

A photograph of two people sitting on a row of red stadium seats in a large arena. The seats are arranged in a grid pattern, and the background is a brick wall. The two people are sitting on a row of seats that is highlighted in a lighter color, possibly indicating a special feature or a specific row of interest.

**Think you have a sad story  
that hasn't been told?  
A scam that hasn't been tried?  
Forget about it.  
At the Athletic Ticket Office,  
they've heard 'em all.**

# **Two on the 50, Halfway Up**

BY MICHAEL WATERS

PHOTOS BY ROBERT TAYLOR

OU ticket manager Tom Blubaugh, right, and assistant manager Twila Waltner try out the Oklahoma Memorial Stadium seats that historically are in such demand—two on the 50, halfway up.

*continued*



With 4,600 names on the season ticket waiting list, filling the 73,000-plus seats in Oklahoma Memorial Stadium is not a problem for ticket manager Tom Blubaugh; keeping all these rabid Sooner fans happy is another matter entirely.

**T**he contest is one of yells and groans. Of struggle and sweat. Of elation and disappointment. Of multi-digit numbers barked urgently at noncommittal faces. Of big men making swift pitches, and keeping a sharp eye for a sudden opening in a packed row of brightly colored shirts.

Yes, it is tougher than ever these days to obtain OU football tickets. And even as the faithful celebrate the resurgent Sooners by packing one sold-out home game after another, there are those grandstand warriors who, despite the University's best efforts, are inevitably left out.

According to Tom Blubaugh, OU ticket manager and 10-year veteran of the ticket battles, one recent example shows just how much today's Sooner fans want to get into a game. He recalls the hot August day when a smattering of returned visiting-team tickets to OU's home games with North Carolina and Baylor went on sale to the general public. "The last person out of the office that Tuesday night left at 10:20, and there were already seven people lined up to buy tickets at eight o'clock the next morning."

This occurred a mere two days after Blubaugh and his staff

## *Sooner fans who have passed on remain,*

sold nearly 6,000 of these single-game tickets by phone and over the counter, two by two, for the benefit of those 4,600 fans on the ever-growing season ticket waiting list.

With exaggerated understatement, the gracious, fast-talking Blubaugh remarks, "Tickets are in demand." Often he and his staff receive some reminder of just how *much* in demand—say, the sight of an 80-year-old woman jumping up and down and stomping her feet. Or perhaps a letter in the daily bagful proclaiming a ticket applicant's devotion to the Sooners: *If you have any old OU football film from the 1990s, you will see me still sitting and cheering the team on to the end of the game . . .*

Blubaugh leads a staff of 10 full-time employees, which includes assistant ticket managers Twila Waltner, Billy Ray Johnson and Carole Dollins, plus a varying number of student helpers. Depending on the time of year, up to 20 people work in the ticket office, and about 50 staffers turn out on football game days to meet the myriad demands generated by admitting some 73,000 individuals into Oklahoma Memorial Stadium.

The office copes with a customer base of some 40,000 people, who collectively purchase about 66,000 season football tickets a year. Approximately 6,000 single-game tickets are held for visiting teams, the unclaimed portion of which are sold to Sooner fans.

And while the football program occupies staffers through much of the year, Blubaugh notes that the office handles ticketing for all sports, including men's and women's basketball, wrestling, baseball, softball, track, gymnastics and volleyball. In fact, while the office was in the process of mailing out season ticket applications for football last March, "we hosted a NCAA first-round basketball women's tournament, which sold out Lloyd Noble Arena for two nights—the two largest crowds ever to watch women's basketball in the state."

Blubaugh believes that the needs of Sooner fans should be handled, above all, by local people. "We operate a full-fledged phone room, something that a lot of schools farm out," Blubaugh says proudly. "But it's important here—we want our fans and our donors taken care of by *our* people, not calling a number and ending up talking to somebody in Denver."

That approach to service carries over to other staffers, such as administrative assistant Charlette Stuart. "Our customers always come first, when they walk up to the counter or when they call on the phone," she says. "You address that first, and then there's the correspondence—I've never seen a day when we didn't have a big bag of mail."

In all, it is a work environment in which the words "down time" belong to a dead language. "It's a pretty steady 60 to 80 hours a week," Blubaugh says, "from August 1 throughout May."

In the opposite corner, outnumbering the ticket office staff by about 200 to 1, are the fans. Or, as some could be called, the F\*A\*N\*S. They are the kind of people who would employ "Boomer Sooner" as a wedding recessionary, or take an OU flag with them to a far-flung battlefield as part of their military gear. They cherish their regular trips to Memorial Stadium almost on par with their husbands and wives and sons and daughters.

These are the good people who flood Blubaugh & Co. with requests each year—for season tickets, more season tickets, different seats for their season tickets, Texas tickets, away-game

## *in some cases, stalwart season ticket buyers. A few keep on buying for years.*

tickets, championship game tickets and bowl game tickets.

