



# A FOOTBALL LIFE

## I N M I N I A T U R E

**D**erek Smith was 12 years old when he started watching National Football League games on television. He gravitated toward the Dallas Cowboys and was a big fan of the team's quarterback, Roger Staubach. It was the late 1970s, and he and his friends loved everything about the sport. When electronic vibrating football field games came out shortly after, "that just exploded—everyone on the block had one," he said.

Around that time, his parents divorced and Smith, an only child, kept himself occupied and out of trouble by building train tracks complete with whole cities, and also building Legos and Lincoln Logs.

As an adult, Smith combined the two hobbies, building his own football stadiums.

While he mostly builds NFL team stadiums—"everybody has a favorite team"—he has completed others, too. He's built at least five University of Oklahoma football stadiums (one of his daughters goes there), a few other college stadiums, a St. Louis Cardinals baseball stadium and softball complexes—and a post office, of course.

At last count, he had constructed 64 stadiums over the past two decades, which is about how long he's been a letter carrier. The Okla-

homa City, OK Branch 458 member has been delivering mail for the Postal Service since 2001. "I've been working here as long as Tom Brady's been playing," he said, joking, "He has not retired, and neither have I."

He mainly builds the stadiums as special requests for private collectors or to give to close friends.

The carrier often looks at a blueprint to begin to mock up the stadium, but blueprints are just the beginning.

"You've got to use your imagination," Smith said. "A's got to get to C, and B's got to get to D, and then D's going back to B, and then you're doing it as you go. You've got to have cutouts for roadways, sidewalk, and anything that slants."

Sometimes he has been to the particular stadium and has taken photos of it; other times he researches using Google Earth and gets panoramic photos to use along with the blueprints.

He deploys a variety of tools—a ruler, razor blades, X-Acto knife, pencils, Sharpies ("I've got every color marker you can think of," he says), paint, tacky glue, reading glasses and magnifying glasses, curved scissors, tweezers and pliers.

People don't realize that Smith's stadium models, which are several feet in length and width, can cost \$150 in materials, he said. So he tries to stock up when there are sales. Indeed, his Christmas wish list always includes markers, razor blades and glue. "That's what I need," he tells his family.

He sometimes puts together plexiglass cases for the models too, but that can get pricey.

Top: Notre Dame Stadium

Below: Derek Smith presents his re-creation of the new Los Angeles Rams/Chargers Sofi Stadium.







The carrier draws and designs logos and prints those out and chooses color schemes, and then “I dress it up,” he says. “Usually I find out what [the intended recipients] like, if they want a certain kind of field or end zone.” He also chooses elements from different eras. Smith, who says he’s a “throw-back guy,” likes to alter the helmets, since he prefers the 1970s-era two-bar helmets.

He uses special paper for the colored end zones that will bring out color and doesn’t smear, and uses thick foam board and particle board to build with so that the model doesn’t bow. And he paints in roads with rulers, for which you need to have steady hands, he says.

With some stadium seating, he cuts and glues strips of paper and then uses a paint brush to make rows.

(“That’s one shot,” he said. “You can’t mess up—it will bleed everywhere.”) Recently he has started using

thousands of small rhinestones as in diamond paintings.

“People can look at the stadium and go, ‘I sat right there,’” he said. “That’s how detailed it is.”

Everything also is to scale on his stadium models. “If you were small enough, you could walk around in there and you wouldn’t hit your head on it—you’d actually clear it,” Smith said.

As real-life stadiums get bigger, longer and more elaborate, Smith tries to keep up, experimenting with new details, such as raised fields with fans below, and cutouts where people can walk around on runways and staircases.

“It’s fun for me, it gives me something to do, I’m relaxed, [and] I think about the craziest stuff when I’m working,” he said.

But, he added, “It’s all time-consuming.” That generally means 17 to 18 weeks to complete a stadium, “if I’m staying on it,” he noted.



**Top: The University of Oklahoma Memorial Stadium**

**Above: Oklahoma State University’s Boone Pickens Stadium**





Above: Smith re-created the Southeast Station in Oklahoma City.  
Below: The Dallas Cowboys AT&T Stadium



Smith doesn't sleep a lot. The self-described lifelong night owl says he works on his projects once he's home from his letter carrier job, then sleeps four to five hours. He continues on weekends and on days off in a room he's designed to do so, including a sitting area for visitors so he can work and talk. It has a 6-foot table in the middle of the room on which he works.

"It's a way for me to come home and de-stress," he said of his hobby, but it takes away time from family, which is a drawback.

"My attention is totally on what I'm doing. You can get going on something, and the time just flies," Smith said. "My feeling is, once I'm starting a certain section of a stadium or building, I have to get it out of my head or I can't sleep, because it's still going in my mind."

In 2020, Smith decided to build the Dallas Cowboys AT&T Stadium, an elaborate domed stadium that he didn't think he could pull off, but "it actually came out beautiful," he said. That one was for his girlfriend's son, who is a Cowboys fan.

His three daughters and his girlfriend are major supporters of his work, and have even helped him take a video of his process to show it step by step.

He tries to keep his talents under wraps and rarely posts about his creations on Facebook, lest he receive too many requests. But a few co-workers and branch members know. Branch 458 President **Kenneth Mayfield** calls Smith a "very detail-oriented" person overall who does beautiful work on his hobby.

The carrier has entered the models in fine arts competitions at the Oklahoma State Fair over the years, with his work garnering 22 first-place ribbons and three for "Best of Show."

He has only a few models at home, including a Rose Bowl Stadium for himself and another that he's currently building just for fun. The rest he has dispersed to lucky friends and paying patrons.

On occasion, Smith has sold them on eBay or to a private collector, including an Oakland Coliseum for \$850 and a Lambeau (Green Bay) Field for \$1,500. "I've got so much going on," Smith said. "If someone can get a hold of me, and grab me for something it's rare, because I'm already doing something."

One of Smith's daughters asked him if he'd like to manufacture them as an official business in the future, but he is adamantly opposed to the idea. Mostly, he likes giving the models away as gifts. "When I make something, I like to give it to them and look at their smile," he said. "That makes it worth the hours of time I've done it."

His creations give him a challenge, require serious patience and dedication, and prove that you can accomplish what you set your mind to, he says: You can spend three hours on something, mess it up and have to start all over—but you're setting a goal and making the effort.

As to why he loves making the models so much, Smith pondered the matter before replying, "I think it's because I grew up around football for so long. It's just a connection; it reminds me of my childhood and something I did as a kid, and I've gotten really good at it now." **PR**

## COLA: Cost-of-living adjustment

- ▶ Following the release of the December consumer price index (CPI), the projected accumulation toward the seventh cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) under the 2019-2023 National Agreement is **\$o annually**. This COLA is based on the change in the CPI from the base index month to January 2023, with the previous COLAs subtracted.
- ▶ The 2024 projected COLAs for the Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS) and the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS), which are based on the CPI's increase between the third quarter of 2023 and third quarter of 2024, is **o percent**. The 2024 COLA will be based finalized with the publication of the September 2023 CPI in October 2023.
- ▶ The 2023 COLA under the Federal Employees' Compensation Act (FECA) is **6.3 percent** following the release of the December CPI. This COLA is based on the change in the CPI between December 2021 and December 2022.

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