

“Gonna Be a Sooner Someday”



BY MICHAEL WATERS

It's time for a story.

OU women's basketball coach Sherri Coale faces a restless but attentive group of 25 children gathered on a July afternoon. She is reading from an iPad as the story appears on a large screen behind her. She says jokingly, "I'm going to read away, and if this iPad goes off, you guys can help me figure out how to turn it back on, okay?" The children laugh, knowingly.

"This story is about *nutrition* . . ."

Nearby, another gaggle of youngsters listens as men's basketball coach Lon Kruger talks about the value of sportsmanship. Another group is led in a hyperkinetic round of jumping jacks, and yet another learns how OU's twin mascots, Boomer and Sooner, have been turned into cartoon characters—coming soon to a game app, animated video and scoreboard near you.

OU Athletics launches Sooner Jr., a program focused on guiding young F.A.N.S. in the pursuit of fitness fun, academics, nutrition and sportsmanship.

These are scenes from the launch of Sooner Jr., an ambitious educational initiative developed by the Athletics Department with input from a host of other campus and outside agencies. By employing the latest digital technologies alongside good old person-to-person communication, the program seeks to imbue the next generation of Sooner fans with a set of values embodied in the acronym F.A.N.S.—fitness fun, academics, nutrition and sportsmanship.

As children take part in the program, they will recite a pledge that further sums up its goals—"I promise to have fun, eat right, stay fit, get good grades, and be a good sport, because I'm going to be a Sooner someday."

The effort is being promoted as the most comprehensive youth education initiative in OU history. Athletics Director Joe Castiglione says, "We believe it may be the first of its kind in college athletics. It's always exciting for us to be on the cutting edge of something special."

According to Castiglione, the initiative will integrate and expand upon the Athletics Department's already prominent outreach into the community. OU coaches, players and staff have long appeared at school assemblies and other outside events, seeking to instill positive values in the next generation. Now, they will do so under a common banner, reinforcing a unified set of messages geared toward helping Oklahoma parents raise healthier, better-educated kids.

The need is apparent. According to U.S. Department of Education statistics, 72 percent of fourth-graders in Oklahoma ranked below proficient reading levels in 2009. In another report the Sooner State has the seventh-highest obesity rate in the nation, at 31 percent—a jump of almost two-and-a-half times since 1995.

"We are an overweight nation and most people feel that the most successful approach to correcting this is to help children achieve a healthy weight," says Allen Knehans, David Ross Boyd Professor of Nutritional Sciences, who is one of the leaders in the effort.

Forging a program to combat these trends was the focus of a brainstorming team that spent over two years putting Sooner Jr. together. Led by Charlie Taylor, assistant athletics director for marketing, and Renata Hays, licensing director, staffers searched for creative program elements that would find acceptance with a wide age-range of children—and their parents as well.

"It started from a need of better connecting with the youth of Oklahoma," Taylor says. "We want the kids to think it's cool. But it also has to be something that Mom and Dad can trust."

The search led the Athletics Department to partner with on- and off-campus agencies to shape messages and employ media that would educate and entertain easily distracted young children.

In crafting the "message" half of the equation, planners took the advice of Connie Dillon, faculty athletics representative, in involving OU's K20 Center for Educational and Community Renewal and the Department of Nutritional Sciences at the Health Sciences Center. Educators in both organizations began putting together materials on nutrition, fitness and literacy.

Knehans cites two goals of the program—encouraging children to achieve a healthy weight and to eat right. Part of the challenge, he adds, is helping children understand just what it means to "eat right."

"One of our objectives was to develop a reading list of books that would depict or encourage healthy eating, hoping that children would choose one or more of those books to include in their reading challenge," Knehans says. "We found a fantastic list that was put together by a group in Michigan for kindergarten and first grade. We still need a reading list for older elementary children, and we are working on that."

While faculty advisers worked on the educational aspects of Sooner Jr., Taylor and Hayes sought help in creating the communications tools. Fine Arts Dean Rich Taylor, a former Disney executive, provided "a lot of great leads," Charlie Taylor says.

To transform OU's equine mascots Boomer and Sooner into "spokeshorses" for the initiative, the planners turned to Premise Entertainment in Orlando, Florida, a company boasting a staff of former Disney feature animators. The Athletics Department asked Premise, headed by Dominic Carola, to put Boomer and Sooner into still-drawing and animated cartoon form to give children a fun and captivating focus for F.A.N.S. messages.

