



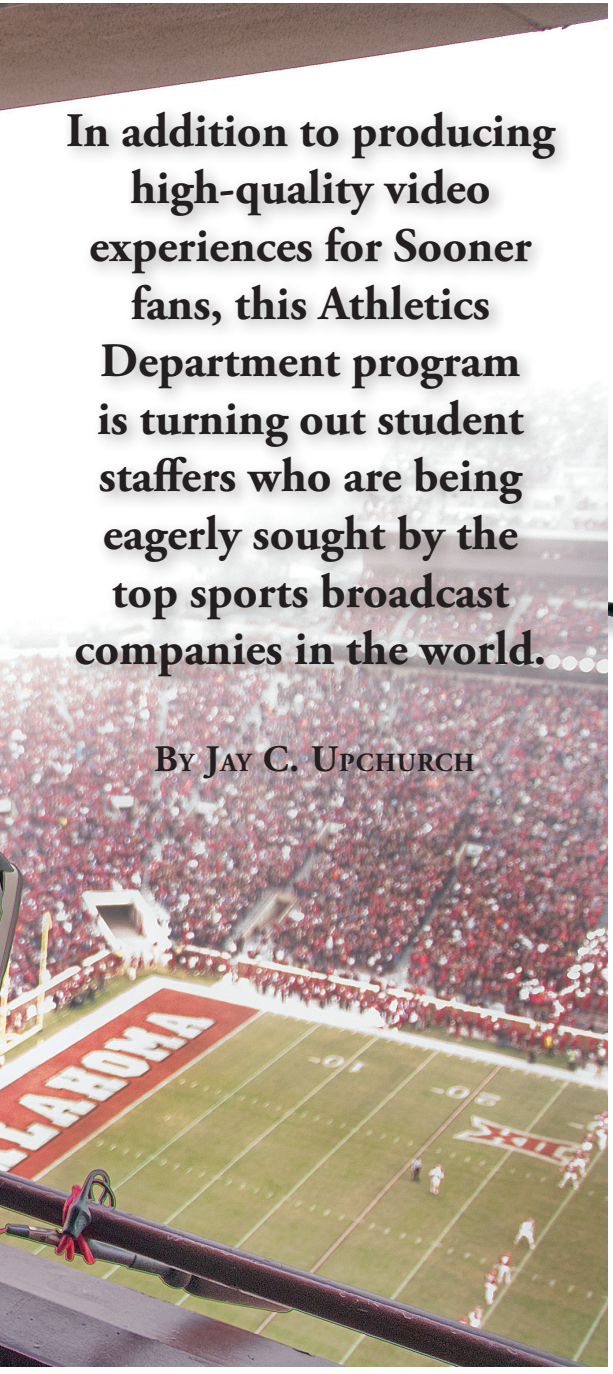
Hugh Scott

Student Ralph Craig runs a camera for the big screen on a chilly day at the top of the Gaylord Family-Oklahoma Memorial Stadium.

Sooner

In addition to producing high-quality video experiences for Sooner fans, this Athletics Department program is turning out student staffers who are being eagerly sought by the top sports broadcast companies in the world.

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH



ESPN called Zack McMakin to ask if he would be interested in serving as technical director on its late-November broadcast production of the Clemson-South Carolina football game. It was a question the 25-year-old University of Oklahoma graduate had hoped to hear—maybe five or six years down the road.



After all, it's not every day that the top sports broadcasting company in the world offers up a premium job opportunity on one of its national football telecasts, especially to a relative unknown in the industry. Add in the facts that McMakin grew up in South Carolina and both of his parents graduated from Clemson University, and it's easy to understand why he was both excited and terrified to say yes.

"It was the perfect situation and the game I really dreamed about working on at some point in the future," says McMakin, who works 30 hours a week as technical director for SoonerVision, the in-house video production arm of OU's Athletics Department. "I had previously done some work for ESPN, but never anything on that big of stage. To have that kind of opportunity at this early stage in my career, it's like a dream come true."

That seems to be a reoccurring theme with many of the graduates who have developed and honed their skills at SoonerVision over the past few years. What started out in 1997 as an underfunded video department that basically ran the big screen introductions and replays at OU football and basketball games has evolved into a world-class production studio that is regularly delivering talented directors, producers and engineers into the sports broadcast industry.

McMakin is one of dozens of former OU students who have taken their talents to the next level, and he sees that trend continuing well into the future

SoonerVision



Hugh Scott

Students at SoonerVision learn on industry-standard equipment. Here, they work in relay operations, using EVS to run replays seen on the big screen at a Sooner football game.

