

KENAN STADIUM RETURNS TO ITS ROOTS

By Suz Trusty

On January 27, 2025, the University of North Carolina announced that Carolina Athletics was beginning “the process of converting UNC’s football field back to natural grass. The footprint, which will include a synthetic turf perimeter, will mirror the look of Kenan Stadium’s natural grass field from 2017-2019.”

The Decision

Once the University of North Carolina Head Football Coach Bill Belichick was hired in December of 2024, high-level discussion about the field surface began. Participating along with Coach Belichick and his new staff, and UNC Director of Athletics Bubba Cunningham, was UNC Assistant Athletic Director, Facilities and Turf Management, Casey Carrick. As widely reported, “The decision to convert back to grass was made in consultation with Coach Belichick—with the best experience for the program in mind.”

Carrick says, “Coach Belichick and his staff are fans of natural grass, and their preference was to play on natural grass, so that played a really big key in the decision. But that wasn’t the only component of the decision. After six years, the synthetic turf field was reaching the end of its lifespan, so the timing was right to replace it with a return to its natural grass roots. Kenan had a grass field every year since its opening in 1927, until the switch to synthetic turf.”

And, as reported in a March 17, 2025, *The Daily Tar Hill* article, “Natural grass is a safer playing surface than an artificial surface,” Carrick said. “I think the coaching staff realizes that and knows that just from their time being in football, whether it be college or NFL. So, that’s the major advantage of having a natural grass field, especially here in North Carolina where we’re really able to grow quality grass year-round.”



The goal—UNC’s Kenan Stadium back to its roots and ready for the first on-field event.

Timeline Outlining the Key Milestones and Steps Taken to Convert Kenan Stadium Back to Natural Grass:

December 2024

- Coach Belichick hired; request made to convert Kenan Stadium back to natural grass.

February 2025 – *Conversion Begins*

- Removed synthetic turf and approximately 3,000 tons of gravel base.
- Reinstalled concrete curb and six Hunter ST irrigation heads.
- Existing main irrigation and field drainage systems remained in place (HDPE irrigation line installed in 2019; drainage system upgraded in 2015).
- Installed 3,000 tons of 90/10 rootzone mix and 67,000 sq. ft. of GameOnGrass® Tahoma 31 sod from Carolina Green.
- FieldTurf synthetic turf installed on the sidelines.

April 2025

- Project completed on April 10.
- Hosted Football's "Practice Like a Pro" Day on April 12 – field was painted and game-ready.

May 2025

- Commencement setup began May 1; stage remained on field for over 12 days.
- Stage removed May 14 – grass sustained damage. Recovery window available until June 10 for the soccer match.

June 2025

- Mexico vs. Turkey match scheduled for June 10.
- June 3–4: Carolina Green expanded the grass area by 33,000 sq. ft. to meet soccer pitch dimensions using GameOnGrass® Tahoma 31.
- June 12–13: Hosted summer football camps.
- June 14–15: Extra grass removed; field transitioned back to football.
- Football training continues through June and July, along with various recruiting events (including the "Race Car" photo opportunity).

Forming the Conversion Team

Carrick says, "The decision to move forward with the conversion was made between Christmas of 2024 and New Year of 2025." In Carrick's assistant AD role, he coordinates a lot of the major capital projects overseeing the decisions and projects for construction and facilities. The Kenan conversion is one of those projects. Ryan Anderson was promoted to Carrick's former position, Director of Athletic Grounds & Turf Management. In that role, Anderson assists with the day-to-day operations

and maintenance of UNC's 30 acres of athletic fields and surrounding grounds. Carrick says, "These changes have been great for us. Ryan does a phenomenal job. That gives me time to focus on the major projects. I'm still out on our fields every day checking in with our guys."

Once the conversion decision was made, Carrick reached out to TPI member Chad Price, president of Carolina Green Corp., a field construction company based in Indian Trail, NC. Carolina Green has a long-standing

relationship with UNC Athletics and with Carrick, having worked on multiple projects including Kenan's original transition to synthetic turf and the temporary transitions to grass for international soccer games over the past two summers.

The initial discussion centered on the early spring timing and what turfgrass variety Price would have available for a 67,000 square foot installation of the company's proprietary GameOnGrass®. The decision was Tahoma 31 Bermudagrass. Carrick says, "We have Latitude 36® on most of our other fields, but we had been watching Tahoma 31's performance for several NFL teams. We talked with other field managers using it in our local region with similar growing conditions and got good feedback about it."

The Conversion Process

Carrick reports, "When tasked with converting to a synthetic turf field, we collaborated with Chad to do it in such a way that if it ever went to grass again we could do the conversion back as efficiently and cost-effectively as possible. Price adds, "We left components of the natural grass field we were removing in place if we anticipated they would remain functional if used again and that leaving them would have no negative impact on the new field." They made some good decisions back in 2019.



Removal of the synthetic surface is underway.

The first step was to remove all the old synthetic turf. Next came the removal of approximately 3,000 tons of the gravel base. Price says, "The base material that had been left in place was in good shape and the drainage system that had been upgraded in 2015 was fully functional and draining." Next, they reinstalled the concrete curb to create a barrier between the natural grass area of the field and the synthetic turf area.



Digging into the removal process revealed the components left in place were fully functional.

Carrick says, "We left the major bones of the main irrigation system in place, the wiring and such. We had installed HDPE irrigation line in 2019 when we made the conversion to synthetic. We use big gun irrigation down each side to irrigate the body of the field and installed six Hunter ST irrigation heads." Price adds, "We did upgrade the irrigation system booster pump. They use reclaimed water from Orange Water and Sewer Authority (OWASA) on all their athletic fields. They upgraded the water supply system coming into Kenan Stadium and the booster pump for it to bring in the reclaimed water more efficiently."

