



A Stadium for

Oklahoma

Plans to expand and update one of college football's premier sites form the centerpiece of OU's Campaign for Sooner Sports.

BY CAROL J. BURR

On any given fall Saturday, all roads lead to Oklahoma Memorial Stadium—or at least it seems so to anyone driving I-35 in either direction. On less frenetic days throughout the year, travelers can be seen swinging off the interstate just to glimpse this home to one of college football's storied programs. Small wonder then that University of Oklahoma Athletic Director Joe Castiglione unapologetically refers to the towering behemoth as a national "shrine" to the sport, a piece of intercollegiate history.

The stadium, once defining the southern and eastern edges of the Norman campus, today looms over surrounding academic halls and student housing, its stark, concrete sides strangely out of sync with its brick-and-limestone-clad neighbors. Castiglione would like to remedy the incongruity while bringing the old facility up to date with current needs; his plan follows an 80-year tradition for this ever-changing structure.

continued

Proposed eastside stadium expansion

In 1916 the Sooners still were competing on Boyd Field, a football/baseball/track complex with a 500-seat grandstand located north and west of the present Field House. But Coach Bennie Owen coveted the 30 acres to the south as the site for future expansion. The University acquired the land and in 1922 announced a campaign for a new stadium, later combined with a student-generated push for a student union.

The architect's plan for a horseshoe-shaped stadium, with its brick façade and elaborate collegiate Gothic north end zone, was somewhat grander than the University could afford. A simpler set of west and east concrete stands, the first completed in 1925, the second in 1928, resulted from the drive, which combined private fund raising and student pledges and later a \$400,000 stadium/union bond issue secured by a student fee and income from the two facilities.

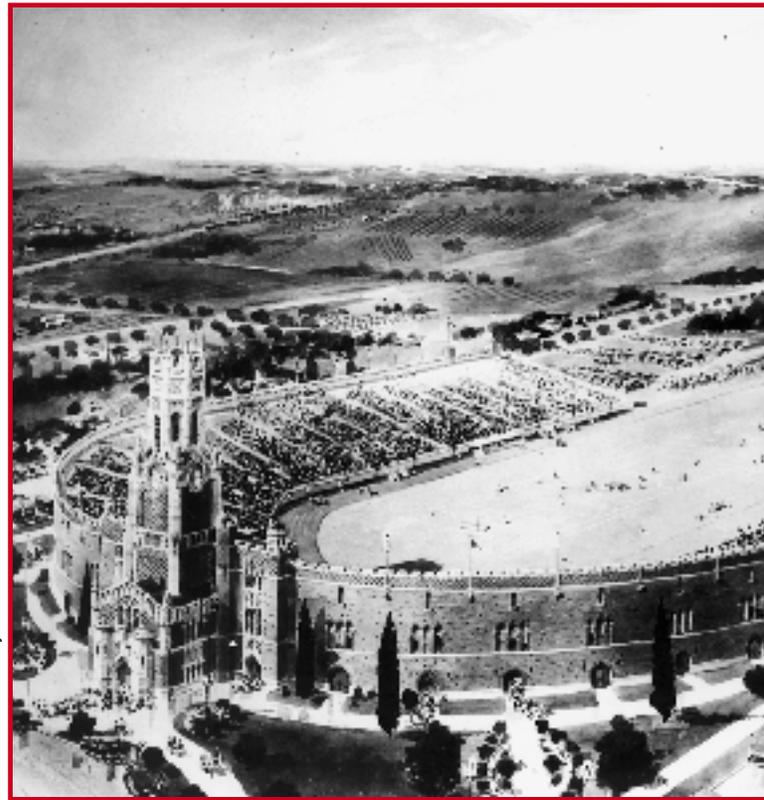
The cost of the original stadium was \$288,000. With some wooden bleachers added behind the stadium's north and south end zones, total capacity reached 32,000. Many far-sighted fans—303 to be exact—obtained lifetime home football passes with a \$250 per ticket donation, some in the names of their children. Ten of those “2-5-0” season tickets are still being honored in 2001.

