

Home Field Advantage



Scott Matthews

*With both tradition and comfort in mind,
a major renovation of OU's venerable
football stadium has delighted fans
and players alike.*

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH



HOME

It's where the heart is

— or in this case, where more than 85,000 hearts beat as one.

It's where character is molded, where spirit and sportsmanship are nurtured, and where the first steps toward potential greatness begin.

Owen Field has been the epicenter for all those things and so much more during the past 91 years. It is the patch of hallowed ground at the heart of Gaylord Family – Oklahoma Memorial Stadium, which unveiled the completed initial phase of a \$160 million renovation project in time for Oklahoma's 2016 season opener against Louisiana-Monroe.

The Sooners handily defeated the visiting Warhawks that September evening, but the real winners for years to come are the student-athletes and the Oklahoma fans. The historic stadium with its newly reconfigured bowl seating on the south end zone figures to provide an even more magical atmosphere.

"We had two main goals with this project," says Joe Castiglione, OU vice president and director of athletics. "One, we wanted to create world-class facilities for our student-athletes, and secondly, we wanted to provide the most memorable game-day experience possible for all of our loyal fans.

"Obviously, it's an ongoing project that won't be fully completed until next spring, but the feedback to this point has been extremely positive."

Gaylord Family–Oklahoma Memorial Stadium has undergone several significant renovations since its initial construction in 1925 under the direction of Bennie Owen, who served as head football coach from 1905 to 1926, and athletic director from 1907 to 1934. Over the years, the seating has been expanded numerous times, including the addition of upper decks and suites on both sides of the structure, as well as upgrades to the facility's overall amenities.

The latest construction, which began in August 2015, included a modest expansion of seating capacity from just over 82,000 to 83,489. But in reality, the addition of more seating was secondary to the main goals of the project, which emphasized the game experience and did not come without sacrifices from some season ticket holders in the south end zone.

The Sooners Club worked extensively with fans in an effort to make sure every season ticket holder affected by the newly reconfigured end zone had an opportunity to find seats that best fit their needs and budget. Not only was the club charged with relocating several thousand fans, but also the nearly 5,000 seats that are normally reserved for the visiting team.

"There were some real challenges along the way, but our fan base was extremely receptive to the new plan and all that it entailed," says Michael Alford, senior associate athletics director of administration and development.

Alford's development staff logged more than 100,000 phone calls and scheduled 5,000 in-person appointments at the university's Preview Center, located on Asp Avenue, two blocks north of campus. That facility was set up to closely resemble sections of the 1,818 new club seats, 66 loge boxes and 22 suites. Season ticket holders were given personal tours that allowed them to get a feel for all potential new options.

"That was one of Joe Castiglione's main directives when we started the process — our staff sitting down and meeting people face-to-face and talking to them about the project and all of the different benefits for the fans and the student-athletes," says Alford. "Our goal was to treat our fans with respect and do our best to allow them the opportunity to pick and choose the game experience that they desired most. We worked extremely hard to make that happen."

As Alford's team raced to fill the redesigned south end zone area, which also included an expanded concourse and the addition of several new concession areas and two 3,000-square-foot fan-friendly plazas, construction crews worked 60-hour weeks to make sure the stadium was ready to be christened by the Sept. 10 season opener.

There were many times during the spring and summer that the stadium lights burned well into the night, allowing construction to stay on pace for the aggressive finish date.

"It was always going to be a tight schedule and that was



Ty Russell

OU Sooners team members may be the biggest winners in the stadium renovation project. “I feel like we already had a home field advantage,” says senior defensive back Ahmad Thomas. “It’s going to make it harder for opposing teams to come in here and play.”

something we put a lot of thought and planning into, knowing we had an exact amount of time to complete the initial phase of the project — the south end of the stadium,” says Craig Kaufman, principal at Populous, the sports-centric architectural firm responsible for the design and development of the latest renovations.

“The biggest part of the construction work was going to be dictated by the window we had between last football season and the 2016 season, so the plan included shifts that went well into the night some days.”

During the project’s initial 13 months, Flintco’s construc-

tion crews used more than one million bricks and almost seven million pounds of steel on the stadium.

Providing additional lighting on some of those late shifts was the new south end zone video board and its 424,500 watts of power. Approximately 50 feet tall and 170 feet wide and taking up more than 7,800 square feet of total space, it is the second-largest college football video board in the country (behind only Auburn).

“The whole thing is pretty awesome,” says OU senior defensive back Ahmad Thomas. “The new seating, the video board, just the overall atmosphere it creates. I feel like we al-

ready had a home field advantage, but this is going to make it louder and create more energy from our fans. It's going to make it harder for opposing teams to come in here and play, and make it more fun for us."

While Thomas and his teammates will play six games in their newly renovated home this fall, the Gaylord Family – Oklahoma Memorial Stadium will remain an active construction site during the next several months. The second part of the initial renovation phase, which focuses on infrastructure in the south end zone, is scheduled to be completed by spring 2017.

