

Doing the right thing

Memorial Stadium renovation will expand seating for people with disabilities

BY TERRY JORDAN

Rich Blakley is a Tiger football fan, but he doesn't go to many games. Blakley, a quadriplegic, can't get excited about sitting in the only area at Memorial Stadium designated for people in wheelchairs — the rim above the big "M" on the north side. "You're 100 yards or more away from the action, the scoreboard seems a mile away, and the speakers are right in your ears," says Blakley, director of Columbia's Services for Independent Living office.

All of that is about to change, however. Beginning this fall, people with disabilities will be able to sit in prime viewing areas on the east and west sides of the stadium. In the next year or two, new restrooms, ticket booths and concession stands will be built to accommodate people with disabilities. And suddenly, Blakley and others in his situation are asking about season tickets.

"This is great," he says. "You'll be able to analyze the offensive formations. You can see the blitzes coming. You'll feel a part of the game."

The move is not being made without sacrifice. More than 1,000 season-ticket holders will be relocated to accommodate the change, and the seating renovation alone is costing the Athletic Department \$1.2 million. But Athletic Director Joe Castiglione says the plan is long overdue.

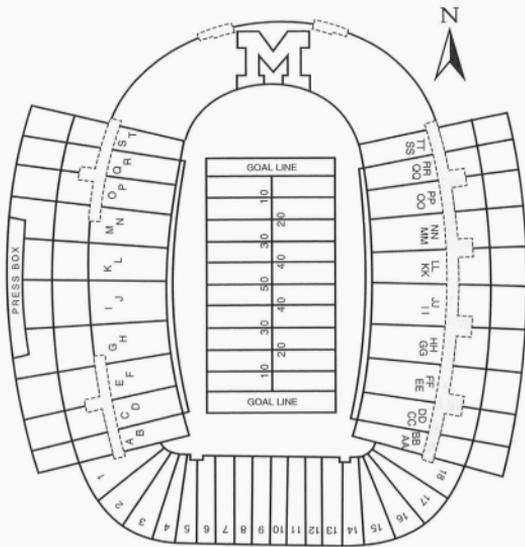
"We want to be sensitive to the needs of all our fans," Castiglione says. "This is a terrific opportunity to eliminate existing barriers and improve the environment for people with disabilities, allowing them to experience that part-of-the-crowd excitement that other fans have always experienced."

"Let me emphasize that no one is going to lose season tickets. At the same time, we're welcoming inquiries from people with disabilities who may be interested in sitting in those new areas."

"Yes, there's a price. But it's the right thing to do."

The plan also places Mizzou among the leaders of schools addressing the issue,

Seating for 136 wheelchair users and 158 companions will run from end zone to end zone on the east side, and between the end zones and the 30-yard lines on the west side. The existing 60 spaces on the north side will continue to be reserved for wheelchair users and their companions.



Castiglione says. "I haven't seen or heard of any of our peer institutions — those in the Big Eight or Big Ten, for instance — renovating their stadiums to this extent," he says. "Some, in fact, are only now adding disability seating similar to our 60-space section on the north side." Blakley concurs. "I've been to Illinois games in Champaign, and their disability seating is in the end zone, too," he says. "That's not good."

The Board of Curators approved the seating renovation plan last fall, awarding the contract to Richardson and Bass Construction Co. of Columbia. The firm will enlarge many of the tunnels on the east and west sides that lead to the main seating areas. "As you walk out of those tunnels into the light — about halfway up the stands — the wheelchair seating will be right there," explains Associate Athletic Director Gene McArtor, BS Ed '63, M Ed '64, PhD '72. "We're taking out the four

rows of seating at and below that level, and basically building a long platform and a railing to accommodate wheelchair users and their companions."

Why four rows? "The new seating requires adequate space for wheelchairs to maneuver — forward, backward, and to the sides," McArtor says. "The specifications meet guidelines of the Americans with Disabilities Act." The special seating will run from end zone to end zone on the east side, and between the end zones and the 30-yard lines on the northwest and southwest sides (see diagram). In all, there will be spaces for 136 wheelchair users and 158 companions. The work will be done this spring and summer, in time for the Tigers' home opener Sept. 2 against North Texas State.

To make room for the changes, 2,300 reserved seats will be removed.

Castiglione estimates that at least 1,000 of those are occupied by season-ticket holders. "We're currently notifying those fans and offering to relocate them to comparable seating nearby," he adds. With questions, call 1-800-CAT-PAWS. Wheelchair users interested in the new seating also are being urged to call that number.