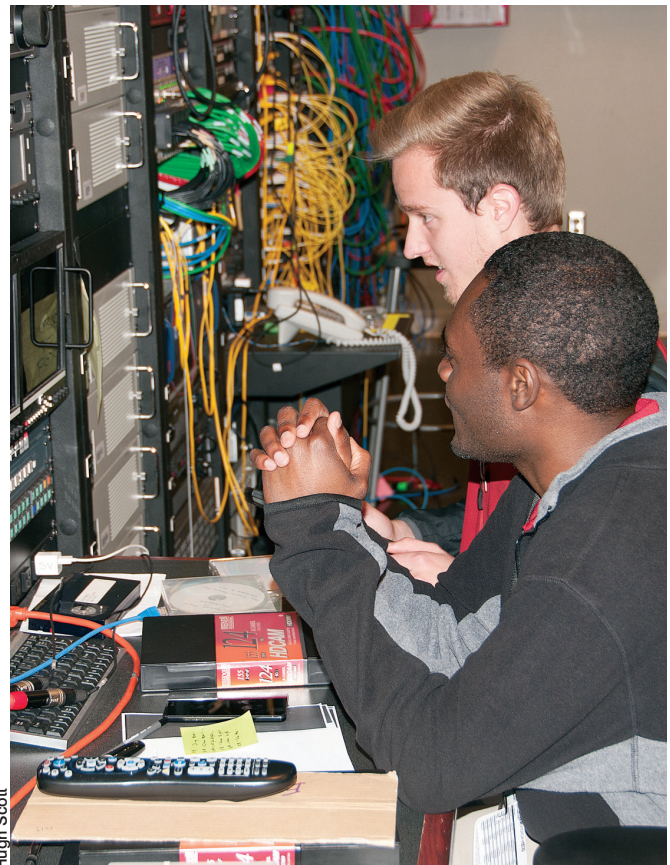
as long as SoonerVision remains at the forefront of the collegiate broadcasting movement.

“SoonerVision started out as a way for me to check off a requirement toward graduation. But as I got more involved, it slowly became a guide to my future,” says McMakin, a National Merit Scholar who earned a broadcasting and electronic media degree from the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication in 2013.

“As I began to figure out what I wanted to do for a career, SoonerVision provided a path to help me get there. It’s been a wonderful place to cultivate my knowledge and skills, and it’s helped prepare myself and a lot of others for the next phase in our lives.”

Brandon Meier is the assistant athletics director for OU’s broadcast operations, and he has played an integral role in helping forge a viable partnership between the Athletics Department and the Gaylord College. That partnership has provided many journalism students with a direct pipeline to SoonerVision, which helps furnish invaluable training for their prospective career goals.

“Honestly, I believe it’s one of the biggest win-win situations going on here at OU,” says Meier. “The students have an



Hugh Scott

Daniel Hinson, left, and Kyle Levesque coordinate content, like highlights from others games, to be shown on the big screen during OU football games.



Bill Richards

Brandon Meier, assistant athletics director, broadcast operations, left, with former student Jacob Potter, now director of programming and production, produce a pregame show for the 2013 Cotton Bowl—Oklahoma vs. Texas A&M. Meier led one of the largest technology upgrades in OU history as new LED video displays were added to OU athletic venues and SoonerVision studios were upgraded to high definition.



Hugh Scott

Broadcast graduate Phillip Lyons runs a hand-held camera on the floor of Lloyd Noble Center during an OU basketball game.

opportunity to work in a world-class facility in a hands-on environment, helping create the high quality content for which SoonerVision has become known. And SoonerVision gets a smart, ambitious workforce made up of students eager to learn and excited about being a part of something fun and creative.

“On top of that, it’s been a tremendous launching pad for so many students and their careers. It’s rewarding to watch these young people learn and grow working here and then see many of them going and getting great jobs in this field, working for a professional sport team or maybe for Fox Sports or ESPN.”

from camera operators to replay operators to control room assistants.

“It basically takes a small army to pull off a successful broadcast. Obviously, the students are critical to everything we do.”

Over the last three years, from late August to mid-December, SoonerVision has produced more than 500 hours of unique content, such as game broadcasts and coaches’ shows. In 2013, SoonerVision aired 4,667 hours of programming on all of the Fox Network platforms, including Fox Sports Southwest.

