

Billionaire Pickens tours new Oklahoma State facility he helped build

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STILLWATER, Okla. -- As T. Boone Pickens walked past a series of four new hydrotherapy pools and rounded a corner to see a series of tables in Oklahoma State's upgraded rehab area, he had a simple question for head athletic trainer Rob Hunt: "Have we got the best?"

And Hunt said just what Pickens wanted to hear after he'd put about \$250 million into the renovation: "Absolutely."

Pickens, a billionaire alumnus who provided the bulk of the funding for the \$286 million stadium overhaul, got his first glimpse of the Cowboys' new west end zone complex with a tour Monday. The new facility in the stadium that bears Pickens' name opens this year with the training area, a new weight room, an expansive locker room and a theater-style meeting room among its many perks.

"That's what this whole thing is. It's the best, and that's what we want," said university President Burns Hargis, who walked alongside the Texas oil tycoon and athletic director Mike Holder on the tour. "And with Boone Pickens' help and inspiration, I think we're getting it."

When Pickens announced his \$165 million gift -- the largest ever to an NCAA athletic program -- back in January 2006, he talked about how Oklahoma State had been competitive in athletics only on a "hit-and-miss basis." He hopes his donation will change that.

Oklahoma State coaches have spent the time since then selling recruits on the blueprints and artists' renderings of what would be built in Stillwater. That dream helped propel the Cowboys to a 9-4 season a year ago, including a landmark win against No. 3 Missouri.

"I don't talk about competitive anymore. I talk about winning," Pickens said. "We're going to win now."

Pickens has done his part.

He started out with a \$20 million donation in 2003 to start the stadium overhaul, then came back with the record-setting gift that set the wheels in motion for the west end zone project. When his plan to invest that \$165 million and turn it into enough to pay for new venues for several other sports tanked along with the economy last year, he donated another \$63 million to complete the stadium.

Yet he still hasn't given up on the wider project, saying he hopes to have "a lot done within five years."

"We're going to build an athletic village. That is going to happen," Pickens said. "We got slowed down a little bit, but in a way we were going almost at breakneck speed. To slow down a little bit may not be all that bad. But the village will be built before we're through."

What's already been built is dazzling, particularly when compared with the old football facility that Oklahoma State's own refer to as an erector set. Black leather sectional couches fill the empty spaces in the locker rooms, with flat-panel, big screen TVs hanging on the walls nearby.

Rows and rows of weight stations, stationary bikes and treadmills stretch across the weight room under a quote from Muhammad Ali about how fights are won before they begin.

And the training area features the four eye-catching hydrotherapy pools -- including one with a treadmill at the bottom -- that can be warmed up to spa temperatures or cooled down so they're not quite ice cold.

The university showed its appreciation by assigning Pickens one of the lockers, which are large enough for players to sit in them with their shoulder pads still on and ventilated to cut down on the odors. His locker, located just to the right of one for fellow booster Sherman Smith, had a No. 1 jersey hanging in it during the tour.

Pickens took advantage of the new, 20,000-square-foot weight room by sitting down to pump some iron. He did a few lifts with 40 pounds, then told strength coach Rob Glass to "put some more on." When he was done pressing 60 pounds, the 81-year-old announced that he could do 80 pounds but "I don't want to take any chances I might not."

And he wasn't done yet. He tested out one of the treadmills and a vibrating Power Plate platform that helps athletes with their flexibility and balance.

When asked if he got his money's worth, Pickens said: "I really do."

"You're not going to have these kind of facilities and have kind of a lackluster attitude about whether we're going to win or not," he said.

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