While the 60 spaces for wheelchairs behind the big "M" are generally full on game day, only 14 are purchased as season tickets. What happens if demand for the new seating on the east and west sides is less than anticipated? "There's always the chance of selling those spaces to the general public," McArtor says. "But we'd need to go through several games — perhaps an entire season — to see how many spaces are sold on game days." He adds that the 60 spaces on the north side will continue to be reserved for wheelchair users and their companions.

The seating plan is only the start of a new look for the stadium. In the next couple of years, the Athletic Department plans to build new restrooms; renovate the concession stands; construct new ticket booths; and generally improve accessibility for people with disabilities. All the work will meet ADA guidelines.

"Let's face it: Memorial Stadium is an older facility, and things like the wooden restrooms and the old ticket booths need to be upgraded anyway," McArtor says. "As long as you're doing a job, why not do it

right? Certainly, it will meet ADA standards, but all of our fans will appreciate these improvements."

McArtor and Castiglione are hesitant to give details of this next phase, since it has not yet been presented to the curators. But they say it could run into "several" million dollars. "Here again, we consider this as something that needs to be done," Castiglione says. "We will plan for Athletic Department revenues to cover the cost of these improvements; money from the state is not included. I've said many times that we expect to be successful in the near future. Therefore, we must be visionary and act accordingly."

McArtor adds that the majority of the funds will come from surcharges on ticket sales. The amount of the surcharge has not been determined. "And most of the rest will come from our reserves," he adds.

Similar changes are under way at the Hearn Center, says director Tim Hickman, BS BA '89. Thirty additional parking spaces for people with disabilities have been added on the east side of Hearn, and there are new curb cuts and wheelchair ramps on the west side. The restrooms and drinking fountains have been converted to meet ADA standards, and eight wheelchairs spaces have been added in A section of the arena. "In all, we have 53 spaces for wheelchairs for athletic contests and for concerts," Hickman says. "We're continuing to evaluate the demand for disability seating."

The plan for Memorial Stadium is applauded — at least in principle — by Chuck Graham of Columbia, who has filed a federal suit against MU to bring both Memorial Stadium and the Hearn Center into compliance with ADA standards. "I've yet to see details of the University's plan," says Graham, a paraplegic and Missouri coordinator for the Great Plains ADA Project. "But where the seating renovation is concerned, I don't think the Athletic Department and ADA proponents are that far apart."

The lawsuit originally was set for trial Jan. 30, but both sides have agreed to mediation to solve the dispute. Graham emphasizes that he filed the suit as an individual, not as a Great Plains ADA employee. "The seating is only one issue," Graham says. "It will take time to get rid of what I call 'a legacy of barriers' against people with disabilities. Changes will have to be made, and word of mouth will need to filter down to the disability community."

But once that word filters down, Blakley says, the disability community will be delighted. "Granted, the seating renovation won't solve the whole problem. You also need the restrooms . . . and the ticket booths . . . and the concession stands . . . and the pay phones. What good is prime seating if you can't use the other facilities?"

"After people get the whole package and check it out, though, they'll be back. I'm sure of that." ☐

Turf's up

When fans file into Memorial Stadium on Sept. 2 to watch the Tigers play North Texas State, they'll be watching the Tigers play on natural grass, at home, for the first time since 1984.

"As excited as we are about this, there are fans who are even more excited," says Associate Athletic Director Gene McArtor, BS Ed '63, M Ed '64, PhD '72. "The decision to return to natural grass may not have been unanimous, but it's awfully close."

Workers for Columbia's Richardson and Bass Construction Co. began using backhoes in early December to tear out the 10-year-old Omniturf on Faurot Field. Included in that job is the removal of a 2-inch rubber mat, 4 inches of popcorn asphalt and 6 inches of rock drainage, in addition to the sand-filled carpet surface. After the excavation, a new drainage sys-

tem will be installed.

Meanwhile, the Kentucky bluegrass for the new field is being grown on a Rocheport, Mo., sod farm owned by Gene Sandner, BS Ag '83, and Darrell Seltam, BS BA '36, MA '37. Come spring, workers will begin laying down, in order, 4 inches of pea gravel; 8 inches of root zone sand and organic matter; 4 inches of TurfGrids and reinforced sand; and the bluegrass. "This sand-based subsurface makes all the difference, because it allows water to drain quickly," McArtor says.

The plan for the new turf was devised by former MU horticulture specialist Dave Minner, and is similar to surfaces built for the Kansas City Chiefs, Baltimore Orioles and Cleveland Indians. Richardson and Bass are doing the drainage work and installing the new surface at a cost of \$1.4 million.

The Tigers got a firsthand look at a similar field when they played on grass at Oklahoma last fall. "It had rained two inches in the previous 48 hours, yet the turf was in great shape at game time," McArtor says. "We were impressed."