

*By Terry Tush  
Photos by Mike Bevers*

# Packing Up Moving Out

The people who built the west end zone are happy, but yet sad, that it's finished

**J**ohn Houck will arise from his Stillwater residence on the first Saturday morning of September like he has every other weekend morning for the past 18 years that he's worked at Oklahoma State University. But it will not be just another Saturday for Houck and thousands of other OSU football fans.

Houck and the many other die-hard fans who follow Mike Gundy's team will awake that morning and go to their closet to pull out their orange shirt like they have for years. But on this Saturday they will wear their Cowboy gear with just a little more pride, and the smiles on their faces will be just a little bit wider, because Sept. 5 is a date that OSU football fans have been looking forward to for years.

That's the date, as anyone knows who follows Cowboys football with even the slightest of interest, that OSU will kick off the 2009 football season against Georgia in the newest crown jewel of college football stadiums – Oklahoma State's very own Boone Pickens Stadium!

Boone Pickens Stadium has undergone massive renovations to both the south and north sides in the last six years, and within the next few months the addition of the west end zone facility which houses the OSU football program will be completed – right on time.

For the first time since the 2003 football season, when construction began on renovating the stadium's south side (known as Phase I), Houck will be able to sit back, watch and relax when the Cowboys take the field against the Bulldogs.



David Reed, Jim Heley and John Houck are proud to have been a part of the west end zone project.



It's a day – and a game – that Houck has been anticipating for years.

"I have not been fully at ease at a ballgame since we really started the south side (renovation)," said Houck, the assistant vice president for intercollegiate athletics who oversaw the stadium renovations and improvements for Oklahoma State University.

"I can sit back and I can say to my wife, 'Ah, let's go watch a ballgame.' And it will be the first time that I won't have to get up and deal with (construction) issues.

"Forever it seems like it was nagging in the back of my mind ... something going on with the construction. I think this fall will be the first time I will be able to enjoy a game in a long, long time."

Thanks to Houck and several other people who worked on the stadium expansion and renovations, Cowboy fans are looking forward to the 2009 season opener with more anticipation than



**Favorite part of the facility:** The players' locker room. Being able to come up with a custom design that is special and unique for OSU, that even Jerry Jones (of the Dallas Cowboys) is envious of.

**Best day on the project:** When we finished up the seating bowl and that all came together relatively smooth. But that's right up there with the things I sweated the most about, like the team (18-wheel trailer) truck actually made it into its parking spot (under the stadium), and he was able to maneuver down there like we expected it too. Once I got the call that the truck made it, it was a great day. But if I had to pick one, it would be the first game that was played last year, and seeing all the people in the west end zone. That would be my best day, so far.

**Worst day on the project:** One of the worst days was getting called to come over (from Tulsa) because they were getting ready to set a piece of steel right up against Phase 1. It was a piece of X-bracing and it clipped the corner of the existing concession/restroom building. If we put in that piece of steel it was going to take off about three or four feet of the top corner of that concession. That was probably one of the most tense and difficult days ... We were on the phone with the structural engineer, hanging over the side of Phase 1 taking pictures trying to figure how we were going to solve that. We were able to shift that beam up and offset it by three feet, and it missed the existing building. It all worked out. There have been days like that but to say it's the worst day isn't probably accurate because I'm going to hold true that my worst day is going to be the day that I leave and I don't have

probably any home game in the history of OSU football.

Sure, it took hundreds of people working thousands of hours the past seven years to transform what was then known as Lewis Field, or as rival fans used to call it "Rustoleum Stadium," into the Taj Mahal of college football stadiums. And, it would have never happened without Boone Pickens giving \$254 million to the project from March 2003 through October 2008.

But three men have been there throughout much of the project, including every step of the way during the planning, implementation and construction of the west end zone project, which will house all parts of the OSU football program, including a new state-of-the-art player locker room that will be among the best in the nation – college or pro.

Houck, Jim Heley and David Reed are looking forward to watching the Cowboys run out of the stadium's northwest corner (instead of the southwest corner as they have in recent seasons) to take on the Bulldogs from Georgia in September. But they'll be sitting in their season-ticket seats with a smile on their face, and probably a tear in their eye.