Cell animation is slow, painstaking work, and animators have labored through an 18-month design phase to bring Boomer and Sooner's animated images to life. In the images produced so far, the animation team has made magic. Boomer and Sooner

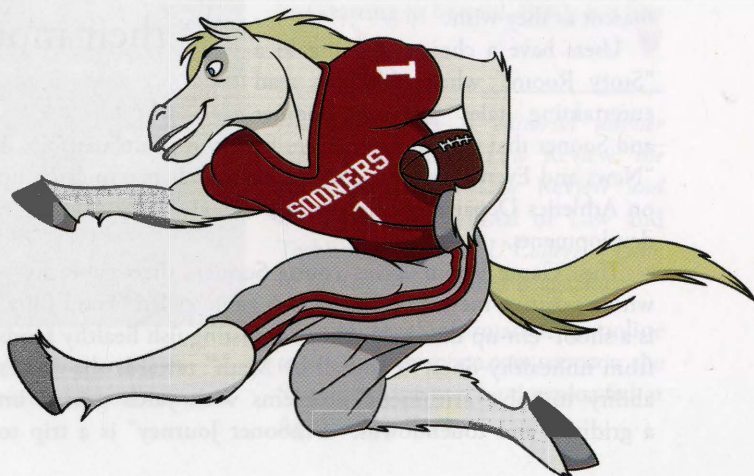
stand, walk, run down football fields, hit baseballs, and do all sorts of things that horses do not ordinarily do. According to Taylor, the pair is being used extensively in an animated and live-action music video, on scoreboards during sporting events, and in an innovative application for iPhone, iTouch and iPad.

The music video involves another outside partnership with Banshee Music in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which provided a song and a recording of the initiative's youth anthem, "Sooner Someday." The classic-rock-themed tune offers upbeat lyrics such as, "I'll make it to the top / By working real hard / And nothing's gonna change my mind or get in my way / I'm gonna be a Sooner someday." As young people hear those words in the music video, they will watch Boomer and Sooner in action on the screen.

Knehans applauds the use of Boomer and Sooner. "I feel like this effort is trying to take the marketing strategies that have been successfully used by the food industry to encourage the consumption of fast food and soft drinks, and turn them around to use popular characters, namely Boomer and Sooner, to encourage the consumption of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat dairy."

The mascots figure most prominently in the Sooner Jr. iPhone application, probably the most innovative and talked-about aspect of the initiative. Taylor says the need for an app was apparent—two-thirds of in-state Sooner fans use smart phones, and over one-third of them already have iPhones.

Athletics Department planners "did a lot of research and talked to a lot of companies" about application design, he says, but ultimately found the answer "right here in our own backyard," at the OU Department of Information Technology. There, a nine-



SOONER Jr.

member, permanent team composed of a full-time developer, a full-time interface designer, and seven student interns worked in consultation with Athletics over a four-month period to get ready for download from Apple's App Store.

Becky Grant, marketing and brand manager for OU-IT, recalls that "the process started with a brainstorming session involving OU-IT and OU Athletics to determine the goals and some of the design and interface details of the app. The developers and interface designers then met to determine specifics and to layout the design, user interface and activities that users could complete within the app. OU Athletics was heavily involved, giving guidance and approving designs and features."

Taylor is adamant that the finished product is not "a mind-numbing game that we just hand over to our kids."

The app delicately tries to balance instructional needs with what children in the 7-14 age range would find to be irresistible fun. The user is invited to customize the app by choosing a mascot (either Boomer or Sooner), and entering name, age and weight. The child's mascot then greets him or her in a "Locker Room," which introduces the main sections of the app and gives the child a chance to redeem points won in other portions of the app to "buy" athletic clothes and dress their mascot as they wish.

Users have a choice of going to a "Story Room," where they can read entertaining tales starring Boomer and Sooner that promote nutrition, fitness or sportsmanship. A "News and Events" section gives children a chance to catch up on Athletics Department happenings and the latest Sooner Jr. developments.

The "Game Room" gives young Sooners their game fix—with a positive-message difference. A game called "Food Blitz" is a shoot-'em-up that helps the user distinguish healthy foods from unhealthy ones. "Football by Math" rewards the child's ability to solve arithmetic problems with yards gained on a gridiron and touchdowns. "Schooner Journey" is a trip to



Sooner Jr. offers children a range of games promoting nutrition, physical fitness and good sportsmanship through a video game platform that can be downloaded onto an iPhone.

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Memorial Stadium, in which the child is challenged to collect discarded water bottles and avoid flying pizzas and doughnuts along the way.

