



prologue.

You've had the same football tickets for 20 years? That's good—or maybe there's something better.

Over the past couple of decades, *Sooner Magazine* has never lacked for stories about new facilities—some of them really take your breath away. Now comes another, right in the middle of the campus. The OU Athletics Department has announced its \$370-million project at Gaylord Family - Oklahoma Memorial Stadium, which will undergo the most extensive in a long series of upgrades dating all the way back to 1925.

If the conceptual plans become reality, two overriding developments will stun the returning football crowd as early as the 2016 season—a major private fundraising campaign permitting. The south end zone will have been enclosed to form a continuous bowl, while the west side is scheduled for a complete transformation.

What sets this stadium project apart from all the others is that it is not an expansion. Athletics Director Joe Castiglione is content with the 82,000-plus capacity and a manageable season ticket waiting list. His department seeks a happier crowd, not a larger one.

The south end zone will have suites and “loge boxes”—four premium, open-air seats, complete with TVs and in-seat food service. A wide connecting concourse will enable any ticket holder so inclined to walk the circumference of the stadium. The west side will mirror the east side's conversion in 2003—only more so. A second upper deck is scheduled to be added, topped by an imposing, multi-level press box stretching from goal line to goal line. More suites, as well as upper deck seating, will be included. All areas of the west side and south end zone will be accessed by 18 new elevators and 16 escalators, and there will be lounges on every level.

There will be hand rails throughout, more ADA accommodations, nearly 70 more points of sale hawking all sorts of concessions and merchandise—and, wonder of wonders, 43 brand new restrooms, bringing the total for those areas to 52. Amid all the newly created seat options, bench seating will remain, but each seat will be a standardized 18 inches wide (currently some seats are as narrow as 14), and the luxury, attached seatbacks so popular the last two seasons still can be leased. There will be Wi-Fi, cellular capabilities and TV screens; planners also are taking into account adaptability to future technological advancements as they happen.

Less obvious to the sell-out crowds that the Stoops era has generated will be the developments planned beneath the new south end zone. The Athletics Department offices, now located in the north end, will move south to join the Switzer Center, coaches' offices, team locker and position meeting rooms, and a weight room enlarged 3½ times into a year-round, high-performance training, conditioning and speed enhancement center.

The Athletics Department, which is self-supporting in every way, including facility construction, will make a gift to the University of their vacated north-end, 60,000-square-foot quarters for academic purposes, such as the Health and Exercise Science Department, now in the Sarkeys Complex with Huston Huffman Fitness Center. The plan calls for the Prentice Gautt Academic Center to move into a building of its own across from the new Headington Hall [*Sooner Magazine*, Fall 2013] on the corner of Jenkins and Lindsey where Jefferson House now stands. The old Jeff, Wilkinson and Jones athletic dormitories are scheduled for demolition.

Recruiting and developing top athletes to their full potential require the latest, state-of-the-art facilities that must occur if the University of Oklahoma is to maintain its standing as an elite intercollegiate football power. Extensive market surveys revealed to Castiglione and his staff that this is what OU supporters want—and they also want and are willing to pay for all the new fan amenities on tap for the stadium.

Sports crowds are shrinking nationwide, even in the pros, and it is less cost than comfort, Castiglione believes. Television is bringing more and more games into air-conditioned living rooms with big screens, comfy chairs and a nearby kitchen. No parking hassles or obnoxious fans in the next row. Still, he insists, there is no substitute for the game experience; it just has to be a great experience, well worth the price of admission.

And the price will go up in some areas of the stadium; premium seats just cost more, and the envisioned facility with all its perks can't be built for free. Every fan will have the opportunity to choose from several seat options. So when details are complete, Athletics Department personnel will contact each affected season ticket holder on the south and west sides and others who may wish to access the new amenities. This process may be painful for some but for others an opportunity to upgrade. Castiglione is determined to maintain an “every-fan mentality” rather than an elitist one, stressing that every seat will be surrounded by amenities that improve fan experience.

Achieving such a lofty goal will require patience and flexibility on both sides—and remembering that that new seat, regardless of location, can't be far from one of those shiny new restrooms.

—CJB