"I will be moved to tears. I know that," says Houck. "The highs and the lows, the emotions, and the decisions, and ... I will be moved to tears."

Heley is the project manager for Flintco Constructive Solutions and has overseen every aspect of the west end zone's construction from demolishing the grandstands in the end zone that had been used by the Cowboy marching band for a number of years to the final details that are not expected to be completed until just days before the season begins.

"It's been incredible. You take a lot of pride in any project that

the access that I have had to this facility and to the coaches.

**Best seat/place to watch a game:** Well, my season tickets are in the top row in the corner directly below the training table (in the west end zone). Personally, I think those are the best in the seating bowl seats. But if money wasn't an object, I would say the best seat in the house is in one of the mega-suites. It's a great corner shot that allows you to see the whole field.

**The best compliment you've heard about the facility:** About a month or so ago Boone flew into town on a snowy day, and Gary (Sparks) and John Houck gave Boone and Mike Holder a tour. To hear that Boone said he was pleased, that probably ranks up there, and then listening to the coaches when they go through it. A lot of these guys have been coaching or have been on staffs or been at a lot of other places so they've seen a lot of different stadiums and facilities, and to hear them say this is one of the best they've ever seen, if not the best they've ever seen, is extremely gratifying.

**Emotion you think you'll feel on Sept. 5:** I think it's going to be a combination of joy, overwhelmed excitement and a little bit of sadness because it's come to a conclusion and I'm no longer needed. I'll definitely be full of joy and excitement. I'd be lying if I said my chest isn't going to be out to here (holding his hands two feet in front of his chest) with pride.

– Terry Tush

The new lockers await when the players report later this summer.



you're a part of. You kind of look back and see where you were and what you were doing at the time, and measure your life by the projects you've worked on. This has been a big part of my life," said Heley, who graduated from Oklahoma State in 1986. "To be able to come back here and work on this football stadium is a miracle, and a dream-come-true project. It's something I'll remember and look back on the rest of my life.

"If I could have picked any job across the country to build, this would have been it. Nobody has football facilities like these that we're building for my alma mater. I tell everyone that we're not building a football stadium, we're building a program.

"But I'm not going to have the keys to the stadium any more," added Heley with a hint of sadness. "I've had the keys to the stadium for six years. I could walk through the stadium any time I wanted to, and I'm not going to be able to do that any more. You get attached to a project. But it's about time to turn it over, and I'm ready to do that."

Reed has been the lead architect on the west end zone for SPARKS Sports for the past four years, and he has worked closely with Heley and Houck to ensure that the stadium meets the needs of the Cowboy coaching staff and players, and the expectations of Pickens.

"I think it's going to be a combination of joy, overwhelmed excitement and a little bit of sadness because it's come to a conclusion and I'm no longer needed," said Reed, a 1994 Oklahoma State graduate who has spent many hours and put thousands of miles on his truck driving back and forth from Tulsa to Stillwater an average of three times a week during the last four years. "I'll

definitely be full of joy and excitement. I'd be lying if I said my chest isn't going to be out to here (holding his hands two feet in front of his chest) with pride.

"It's really been a tremendous honor. I was so excited to work on the Student Union project on this campus, and to be involved in the classroom building in which I had lots of classes in, but those were things that were transformative somewhat but not nearly the notoriety that a school receives with an athletic project like this one," Reed continued.

But as the construction project winds down, and the Cowboy coaching staff and players begin moving into the facility in July, it's not a time for Houck, Heley or Reed to sit back and relax while waiting to hear compliments on the job they've done the last several years. All three say there is plenty of work to be done before the Bulldogs of head coach Mark Richt arrive for the christening of the stadium.

"I'm running through the tape on this one," Houck said using a track term. "I've got to, and I'll tell you these final weeks will be a very, very busy time. We don't have the luxury of time anymore. September 5 is coming, and ready or not here it comes. So, there



**Favorite part of the facility?** "My favorite part is, of course, the locker room. It is the nucleus, it is the hub, it is the center ... everything revolves around that locker room. It's where our athletes will go, will live, they'll hang out, they'll get ready ... that is the center of everything."