The most hi-tech component of the app is found in the "Fitness Room," where the child's chosen mascot, Boomer or Sooner, "leads" children in exercises such as sit-ups or jumping jacks. The user is told to put the iPhone in his or her pocket, whereupon a motion sensor detects whether the child is doing the exercise and awards points. Taylor says this clever function caused people to take particular notice when the app was tested with a group of children in July.

"The target audience was made up mostly of the kids of department employees, and the reaction was fantastic," he says. "You have this roomful of kids—two of them are mine—and you see them get to the Fitness Room. And then you've got 40 kids running around like mad, doing jumping jacks because Boomer and Sooner told them to. And the moms and dads are sitting there with their mouths open."

The initial reaction that day has been echoed in the early responses to the program's rollout. In the three weeks after the announcement press conference, 10 schools signed up for Sooner Jr. events. Athletics Department officials expect to do at least 20 appearances at school assemblies touting the F.A.N.S. agenda during the current academic year. Taylor says that the depart-



In the Locker Room players are greeted by OU mascots Boomer and Sooner, who take them through the application and then allow them to redeem points earned for virtual athletic gear.

ment has gotten a lot of favorable emails and other comments from outside OU, and others within the University have expressed interest in taking part.

Officials are downright buoyant about the initiative's prospects. The first year will emphasize reading under the banner "Read Like a Champion," with future emphases to be determined by the greatest community needs. A Sooner Jr. clothing line offers a range of merchandise supporting the initiative, with profits going back into the program. Later on, the possibilities

include setting up "healthy eating stations" at athletic events. There is much to come.

But much has already been done. Castiglione has praised Taylor and Hays for doing the heavy lifting needed to get Sooner Jr. off the ground, and Taylor is quick to respond in kind. "A lot of people have worked on this, but none of this happens without the great leadership of Joe Castiglione, without his giving directions and supporting it. He is a visionary."

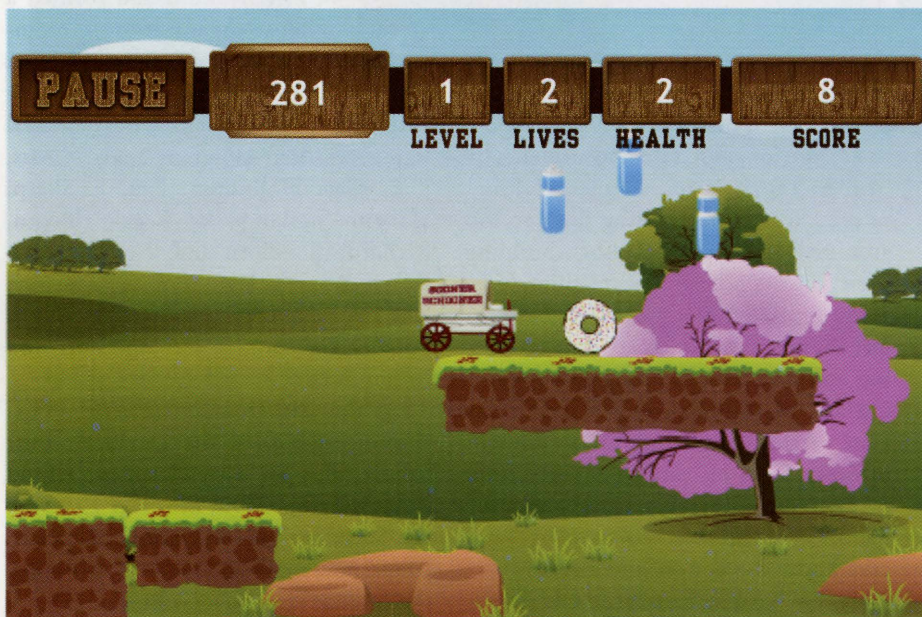
Although a lot of people, on and off campus, could rightfully take a bow for the launch of Sooner Jr., nobody seems much interested in accepting kudos at the moment. OU people are speaking about this program in future tense, and in particular its potential for turning more children into well-educated, healthy adults who believe in fair play—to make them "Sooners someday."

Clearly, the story of Sooner Jr. is just starting to be told. But it is a fine read so far.



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For additional information, go online to www.soonersports.com/soonerjr; the Sooner Jr. app can be downloaded at Apple's App Store.



"Schooner Journey" is a trip to Memorial Stadium, challenging young people to collect discarded water bottles and avoid health hazards like flying pizzas and doughnuts en route.