

# To Play or Not to Play

Oklahoma football is back and learning the play book of a microscopic opponent.

**W**hen the University of Oklahoma met Missouri State in its 2020 football season opener, the Sooners extended their consecutive home sellout streak at Gaylord Family-Oklahoma Memorial Stadium to 131 games.

From the post-game stats, it looked like so many other OU games, featuring tons of offense, a big quarterback performance and a resounding 48-0 victory.

But there was something different. The early September sellout amounted to only 22,700 tickets, or roughly 25% capacity of the stadium—the smallest home crowd in 75 seasons,

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

since 11,000 fans saw the Sooners beat Iowa State 14-7 on Nov. 10, 1945.

Played amid a global pandemic that had literally stopped the sports world in its tracks seven months earlier, fans fortunate enough to attend were strategically positioned throughout the stadium for social-distancing purposes. Instead of people, cardboard cutouts peppered the stands and, despite the stadium's public address system piping in additional crowd noise, the decibel level did not approach its classic roar.

The Pride of Oklahoma marching band was noticeably absent; the sidelines along Owen Field were limited to a handful of photographers and key game-day personnel, while inside the Harold Keith Press Box—normally brimming with more than 100 media and OU staff—were a scant two dozen people.

Missing, too, was the smell of hamburgers and hot dogs, grilled in front of big-screen TVs as tailgating, a popular pregame tradition, was not allowed near the stadium or anywhere on campus. Surrounding parking lots, normally overflowing with cars on game days, were sparsely populated and scores of local businesses experienced significant losses in sales on what is typically one of their biggest revenue-generating days of the year.

In the middle of it all, there was a game with plenty of familiar names and faces in the mix, along with highly touted quarterback Spencer Rattler in his starting debut for the Sooners and 20 others making their first appearance in an OU uniform.

College football was back, and though the atmosphere was tempered by a pandemic lingering in the background, it was time to celebrate.

“We went months and months with basically zero sports, so to get Oklahoma football back this fall definitely makes a lot of people very happy,” says Dallas resident Max Robinson, a longtime season ticket holder and 1975 OU graduate. “It’s different, for sure, and probably will be for a while, but to have some semblance of normalcy again is something I feel not just our fans needed, but the whole country needed.”

OU used the season opener as a test run, of sorts. Fans were



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required to wear masks and practice social distancing at all times while in the stadium.

Unfortunately, too many in the student section failed to follow COVID-19 game-day protocols, forcing OU officials to implement stricter seating guidelines and consequences if safety mandates weren't observed. Threatened with stadium eviction or even elimination of the student section, a much more compliant, but no less exuberant, student fan base was in attendance for the Sept. 26 game against Kansas State.

## FINDING A WAY

After losing millions in revenue with the cancellation of March Madness, several NCAA championships and an entire slate of spring sports, it only made sense that athletic directors and conference commissioners were going to work over-





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time to find a way to move forward when it came to football, which generates more than \$4 billion annually and serves as the lifeblood for basically every collegiate athletics program in the country.

The Big Ten and Pac 12 initially voted to cancel their respective seasons out of an abundance of caution. That left the Big 12, ACC and SEC as the only Power Five Conferences to schedule games this fall, along with more than 70 Football Bowl Subdivision programs.

While many programs—including South Carolina, Clemson and LSU—reported positive COVID-19 cases among student-athletes in early stages of summer workouts and fall camp, OU athletics director Joe Castiglione and head football coach Lincoln Riley took a more cautious approach to bringing student-athletes back to campus. They designed a plan to provide frequent testing for athletes in every fall sport, especially football, which has a roster of more than 100 players, a 13-member coaching staff and dozens more in supporting roles.

“It’s our job as football coaches to look way beyond what’s competitively the best thing for our own team,” Riley said in May. “For a lot of coaches, that’s hard. We’re wired to try to do everything we can to help our teams win. This (situation) is different, though.

“We, as coaches, and our university administrators, our ADs, the NCAA, the people at the conference level—the people making decisions—have to keep that (promise to be caretaker for student-athletes) the number one priority.”

Despite potential health risks, most student-athletes let their collective desires be known via social media about the 2020 football season. The NCAA provided an “opt-out” provision for players with significant COVID-19 health or family concerns, allowing them to sit out all or part of the 2020 season and still retain their scholarships. So far, only returning starters running back Kennedy Brooks and defensive lineman Ronnie Perkins have chosen that option.