Student involvement has been one of the main ingredients to

Meier points to McMakin as the perfect example of an OU student who basically came aboard for a part-time job and graduated with a clear-cut path to a successful future.

“I don’t think Zack had any idea he was going to discover that he had such a passion for the work we do here at SoonerVision. But once he did, it was fun to watch him learn and grow and become a really talented member of our staff,” says Meier. “His success story serves as a real inspiration to a lot of the students we have working here now.”

SoonerVision provides part-time jobs to close to 100 students each semester. And even though the partnership with Gaylord College helps fill more than half of those spots, there are plenty of non-journalism students cutting their production teeth in Meier’s department, from running cameras and editing film to engineering and working as on-air personalities.

“Once we launched Sooner Sports TV back in 2012, the whole department just exploded. We got so big so fast that it became necessary to expand our staff and add more students to the mix,” says Meier. “We could not do what we do without the students. It takes around 33 people to do a live broadcast, and sometimes, we are doing two side-by-side because we are doing a baseball game and maybe a softball game simultaneously. Of those 33 jobs, all but five of them are manned by our student workforce—





Hugh Scott

Senior broadcast major Keegan Meenagh runs a big-screen camera on the upper west-side platform of the Lloyd Noble Center during a recent Sooner basketball game.



Hugh Scott

OU alumnus Stormy Morelli worked at SoonerVision as a student and now serves as its operations manager. Students who work for SoonerVision receive valuable hands-on training that make them sought-after candidates for networks.



those ambitious numbers. Joe Foote, dean of the Gaylord College, could not be more excited about the flourishing partnership that has created so many opportunities for journalism students.

“It’s been the most positive development in our college over the last decade, especially where our students are concerned,” says Foote. “It’s invaluable to have a place where young people can go and get hands-on experience, which helps prepare them for the future and even helps open doors in many cases.

“It’s rare to find the kind of working relationship between an athletic department and an academic entity that we have here at the University of Oklahoma. But people like Brandon (Meier) at SoonerVision and Joe Castiglione and Kenny Mossman in the Athletics Department have been so supportive in helping forge this wonderful partnership.” [Castiglione is vice president for intercollegiate athletics programs and athletics director; Mossman is senior associate athletics director for external operations.]

Meier is responsible for recruiting and hiring many of the 100 students working part-time jobs at SoonerVision. Besides Gaylord College, a number of students have come from such disciplines as theater, meteorology and engineering.

Some come in search of potential career training and advancement, while others are simply looking for a fun job working in and around the OU Athletics Department and its student-athletes.

Liliana Campon, a former member of the OU rowing squad, has experienced both of those worlds.

“I am a sports junkie, so I thought it would be fun being a part SoonerVision and working around all of the different sports,” says the junior from Grapevine, Texas. “I really didn’t know how to do anything at SoonerVision when I was hired, so I did whatever they needed me to do. They showed amazing patience while I learned and really made it a great experience for me.”

So much so that Campon is now in her second year at SoonerVision, and she’s become one of the studio’s top replay and highlight producers for broadcasts and various venue big screens.

“I love working the big screens at OU football games. It’s fun to see the crowd respond when you cue up a great replay and show it,” says Campon. “I am at the point now that this is what I



Bill Richards

In his fourth year with SoonerVision, 2013 OU graduate Zack McMakin is so respected for his work as a technical director that ESPN has hired him for freelance work on several of its sports broadcasts.

want to do after college. I never would have known that without working at SoonerVision. It’s just a fantastic program.”

Meier obviously loves getting that type of feedback from the students who work at SoonerVision.

“It’s one of the most rewarding parts of my job—to see so many students come in and really become a major part of what we are doing,” says Meier. “And then when you have the chance to watch them go out into the world and continue doing this type of work, that’s even more exciting.”

Athletics Director Castiglione believes SoonerVision, and particularly Meier, have done a great job of creating a positive working environment that lends itself to all of the students involved.

“Brandon understands the educational aspect of what he’s doing and makes sure that our students develop in such a way as to prepare them for many years in the profession. It’s definitely a win-win,” says Castiglione. “We get a top-rate television product, and our students gain experience and a skill set to serve them for a lifetime.”

Zack McMakin could not agree more.

“SoonerVision allowed me to see and recognize something that I originally had a mild interest in was actually something I could devote my life to,” says McMakin. “This is now my job, but it’s so much more than just a job. It’s something I’m excited about doing every single day. How many people get to say that?”

Jay C. Upchurch is editor of Sooner Spectator and writes sports articles for Sooner Magazine.