Included in that plan is a new locker room and team meeting rooms, a state-of-the-art weight room, an all-new

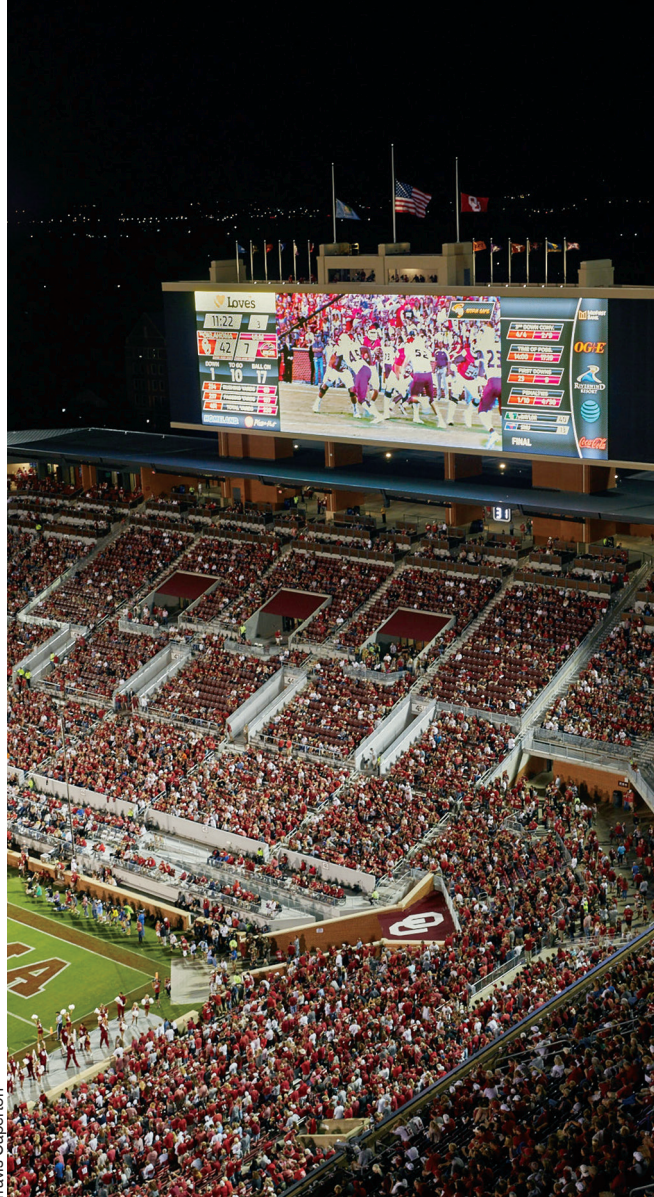
“This project happened thanks to the collective efforts of a lot of people — and you can underline that, highlight it, make it a headline.”

Switzer Center, a nutrition center and dining area, and a 24,000-square-foot training and agility room, all located on the ground floor. The third floor of the facility will be home to the new coaches' offices and team video department.

"It's incredibly exciting to see all of the improvements and progress being made," says head football coach Bob Stoops. "I have always appreciated Joe Castiglione and our administrators all the way up to President Boren for their vision and their unwavering commitment to continue to build and improve upon everything that we have here at the University of Oklahoma.

"And it also demonstrates the support we have from our alumni and really the entire fan base, all of whom are a big reason why we are able to make such a special project like this a reality."

An enhanced fan experience has been one of the main objectives for the stadium project. The new video board, added amenities, improved Wi-Fi and fan plazas were specifically



Travis Caperton

Among the most striking stadium changes is the addition of the second-largest video board in college football. At 50 feet tall and 170 feet wide, the board shines down on Sooner fans with more than 7,800 square feet of sheer pixel power.

designed to create a better game experience.

Atlanta resident and longtime season ticket holder Glenn Ivie traded in his upper-deck seats in section 223 for a pair of seats in section 45 in the south end zone. It is a move that has worked out well so far.

"Honestly, it's been great. The project afforded us an opportunity to choose the seats we wanted and to actually sit with friends for the first time ever," says Ivie, whose daughter Olivia graduated from OU with a bachelor of science degree in education in 2013. "The seats are more comfortable, the aisles are wider with more legroom and the facilities are all new. Plus, connecting that whole end of the stadium has created an even better overall atmosphere than we had before."

Teamwork has been an extremely valuable element in the success of the renovation project. It is something Castiglione has preached even before the plan was launched.

"This project happened thanks to the collective efforts of a lot of people — and you can underline that, highlight



Lynette Lobban

Though the stadium celebrated the grandest of openings, construction continues in the south end on such amenities as a new Switzer Center, locker rooms and a state-of-the-art weight room.




Travis Caperton

Game-day nirvana can be found in 22 new suites that offer the perfect balance of outside seating, an indoor dining and gathering space, a big screen dedicated to instant replay of field action, and multiple screens highlighting gridiron matches from around the country.

it, make it a headline,” says Castiglione. “The list is extremely long, starting with President Boren, Coach Stoops and his staff, the players, our outstanding administrative staff, the construction manager and his crew, the subcontractors, the architects and certainly those fans who purchased one of the new options in the south end zone and all of the fans who have continued to support our program by purchasing tickets in other parts of the stadium.

“This is a magical place that has seen so many great moments and an incredible amount of success over the years. Because of the efforts of so many people who have been part of this football program and this university, we have an amazing foundation upon which this type of project can be built.”

Maybe just call it a home field advantage. 

Jay C. Upchurch is editor of Sooner Spectator.