Sometimes, try as they might to accommodate the ballooning demand, ticket office staffers simply have to say “no.” And in a desperate bid to ward off that word, the fans sometimes do things that, well, they just should not do. And sometimes the season tickets holders, who show up on every game day, do not always get along with each other.

In fact, what the ticket office does every game day might be described as hosting a party for 73,000 people. Not all of the guests are going to hit it off, and that leads to requests each year such as one conveyed in a letter:

*To whom it may concern:*

*My wife and I had the constant pleasure of sitting next to a most religious couple. I am certain of this because of their constant references to “God Almighty” and “Jesus Christ” throughout the game . . . seemingly unrelated to my perceived needs for divine guidance for the Sooners.*

*I would appreciate consideration of moving our tickets up, down, north, or south for the ensuing 2001 season and beyond so that it will give us the opportunity to enjoy the Sooners without such intense religious fervor.*

Sometimes the ticket staff are unable to grant such requests, causing patrons to resort to other means—say, visual aids.

“One woman asked for a seat upgrade two years in a row because of the size of the gentleman who sat in front of her,” Blubaugh says. “And we weren’t able to upgrade her seat. So, the third year she sent us a photo showing how big the man was, hoping that would make a difference.”

Generally, though, the ticket staff are deprived of such helpful exhibits and have to discern the gravity of a request—and the writer’s intent—from a mere letter or phone call. And when the request involves illness, the staff tries to be generous.

“I remember the lady I got a letter from,” Blubaugh says, “whose husband was about to pass away, and this was going to be his last OU-Texas game. The whole family planned to go, they were all season ticket holders, all entitled to Texas tickets, and they needed to be in the shade because of his illness.

“Those things touch you. So we worked, got their tickets together and got those people in the shade.”

A year passed.

“It came time for OU-Texas again. One of our students brought in a letter and said, ‘You’ve got to read this. It’s horrible. We’ve got to help this woman!’ And it was the exact same letter. She’d changed the date.”

Ticket staffers, in fact, have

learned that OU football is not just popular among the living. Sooner fans who have passed on remain, in some cases, stalwart season ticket buyers. A few keep on buying for years.

“People buy tickets through their deceased relatives so they don’t have to give them up,” Blubaugh explains. “They’ll even set up checking accounts in deceased relatives’ names.” One office employee devotes several weeks a year to sleuthing the names of decedents on the season ticket list.

Fortunately, some of the less savory among ticket applicants do not require much investigation or discernment to uncover. One man, for example, once contacted the office, pulling the old “don’t-you-realize-who-I-am?” routine.

“He told us he was a close friend of President Boren,” Waltner recalls. “But he didn’t pronounce President Boren’s name right.”

Among the more reputable letter-writers are those who employ “term of service” as a rationale for granting their ticket requests. *Had two season tickets for 20 years*, read one request. *We have been loyal and proud OU supporters for 29 years*, read a plea for Texas tickets. *Our families have been dedicated OU fans for . . . 57 years*, went a protest over increased ticket costs to cover stadium improvements.

*continued*



Assistant ticket managers Carole Dollins, left, Billy Ray Johnson and Twila Waltner take advantage of a glorious fall day to visit the inside of Oklahoma Memorial Stadium, which they seldom see on game days.

And one correspondent tried to set a high-water mark for duration of support, if not number of years. She argued that a co-applicant *attended her first football game at the tender age of one week (having had the courtesy of being born on the one weekend of the season without a scheduled game) and has not missed a season since.*

Joining the long-timers on the ticket office's plate are the hard-luck cases—fans who simply lose their tickets. A couple from Dallas speeds northward on I-35 and arrives within shouting distance of the stadium—just as they realize their tickets are sitting on a dresser back home. Or, the entire sheet of season tickets disappears shortly after its arrival in the mail. Or, the season tickets never arrive at all. (On one occasion the family dog reportedly ate the tickets.)

While the office does not replace tickets, it can issue “admits” that get the ill-starred patrons into the game. What staffers find when solving these problems, though, is that the phenomenon of disappearing tickets leads to some unfortunate gender scapegoating.

OU Western History Collections



In a simpler time, athletic ticketing was a one-man job in this booth outside the 500-seat stands at Boyd Field, just north and west of the present-day Field House.

“You deal with a lot of men in this business, and it’s never *his* fault!” Blubaugh says. “It’s always his wife or his secretary. *He* never loses the tickets.”

“Or if the tickets were left at home,” Waltner adds, “you hear, ‘Well, she was supposed to have them in her purse.’ It’s generally the wife who gets blamed.”

But the problems caused by misplaced tickets are definitely sometimes caused by men—sometimes highly prominent men. Blubaugh remembers

when he was an intern in the ticket office, “The first call I got concerned the under-deck chairbacks, which were the best seats in the house. It turned out to be the president’s box. And the president—I won’t say which one it was—said, well, he’d lost his tickets. So we issued him two admits.

“Well, he had forgotten that he had actually given the tickets away to a legislator. So on game day, there was the legislator who had the two tickets from the president and also a guest of the president who had the two admits.”

