**Numbers behind Cowboy football attendance: Gundy, Pickens spark the increase**

By Nathan Hiatt and Gabe Campis – in MMJ4393 ~ Data Journalism at Oklahoma State University. ***12.7.17***

Every Monday afternoon during the college football season, Nathan Herrmann reaches into his pocket for his iPhone; he instinctively checks Twitter to see what time the Oklahoma State football team plays and, then, glances at his Weather app.

Herrmann, an OSU freshman, has season tickets to watch the Cowboys play inside T. Boone Pickens Stadium. He said he grew up watching star players, including Dez Bryant, Brandon Weeden, Justin Blackmon, Kendall Hunter and Zac Robinson, and coach Mike Gundy take the sideline each weekend.

He said he still remembers the first game he came to watch OSU play in Stillwater as a young boy. He doesn’t remember the specifics, but he said he knows it was the first game of the 2005 season against Missouri State.

“It wasn’t the greatest game in the world, but I know Oklahoma State won it,” Herrmann said. “I still remember the night as if it were yesterday. Me and my dad came to The Walk and, then, we walked into the stadium. We went to the concession stand, ordered a drink and a hot dog and we went to our seats, which I believe were around the 20-yard line.

“I remember I was so hyped to see OSU play. It was fun. Ever since that day, I have tried to come to as many home games as possible. Each season the atmosphere gets greater and greater, and now that I am a student, the energy is even more entertaining. I mean, it is college football at my favorite school; what could get better than that?”

At that time, football games in Stillwater had an OK atmosphere. Loyal fans came to the stadium and cheered, but it wasn’t until OSU mega-donor T. Boone Pickens pockets bless the university that the capacity and atmosphere reached their potentials. He, along with Gundy, caused not only a stadium renovation but also a stadium rejuvenation.

Sean Maguire, 29, is in his fifth year as the fulltime assistant director of athletic communications at OSU. He also received his undergraduate degree in Stillwater, so he said he knows the history of football attendance in Stillwater.

He said since Gundy became the man in charge though, home football attendance trends have shifted in a positive manner. Maguire said he knows, as many familiar with the program, the main reasons why this upward trend started.

“Gundy’s first year we won four games and there wasn’t too much excitement around the program,” Maguire said. “As the success, and stadium, has built over time, I think people started to get onboard with things. … The most obvious thing is the stadium expansion.

“… You combine that with Gundy and the success he has had, and I think it is a lot easier to get people in here when you have a great place to watch the game and a fun and successful team to watch.”

When Gundy started, the capacity of the football stadium was about 48,000. However, the game changed when Pickens donated millions to the school. The stadium experienced a serious makeover. OSU had no trouble getting fans into the stadium with less than 50,000 seats.

However, the expansion brought the capacity to 60,000 by 2008 and 60,218 the next season, causing a downward spiral in attendance.

The average percentage of capacity for home games from 2008 to 2010 was 84.88 percent, which is rather low. But, the program had its best season in program history in 2011.

OSU finished the season 12-1, winning its only Big 12 championship, and went on to beat Andrew Luck and Stanford in the Fiesta Bowl. Attendance has skyrocketed ever since.

Fans still, sometimes, contemplate whether to watch the Cowboys play, though. Herrmann described himself as a “Loyal and True” fan of OSU athletics. However, he said each week he looks for three things to determine whether he will go to the game that weekend: the kick-off time, what the weather is supposed to be outside and how important the game is.

He said he must take into account his homework, work and personal schedule, as well.

On more occasions than not, Herrmann will make his way to Boone Pickens Stadium for a home game. He said he always takes everything into consideration, though. Some things are ideal for him and things that are not. Herrmann said he believes a majority of fans check certain things before making a decision.

“On most Saturday’s or that occasional Thursday, you will most likely catch me cheering at the game in person,” Herrmann said. “However, I definitely prefer a game that is probably midday, warm and at least a good matchup. I don’t really love the idea of going to a super early or super late game that will be cold and also most likely not a very good game overall. I like exciting and good football game in semisolid weather conditions.”

Turns out, that game against Missouri State in 2005, Herrmann and his father, Don Herrmann, went to had significance; it is one that would change OSU athletics and its football attendance trends.

OSU won the game 15-10, but that wasn’t as important as who wore the headset that night on the sideline and answered all the questions. The night was Sept. 3, 2005, and it started the head coaching career for Gundy at OSU, his alma mater.

Don Herrmann said he has come to football games in Stillwater for as long as he can remember. He went to games when Gundy handed the ball off to Barry Sanders and Thurman Thomas. Don Herrmann said he noticed the program wasn’t having the greatest attendance for many years.

“I have been coming to these Oklahoma State football games for many years,” Don Herrmann said. “Just before Mike Gundy got the gig here, the attendance wasn’t bad, but it wasn’t that good either. Things are changing.”

Maguire echoed Don Herrmann, saying he remembers coming to games just before the Gundy era started. Being from Oklahoma City, Maguire said he recalls coming to OSU football games when he was in high school, and thinking the stadium wasn’t nearly as full as it could be in the future. He said, at the time, games in Stillwater weren’t reaching the potential for capacity.

Maguire said he and his colleagues notice the challenges for its fan base. He also said he recognizes what fans prefer when deciding to come to games, including weather, kick-off time and the significance of the matchup.

“If we are playing a team who isn’t very good and people don’t really care about watching, and people see it is 30 degrees, I can definitely understand why they wouldn’t come,” Maguire said.

With a majority of Cowboy football fans traveling in from out of town, a morning game or night game might cause issues. Jordan Charlton, an OSU student, lives in Stillwater, so he doesn’t have trouble getting to the games, but he knows people who do.

He said he hears complaints about the games being too early or too late.

“I always get texts or see social media posts, saying ‘Why this is game so freaking early,’ or ‘Why is this game so freaking late,’” Charlton said. “I wish each university and the television stations could try to work something out to complement one another. I know that would be extremely tough. Every one trying to make the most money. I get it.”

Maguire and others in OSU athletics don’t control kick-off times though; television companies such as ESPN and FOX do. The statistics prove midday games are the most attended on average, in terms of percentage of capacity. Since 2005, which is 83 home games, the stadium for midday games is 92.48 percent full while morning is 91.20 and night is 90.69.

“We have such a large percentage of our fan base that comes in from out of town, either Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Dallas or Houston,” Maguire said. “We have one couple from Alaska that flies in every weekend for the games. … So, we have a lot of fans who come in and travel. Especially for the bulk of the people in Tulsa or OKC, if we have a late game and they are part of that older demographic, they are not going to want to be driving back home at super late after a night game. The midafternoon games are typically well attended for reasons like that.”

Maguire said OSU athletics has marketing schemes for trying to improve attendance, as well, such as package deals. He said he realizes significance of the game means a lot, too. Normally, conference matchups are the most important for the Cowboys’ season. He said he thinks if the game is good enough, people are going to come no matter what.

The statistics also confirm fans prefer to come to Big 12 games rather than nonconference. Since 2005, the average percentage of capacity for conference games is 92.73 while nonconference is 89.04. This season, OSU decreased its capacity from 60,218 to 56,790, making the seats wider.

With the OSU football program continuing to trend upward, as well, Maguire said tickets are at a premium, the highest demand in school history. OSU has sold out each of its four home games in 2017 so far. Before this, the program hadn’t sold out back-to-back since the 1970s.

“It has been new for a lot of people; I think that is something our fans are going to have to start adjusting to, realizing we are becoming a place where every game is going to be sold out,” Maguire said. “… Hopefully, it is just the beginning of a new tradition and better things to come.”