A grand old gal gets a facelift and an expanded role in campus life

S
ome might argue with the symbolism, but no one can dispute the reality. Oklahoma Memorial Stadium—that splendid old mass of concrete forged from the eternal quest for athletic glory—dominates the Norman campus landscape.

Rising 190 feet in the air (the 15-story Sarkeys Energy Center tower, by design, is five feet higher), the stadium takes up a lot of real estate in providing seating for 72,422 fans on five or six full Saturdays. Commencement has returned to the stadium; the Big Red Rally is held there, as well as a high school playoff game or two, and once a decade an event like the Olympic Festival. The Athletic Department’s administrative offices and support facilities are housed under the stands. Still the utilization rate for the state’s largest event facility is decidedly on the low side.

After a season of studying the balance sheet, second-year athletic director Steve Owens and his staff believe the stadium should be returning more on its investment. To prove the point, OU officials have booked the Rolling Stones.

On Tuesday night, October 28, the rock music icons will roll into Norman, by far the smallest of the 20 cities on a tour that kicks off at Chicago’s Soldier Field. The Athletic Department stands to clear $200,000 to $250,000 for stadium rental, concessions and parking—possibly more. The local economy expects a half-million dollar boost, while the city will rake in $90,000 in tax revenue.

The University passed on a similar Stones concert opportunity three years ago fearing damage to the brand new natural turf on Owen Field. Such concerns are discounted this time around. The performers and 58,000 of their ticket-holding fans literally will never set foot on the grass. A mammoth stage extending to the south 30-yard line and several thousand ground-level seats will rest on state-of-the-art protective coverings.

A successful Rolling Stones concert immediately will position Oklahoma Memorial Stadium as a destination for other big-name tours, with at least one already under discussion. Owens would like to see three or four such events a year contributing to the athletic department coffers.

But several weeks before the rock fans fill the stands, the stadium’s primary users will be treated to a facility upgrade designed to amaze and delight. Four towering banks of lights have been installed, prepared to turn night into day whenever television exposure or the Oklahoma heat dictate a prime-time kickoff. On the east side, a layer of concrete has covered the dirt floor; the fabled Pneumonia Downs, once an indoor practice and meet facility for the track team, is no more.

The most exciting addition, however, is college football’s largest scoreboard, a 166-by-33-foot south end behemoth whose most striking feature is a 31-by-23-foot Daktronics video screen. Locally dubbed “SoonerVision,” the system will provide multi-video programming. In addition to instant replays (Sorry, folks, the NCAA disallows replays of controversial calls by the officials), the screen can call up scores and video highlights of the day’s games, for instance, or great moments in Sooner sports or gems from the University’s past. Each of the SoonerVision programs will be sponsored.

Surrounding the screen, more traditional features will provide up-to-the-minute statistics on yards rushing and passing and total yards, downs and distance, game and countdown clocks and six stationary panels for “corporate partners.” The north end scoreboard has been retrofitted as well with six rotating tri-vision sponsor panels complementing the game information.

The scoreboards at the stadium are part of a $4 million investment that is providing a new, center-hung, computerized video basketball scoreboard at Lloyd Noble Center; updated scoreboards for L. Dale Mitchell Baseball Park and the new women’s softball field; and a marquee near Lloyd Noble Center advertising all sorts of OU special events.

Did I mention that this scoreboard/screen/marquee combo is a money-maker? A big money-maker? The package is expected to return from corporate sponsors at least $10 million over the next 10 years. Perhaps you detect a trend here.

Big-time athletic programs for both men and women require big-time money, and the day when football—no matter how successful—can pay for all other sports is gone. The OU Athletic Department, traditionally and proudly self-supporting throughout much of its history, has struggled financially in recent years. Steve Owens is determined to develop new revenue streams that will correct that problem.

Some fans view with dismay the commercialization of college athletics. But those same fans demand competitive programs. Realistically, we can’t have it both ways. Fortunately association with University of Oklahoma athletics is still a commercially valuable commodity. If corporate sponsorship and special events can contribute to an independently healthy athletic budget, Owens & Co. will deserve a heap of credit.

—CJB