**Best day on the project?** "I can tell you the date and time. My best day was Jan. 1, 2006, and it was about 1:30 in the afternoon. I had dinner with Madeleine and Boone (Pickens), and Mike (Holder) at the ranch. Boone and I were just talking, and Mike was sitting across from us, and Boone said, 'I want you to know I gave \$165 million to the university Thursday.' He said, 'You can build this, can't you?' It just hit me like a gut punch. I said, 'Yes, sir,' and I got up and went over to him and shook his hand. That is the best day."

**Worst day on the project?** "We've had problems, and it would be a constructability problem, and we've had some issues we've worked through, but I cannot come up with the worst day because I enjoy coming here. I've worked through a lot of thorny issues."

isn't a slow down. There isn't a gradual releasing. We're going to go all the way up to the ballgame."

Reed says, "It's a sprint. It really is. We're doing everything we can to help support the construction side, and they're sprinting to get everything finished, and we need to run right there with them. You would think we could sit back and kick our heels up, but the inspections process and the walk-throughs to get to the level of quality that the owner is expecting will take us right up to the end. It's going to be a mad dash to the end."

Heley, as senior project manager of the construction company overseeing the job, and his Flintco crew has more pressure on them as the days of summer dwindle away. He knows the days – and hours – are limited.

"We have several milestones of staged occupancy that are approaching. The lower level is June 1, and we're in pretty good shape for that. Coaches are going to move in July 15, and we're in pretty good shape for that. The suites need to be ready by the end of July or early August, so they can be ready for the first game. Each stage has its challenges, and we're still pushing pretty hard," he says.

The Cowboy coaching staff will have their offices moved from Gallagher-Iba Arena to the new facility July 13-15, and then will unpack on July 16. Mike Gundy's first staff meeting in the new football offices is scheduled for July 17.

What Gundy and his staff will experience will be unlike anything any of them have ever experienced, including first-year defensive coordinator Bill Young who has coached at Oklahoma, USC, Ohio State, Miami (Fla.), and even with the Detroit Lions in the NFL.

The new home for Cowboy football, which includes a locker room that even impressed Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones when he toured the facility during construction, will be 460,000 square feet of the finest comforts. In addition to the 14,000 square foot players locker room and the coaches offices overlooking the football field, the massive structure will house the football strength and

**Best seat/place to watch a game?** "There isn't a bad seat in this stadium. My seats are in the club area beyond the end zone. They're way down there. I've had opportunities to change, but I like it. I enjoy being way up at the top, way down at the end."

**The best compliment you've heard about the facility?** "Barry Switzer just pored all over it. Mike Holder gave me a call and asked if I would show Barry around. He made the remark on several occasions that, 'We have to wake up. We have to wake up. This is going to blow us away.' He went through (the facility) and he was just floored. Here's a guy with a lot of notoriety, has coached both professional and intercollegiate athletics, and the comments he made to me were honest and truthful. So that was a nice compliment."

**Emotion you think you'll feel on Sept. 5:** "I will be moved to tears. I know that. The highs and the lows, the emotions, and the decisions, and ... I will be moved to tears."

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The 5,000-square-foot team theatre room with 200 leather chairs is as impressive as any in the nation.



conditioning staff, sports medicine facilities (including one lap pool, a hydrotherapy pool with a treadmill, and two additional pools that can be heated or cooled), equipment staff and all of the team's equipment, training table for Cowboy/Cowgirl athletes, and a 5,000-square-foot theater room with luxury leather chairs that will seat 200.

"I think the immense-ness of the thing is what's incredible,"

Houck said. "We have over 1,100,000 square feet in the stadium alone. If memory serves me correctly, I think Oklahoma State University in Stillwater has something in the range of a total of 12 million square feet. So in that facility right there we have 1/12<sup>th</sup> of the area on this campus. It's just a huge, huge undertaking.

"It is not the same stadium that I used to attend ballgames in." Houck will now begin focusing his efforts on the Athletic

Village, which will include an indoor practice facility, new outdoor football practice fields, new baseball and softball stadiums, and new soccer and tennis complexes. Those projects have been put on hold until the funds are raised.