Sometimes OU tickets have been known to, seemingly by miracle, survive disaster. “One man told us he lost his tickets last year when his house flooded,” Blubaugh says. “We asked him, ‘Do you have any remnants of the tickets?’ He said, ‘No, but I’ve got my insurance claim.’ So we issued him admits.

“And then, lo and behold, his tickets reappeared. Someone else showed up at the second or third game with them—along with his admits.”

Plainly, the people in the ticket office care about helping Sooner fans, but they care about the tickets as well. After all, as Blubaugh says, “Each ticket is the property of the state of Oklahoma. We’re responsible for it just as if it were an office computer on campus, or anything else that belongs to the state. And we have to account for every one of these pieces of stock with our auditors.”

One of the most serious matters that face the ticket office are ticket counterfeiting and theft. “Every year we have some tickets stolen out of the mail. We have federal postal inspectors here at every game—a lot of people don’t realize that this kind of theft is a federal offense.”

The legal status of the tickets has led to some unusual record keeping in past years. Once, Blubaugh remembers, the office had an easygoing policy of replacing lost student tickets. The trouble was “students would stick them in their pockets, and the tickets would get washed. And after washing their clothes, and the ticket, they’d come in asking for a new one.”

It began to happen so often, the manager adds, that “we had to make them bring in some kind of remnants before issuing them a new ticket.” The upshot: an accumulation of little zip-lock bags, full of clothes-dryer lint and minuscule, gnarled remains of football tickets, placed on file at the office—and soberly inspected by auditors.

The saving grace of such detail work is, of course, that zip-



Box office manager McK Williams mans one of the stadium ticket windows on the first day of student football ticket distribution.



Although the bulk of Sooner season tickets are printed and mailed offsite, staff assistant Betty Arbuckle generates tickets requiring special handling, late orders and the internal University accounts.

lock bags do not yell at staffers or write angry notes. To the staff, the latter is simply another part of the job.

"This year we sent out notices to people who didn't get the away-game tickets they requested," recalls Carole Dollins, information systems specialist for the ticket office. "We told them that we could provide them with Texas Tech tickets, because that game is low-demand. We got one of those notices returned to us, torn into little pieces with a note that read, 'Who the hell wants to go to Lubbock in November?'"

"We do what we can," Blubaugh says, "but people don't realize the volume of the requests. And it went very quickly, very recently, from everybody being able to get what they wanted, to the limited situation we have now. And now they're upset because, say, their grandkids don't get to sit with them at the game."

Sometimes Sooner passion turns downright ugly, such as several situations in which ex-spouses battled over OU season tickets in divorce cases. "Those problems can get a little heated sometimes," Waltner says. "For instance, we require that people give us their mailing address in writing. And sometimes you have an ex-spouse, someone who is not supposed to have the tickets, changing the mailing address to their own name."

Then, in one instance, a woman demanded custody of the season tickets, and won them in the divorce decree. She then contacted the ticket office and cancelled the order—so she could tell her ex-husband that she had cancelled his precious tickets.

Caught in the middle of these and other acts of temperament, Blubaugh's staff maintains a professional cool without being pushovers. ("A customer threw a pencil at me," Waltner recalls. "I had him pick it up!") Yet even in the situations in which the ticket staffers are plainly swindled, a reminder



The regularity of the ringing telephone is a given in the ticket box office, where employees like Kamee Lance, a freshman from Noble, are trained in the fine art of customer service.

comes along that Sooner fans are, after all, basically good people.

"Once when we were hosting the OSU game, a ticket-taker left her post," Blubaugh says. "A fan outside the stadium spotted it, and before we got it stopped, about 30 people came in. Then, we got a letter on Monday containing the price of a ticket. The writer said he was one of those 30 people, and after thinking about it over the weekend, he decided what he did just wasn't right."

And along with the complaints come heartfelt thanks and a warm acquaintanceship with the most devout of Sooner football fans. "You make a lot of friends here with people you see year after year," Blubaugh says. "We have a lot of wonderful, wonderful fans."

"And every now and then we'll hear from really elderly people, who may have lived out-of-state for a long time, but they want to come back to OU and see one game," Waltner adds. "They've been OU fans forever, and we always want to help them."

And despite the overtime and pressure of dealing with a large and demanding customer base, other staffers who work in the ticket office say they get a good feeling from helping the fans and staying close on a daily basis to the growing excitement of 21st century OU athletics.

"There's just a different atmosphere all around the town, especially on game days," McK Williams, box office manager, says. "It's great to be part of it. You get here to the office, and there're people everywhere, and they're not even in the stadium yet."

The 60,000-plus people that the OU ticket office work with should count themselves lucky to have their hands on prized football tickets dispensed to them by a seasoned and professional organization.

But as for the have-nots mulling how to join the ranks of the haves, here is one parting word of advice. If you call the ticket office and claim that your long-time buddyship with OU's president should help get you admitted to Memorial Stadium, remember—it is pronounced "BOR-en."