Riley believed it irresponsible for programs to bring back their players too early for workouts, especially while there were no clear-cut protocols for testing or uniform safety standards in place to help protect student-athletes.

The program’s typical June 1 report date was pushed back to the first week of July, making the Sooners one of last Power Five teams to return for voluntary workouts. Though not together training and working out for much of early summer, OU players stayed connected as much as possible.

“Through everything that has been going on in the world with the virus, we did a great job as a unit sticking together and being able to work and communicate with each other so we didn’t lose that chemistry and connection you need,” says offensive lineman Adrian Ealy.



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While OU demonstrated patience and student-athletes were given safety guidelines in the weeks leading up to their return, no less than 14 players tested positive the first day on campus. By comparison, programs like Clemson and LSU had 47 and 34 positive tests, respectfully, during that same span.

For a time, it looked as if the overwhelming surge of positive tests seemingly plaguing every football program might derail the 2020 season. But as teams became better educated about the virus, cases began to level off and decrease.

## TESTING AND ADJUSTING

The Big 12 implemented a new rapid COVID-19 antigen test that helped produce faster results and the league’s teams established stricter guidelines for student-athletes outside football facilities. OU’s athletics department also began releasing weekly COVID-19 test results for all student-athletes and members of the athletics staff.

“Like everybody’s lives right now, (having our players back is) definitely different,” Riley said in early August. “We’re trying to adjust seemingly day to day, and there’s a lot of challenges within that. You either let those challenges consume you – or you get up, you adjust, and you do something about it and keep trucking on.”

## NECESSARY REVISIONS

To offset projected spending on COVID-19 testing and heightened safety measures, OU’s athletics department an-





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nounced in July that it would be implementing budget cuts totaling more than \$13 million, including 10% salary reductions for all employees earning \$1 million or more annually.

As Castiglione and other Big 12 athletic directors began to look at revising 2020 schedules, it became clear that playing a full conference slate would take priority, which ultimately meant two of OU's three non-conference games — including a much-anticipated road trip to play Army at West Point, N.Y., — would be lost this season.

“We appreciate the donors, ticket holders, partners and fans who have been so patient and supportive through these unprecedented times,” Castiglione said in released statement. The OU AD says his staff prepared for several scenarios.

One variable for which the Sooners were not prepared unfolded just days before the scheduled game with Missouri State. Despite extensive precautionary measures to keep student-athletes from exposure, COVID-19 still managed to threaten cancellation of the season opener, as no less than 17 OU players couldn't play due to COVID-related issues.

Even before the opening kickoff, Riley was forced to shuffle his starting lineup, which has become a regular occurrence during this pandemic. Friday testing prior to every game is the norm, as Riley and his staff work closely with team physicians and training staff. There are instances when the team doesn't know until just a few hours prior if a player or players will be eligible to play.

“Your roster availability seems to change daily,” says Riley.

“It's kind of the same changes you had during the preseason that continue to affect us. The way you practice, who you get in the locker room, who you don't, who is exposed to who. There is just a lot more to it than there has ever been.

“There is no question that the season has brought about some different challenges that I feel like now we have adapted to.”

Several games into the season, the Sooners were still getting used to the modified game-day atmosphere, featuring far less fan noise, distractions and a very different vibe.

That was particularly true at the annual Red River Showdown between OU and Texas in mid-October. Typically played at the


Cotton Bowl with the Texas State Fair as backdrop, this year's rivalry unfolded without most of its treasured traditions.

No state fair. No Big Tex Choice cuisine. And no perfectly divided bowl separating crimson and burnt orange, as the normally 90,000-seat venue was reduced to 25% capacity. Still, most Sooner fans would say that a 53-45 win that stretched into four nail-biting overtimes more than made up for a lack of noise and Aunt Ruth's Fried Taco Cones.

“To be honest, we really don't care about the atmosphere too much this year” says OU center Creed Humphrey. “We're focused on doing our job and playing to our standards.”

Meanwhile, Riley and his staff are focused on keeping a healthy squad on and off the field — not an easy task during a season when a single, invisible opponent in the form of a virus is more dangerous than any of those lining up against the Sooners on game days.

“It's impossible to be prepared for every contingency. But you must be as flexible and open-minded as you can,” says Riley. “You can have six weeks of negative tests and everything is going great — then one test, one exposure can be like a grenade going off within the program because it can affect so many people.”

It may not be exactly what OU fans were hoping for, but the chance to watch their beloved Sooners from the stands or in their living rooms is good therapy until safer times return. 

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