.

That said, all three surfaces present painting challenges. Natural grass, particularly near the 50-yard line of a football field, can be in ill health to begin with and killed entirely by the improper application of paint. (Heavy concentrations of paint can retard photosynthesis, while dark colors may attract lethal amounts of solar heat). Dirt

requires the extra step of moistening the surface before painting a design, which may not survive an entire game amid excessive foot traffic. (Rain or a drag mat means instant design doom.) Synthetic turf, meanwhile, often comes with a UV-inhibiting sheen that can prove unfriendly to all but the most specially formulated paints.

Equipment used to apply the paint requires careful consideration, too.

Aerosol spray cans are fine for detail work (as long as they're the kind designed to spray when held upside down). But covering large areas requires bulk paint pumped through a wand and nozzle using an airless system (which may apply between 1,500 and 3,000 pounds of pressure per square inch) or a CO₂ system (60 to 100 psi). Whereas the higher-pressure machine more easily coats natural grass, the lower-pressure unit is best suited for today's synthetic turf — coating the turf fibers but not so much the crumb-rubber infill below.

Then there are the design issues. Hebrard doesn't hesitate to employ stencils for large, detailed logos that exceed his freehand talents. Stencils can cost hundreds of dollars to manufacture, a process that requires projecting a logo onto a polyethylene tarp (preferably white, with grommets), tracing the image with a black marker, then razor cutting half-moon holes in the tarp every foot or two along the

design's edges to serve as guides. The rounded edge of each half-moon faces what will represent the painted portions of the finished design, and each hole in the tarp should be color-coded during the manufacturing process to avoid confusion in the field. Once the stencil is anchored to the turf, the openings are sprayed with their appropriate colors. When the tarp is removed, the painter simply connects the different colored half-moons, filling in areas designated by the rounded side, while leaving the straight sides as the logo's borders.

Some stencils may serve only one event ("Homecoming '04," for example), while others, such as a generic football helmet, can be reused and customized with appropriate team logos for many years.

Another common field painting technique is to make a hard copy of the logo — say, the scripted word "Spartans" — and impose on it a grid of 1-inch numbered squares. By creating a grid of 1-yard squares on the field using

stakes and string, the word can then be recreated by determining which portions of specific letters intersect specific squares in the grid, then painting the entire word one letter fragment at a time — a process that may take hours to master.

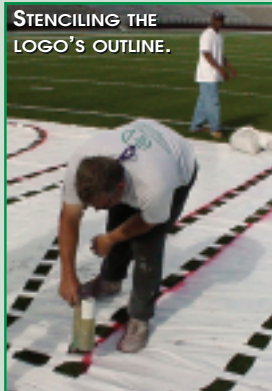
Mistakes — like the time Hebrard went straight to work after unfurling his stencil for a midfield logo on the 45-yard line — happen to everybody. Quite often, emergency corrections simply entail the application of a topcoat of green paint. However,

logos on natural grass will eventually be mowed away and those on synthetic turf can be attacked more aggressively using chemical erasers, which safely dissolve the paint into tiny particles that wash away in the turf's drainage system.

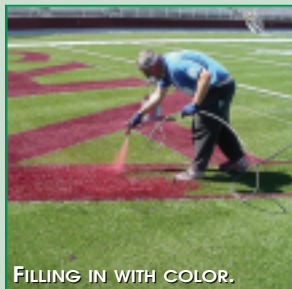
When created using sufficient time and quality materials, smartly painted logos can add color and cachet to sports fields at any level. But even Hebrard cautions that rookie artists can get carried away. For instance, he advises not to rush out and paint the end

zones of a high school football field. "At the high school level, most seating isn't conducive to good sight angles, anyway," he says. "For the amount of money, paint and labor that it takes to do an end zone, why not mow a little bit more or topdress a little bit more? Those tasks are far more critical."

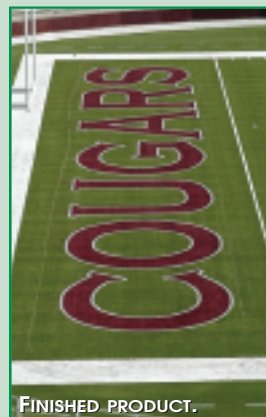
— P.S.



STENCILING THE LOGO'S OUTLINE.



FILLING IN WITH COLOR.



FINISHED PRODUCT.