



prologue.

Those television dollars: selling point or selling out?

A story making the rounds last fall claimed that one disgruntled Sooners football fan, frustrated by yet another season replete with 11 a.m., made-for-TV kickoffs in the sweltering September heat, had posted OU's stadium lights on eBay: "For sale cheap; never been used." Some other comments thrown at the Athletics Department on the subject were less humorous.

Most fans on the ground, it seems, hate morning football—tailgaters reduced to breakfast fare, Norman merchants with fewer pre-game shoppers and shrunken lunch and dinner crowds, the operational crews that must prepare for the game, the coaches and players themselves. On the flip side are all those fans who seldom if ever make it into the Gaylord Family Oklahoma Memorial Stadium; for them, having their Sooners on television is a boon at any time of day or night. A team in such demand clearly is a point of pride, undoubtedly a recruiting tool—and oh, yes, it is money in the bank.

Football telecasts bring \$2 to \$2.5 million annually into OU athletics coffers, and contrary to popular perception, kickoff times are out of the athletics director's control. As part of the Big 12 negotiated television package, the institutions share equally in TV revenues, with an additional payment to the participant based on the broadcast's type of exposure, from regional to national. Each member realizes up front that its games may be scheduled for 11, 11:30, 2:30, 6 or 7 o'clock on any given Saturday.

It could be worse. With TV viewers' seemingly insatiable appetite for wall-to-wall football, both collegiate and NFL, some schools are agreeing to Thursday or

Friday night games—even Tuesday or Wednesday—and on Labor Day Weekend, a Sunday game. OU Athletics Director Joe Castiglione steadfastly refuses to consider such proposals for Sooners home games, although he admits that one day he might have to agree to a Thursday or Friday night away game, if there has been no previous Saturday home game.

Surrendering partial sovereignty to television schedulers for the dollars involved is not so much selling out as it is generating maximum income for a very expensive program. The 2005-06 OU athletics budget was a self-generated \$63 million. No University funds go into building and maintaining facilities, hiring and retaining coaches and support personnel, providing scholarships and academic support services for student-athletes in 20 different sports, travel, insurance, sports medicine and all the other basic expenses of a major Division I program.

The money has to come from somewhere, the most obvious source being ticket sales. Ticket prices surpass even early kickoffs on the list of fan complaints, but Castiglione insists that OU's prices have not increased more than 3 to 4 per cent annually and have never been the highest or even second highest ticket in the conference. Keeping a lid on ticket costs, he says, is the major reason for augmenting all the other income streams available: annual giving; conference revenue sharing; branding, licensing and merchandising all things Sooners; as well as corporate sponsorship of OU's own radio and television programs.

Directly or indirectly, football provides 70 percent of the Athletics

Department's income, while accounting for just 30 percent of its expenses. Of the other sports, only men's basketball creates enough net revenue over expenses to contribute to the overall program. Even the phenomenally successful women's basketball program has yet to become self-supporting. Still Castiglione is committed to sharing the proud Sooners tradition with all student-athletes by providing them the opportunity to become champions, regardless of the public popularity of their sport.

"We made the conscious decision to sponsor 20 different intercollegiate sports," he says. "So if we are going to do it, we might as well do it right."

He also has committed the athletics program to being "the best reflection, the best extension, the best partner that the University of Oklahoma can have. We don't think we are anywhere nearly as important as some zealots would like to make intercollegiate athletics out to be, but we do think we bring something very valuable in support of the institution's mission."

Tradition, visibility, pride, certainly, but Sooners athletics also contribute to the University in a more tangible way. For the fourth year in a row, the price of each football ticket includes a \$2 academic enhancement fee that has averaged more than \$850,000 annually for the University. In addition, the Athletics Department initiated a \$1 million endowment for the University libraries. "We don't operate on an island by any means," Castiglione says.

So for now at least, the stadium lights are not for sale—some network genius is bound to schedule a nighttime kickoff for late November.

—CJB