Oklahoma Memorial Stadium pays tribute to University-affiliated persons who lost their lives in World War I; the playing field is named for Bennie Owen. Modifications to both have been ongoing.

A memorial tower, gift of the class of 1924, complete with a football-timing clock and scoreboard on its south face, went up at the north end only to come down when a 1949 expansion enclosed that portion of the field. The cinder track that encircled the playing field was removed, and the surface lowered six feet, enabling an additional 10 rows of seats to be constructed on the east and west. The new three-story press box above the west stands was declared to be the finest in the nation. The 1949 project, which brought capacity to more than 55,600, was financed with \$1.2 million in self-liquidating bonds, repaid by the Athletic Department. In 1956-57, a south-end grandstand replaced the wooden bleachers, adding another 6,100 seats.

Ticket demand continued to outstrip availability throughout the golden Wilkinson/Switzer eras. By 1974, another expansion to 70,800 was authorized, adding the west-side upper deck and a towering new press box at a cost of \$5.77 million. The \$4 million south end zone project in 1980 brought capacity to approximately 75,000 and also provided a complex of coaches' offices, plus rooms for weight training, meetings, equipment, and team lockers. Nine sky-suites were constructed in 1995 and more wheelchair spaces provided in 1998, reducing capacity to 72,726. New stadium lights now permit night games, while a new scoreboard and video replay screen top the south-end seats. The privately financed Barry Switzer Center, with its enhanced sports medicine and training facilities, locker rooms, coaches' offices, and “legends” display areas, opened in 1999 at the southeast corner of the stadium.

The expansion and renovation contained in the Great Expectations—Campaign for Sooner Sports is the 21st century version of Bennie Owen's original dream for Oklahoma



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Memorial Stadium. The exposed surfaces will be bricked with the white cast stone accents that trademark other University buildings. The new north façade, complete with a clock overlooking the recently installed reflecting pool, will contain elements compatible with the graceful old Field House it faces across Brooks Street.

The dominant expansion feature is an east-side upper deck whose chair-back seating will boost capacity beyond 80,000. Beneath the deck will be two levels containing 27 suites and outdoor chair-back club seating with access to a lounge area similar to the west-side Santee Lounge. Plans call for refurbishing of the Santee facility as well as the press box, which will be air-conditioned for the first time. Fan amenities throughout the stadium will include upgrading of the existing concourses, rest rooms, and concession areas.

Alleviation of stadium congestion is being addressed in



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Clockwise from lower left: Old photos reveal Oklahoma Memorial Stadium as constructed in 1928, the architect's vision in 1925, with the clock tower and reflecting pool in 1940, and the current OU stadium.



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several ways. While the new east-side premium seating will be reached by elevators, and additional ramps will serve the upper deck, a mezzanine is being added to both the east and west sides to serve the existing seating areas. To improve entrance, exit, and crowd flow on the ground level, the concourse perimeter is being extended and the chain link replaced by capped brick pilasters and wrought

iron gates and fencing. This attractive border treatment will extend south on both Asp and Jenkins and along Lindsey to enclose the practice fields adjacent to the stadium. Although east-side traffic will be interrupted during certain phases of upper-deck construction, Jenkins Street eventually will acquire a gentle curve from Brooks to Lindsey (into University-owned land) to accommodate the expanded stadium perimeter. The new 800-car, five-level parking garage adjacent to the stadium's west side, which is separately bonded and not part of the athletic development projects, will carry out the brick-and-cast-stone motif. If the construction gods smile—and the weather cooperates—University planners expect to have fans settled in their lofty new seats enjoying the stadium's upscale look and upgraded features for the 2003 football season. But even if the fates conspire against such an ambitious schedule, history advises patience. This massive undertaking is being built, after all, on the foundation laid by Bennie Owen nearly 80 years ago.