Price noted there's been quite an evolution of the cameras they place around the field over the last six years, so they made a more permanent conduit installation for them than the field had previously.

Carrick says, "We debated leaving the existing sand in 2019, but opted to remove it. We installed 3,000 tons of new rootzone mix, 90 percent sand and 10 percent sphagnum peat, and knew we'd made the right decision. After that profile was laser graded, Chad's crews installed 67,000 square feet of GameOnGrass® Tahoma 31 sod."



The crew laser grades the newly installed soil profile in preparation for the sod installation.



With the new sod in place, cultural practices kicked into high gear, with mowing an important part of the equation.



Painting is the finishing touch in preparing the new grass field for its first event.

The next step was installing the new synthetic turf, a Field Turf system, around the perimeter of the field. “There’s little open space on campus for training,” says Carrick. “The synthetic turf gives them approximately 33,000 square feet of usable space for outdoor drills, without doing any damage to the natural grass surface. There are always more people on the sidelines than on the field during games, too, so they get more wear and tear than the field itself.”

A new feature was added to the sidelines, Price reports. “We installed a fifteen-foot square section of natural grass on each sideline to give the kickers a practice area with the same surface as the field they will be kicking from. We put in a separate irrigation system with small heads to water those areas.”

Field painting technology has improved over the last six years, so, Carrick says, “We’ve gone high-tech with a new painting machine, too. The stadium field is always televised on game day and it’s also a recruiting tool. We want it to be picture perfect.”

“Practice Like a Pro” Day

All construction was finished on April 10. Carrick says, “On April 12, we held ‘Practice Like a Pro’ Day, an event for everyone to see the football team practice on the new grass field. We painted the field in preparation for the event, just as we do on game day.”

It was promoted by UNC as an opportunity for fans to attend an event similar to “open practices the New England Patriots held when Belichick coached that NFL team to six Super Bowls. It will feature multiple periods of action, with an in-stadium emcee providing details on what will happen in each period.” In addition, “following practice, players will be available for a brief autograph session.”

Carrick reports, “Everyone loved the grass, from those who came to watch to the players who not only liked how it looked, but who also said they loved the feel of it under their feet. And the field held up great.”



The Practice Like a Pro event proved to be a huge hit with the fans and everyone loved the grass.

Commencement Ceremonies

The next big spring event for Kenan Stadium was Commencement. UNC's Commencement is a time to celebrate the accomplishments of thousands of Tar Heels and recognize the personal drive and determination that led them to graduation. It's traditionally held at Kenan Stadium, with those graduating seated on the field and those cheering on the graduates seated in the stands. Commencement ceremonies began at 7:00 pm on May 10.



Primary damage from the Commencement ceremonies stage was along the 20-yard line.

Carrick says, "That was a 10-day setup, covering the field and installing the stage, which came out to the 20-yard line. We had a two-day tear-down after the event. We did have a little damage where the stage was, primarily along the 20-yard line, but Ryan and his staff used intensive cultural practices to compensate for the damage. Our available recovery window extended until the next on-field event, the international soccer match on June 10."

International Soccer Takes the Field

As UNC reported, international soccer excitement was intense when it was announced that Kenan Stadium at Chapel Hill would host the highly anticipated match between the Mexican Men's National Team and the Turkish National Team on June 10, 2025.

To meet the soccer pitch dimensions, Carolina Green installed 33,000 square feet of GameOnGrass® Tahoma 31 sod over the artificial turf around the perimeter of the Kenan Stadium Field. Price says, "We rolled out a non-woven geotextile material over the synthetic surface before we put down the sod. That material is much like a dryer sheet but it's a lot thicker, like a big doormat. It allows water to go through, but it traps any sand. We always need to cut back into the natural grass field a bit as we install the additional sod to create a smooth transition that doesn't impact play."



This photo was taken when Carolina Green had just finished installing the additional sod to meet soccer dimensions in preparation for the international match.

As UNC reported, the historic match would draw top-tier soccer talent to the region, attracting fans from across the country and beyond. Mexico took on EURO 2024 quarter-finalists Türkiye (Turkey) for the first time in its history. The match was Mexico's first-ever game in Chapel Hill.

Back to Football

Following the soccer match, summer football camps took over the field on June 12 and 13. With that tight timing, the soccer configuration remained in place—but not for long.

Carrick says, "We had Carolina Green scheduled to return on June 14 and 15 to remove the 33,000 square feet of grass and reset the field for football. Price says, "Our crews are skilled at handling these conversions, so it's an in-and-out process for us. Casey's staff takes over from there, assessing what's needed to be in top shape for whatever comes next."

That's football training throughout June and July, Carrick reports, so safety and playability are their top priority. "It's also prime time for on-campus recruiting events," he adds. "Kenan Stadium is always part of the campus tours for potential students, whether they are athletes or not. And, with a camera on every cell phone, we want the field to be picture perfect."

UNC's first football game of the season is set for Labor Day. It's a home game at Kenan Stadium—on Monday night an 8:00 o'clock game against TCU televised on ESPN. "There's always a buzz around the football opener and we anticipate it will be greater for the first game on the new natural grass field," says Carrick. "I have a really great staff that is totally on board with the natural grass field and is dedicated to doing whatever it takes to keep the field in top shape. So, it's a lot of fun for us to host these high-profile events."

Suz Trusty is co-editor of *Turf News*. Photos by Casey Carrick and Ryan Anderson, University of North Carolina Athletics. The timeline was provided by Casey Carrick.