"We need to continue actively planning the Athletic Village. I told you earlier that I didn't think we had a ghost of a chance of doing the west end zone, just four years ago. If you'd had asked me, 'When are you starting the west end zone?' I would have said, 'Never. There is no way that we can do that.' But I think four years from now you'll see an indoor practice facility," says Houck. "And I'm not going to get blindsided by not having things ready to go for the Athletic Village. When you can't build, you'd better plan because that's a nice time to do planning.

"Plus, we now have an additional 1 million square feet to maintain and operate and to care for. So I will probably shift gears a little bit into the operation and maintenance of this facility because we've done something here that we're going to have to actively and aggressively take care of."

Reed says it's not going to be easy for anyone to move on to the next job, especially the hundreds of Oklahoma State alums like

himself who have been working on the stadium for several years.

"Some of these guys are going to get sent on to do a wastewater treatment project, and others are going to go to a project adding on to a high school gym. How does that compare to this, especially for Oklahoma State alums? I'm definitely struggling with that too," said Reed.

"But the opportunity here was tremendous, and I don't know if there's another project that I can work on, and get as much satisfaction, and take as much pride and ownership as this? Maybe the Athletic Village because it's still pertaining to OSU. But it's going to be tough."

Heley, like Houck, will remain in Stillwater, and hopes that he also will get a chance to have a hand in the construction of the Athletic Village.

"I'm working on the Student Union project starting in October, which will probably be a two-year project, depending upon how we phase it," he says. "But I would love nothing better than to get to work on the Athletic Village. We're looking at four, maybe five, more years of work out there on the Athletic Village."

But before any of them move on they still have some unfinished business to take care of at Boone Pickens Stadium. The satisfaction comes from more than the paycheck they receive from their respective employers. They feel like they've accomplished much more and have helped Oklahoma State close the gap in the Big 12's South Division.

"The driving concept when we first started laying this out was the players are at the heart of what this stadium is for. They are going to be out on that field (representing us)," Reed said. "We've taken care of the fans in Phase 1 and Phase 2, and now the west end zone is really our chance to take care of our players and our coaches and give them a level playing field with the (schools like) OU and Texas."

Houck believes that the mission was accomplished through the cooperative efforts of people like Heley, Reed, and the many others who had a part in the west end zone's completion.



**Your favorite part of the facility?** "It has to be the locker room because it's the heart of the football operations. It's the very center of the west end zone, and everything else is built around it. Everything else radiates off of the locker room. It's probably one of the most impressive rooms in the facility. It's certainly the most unique."

**Your best day on the project?** "I think the Tulsa game when we opened Phase 1 because it was such a rush to the finish. We didn't sleep much the last couple of months because we were working 24 hours a day to get it open for that game. It was a very high day for me. It was a very rewarding day because we got a lot of compliments that day. OSU had never seen anything like that before with athletic facilities, and it really did take it to the next level."

**Worst day on the project?** "I really don't have one that I can pick out."

**Best seat/place to watch a game?** "I would say the club seating


area because you're around a bunch of great fans in a very nice setting with the bar service and the food service. Plus, you're close enough to the game and to the action."

**The best compliment you've heard about the facility?** "That it's amazing, and I've heard that from a lot of people. I hear that from fans who have tickets to the suites, you hear it from players walking through the players' facilities ... people don't expect to see this in Stillwater, Oklahoma."

**Emotion you think you'll feel on Sept. 5:** "I'm always looking forward to football season. I'll be excited for the game, and I'll be looking forward to the fan's reactions. We saw a lot of that last year, though, when we had the whole bowl filled up. That was awesome. I'll be mostly excited, but there will be a little bit of sadness because it's been a big part of my life the last six years."

– Terry Tush

Nearly \$2 million was spent on appliances for the new kitchen to feed all of OSU's athletes.



"I can't impress on you how amazed I am that in the last three or four years we were able to do what you see today," says Houck. "There's no way we could do it four years ago. No way! No chance! Well, it proves that anything's possible if you put your mind to it."

And you have hard working people dedicated to working together for the good of Cowboy football. It will be hard to miss Heley, Houck and Reed on the first Saturday of September. They'll be the ones wearing their orange proudly with huge smiles on their faces accepting congratulations for a job well done. But they'll also be the ones with a few tears in their eyes. ■