

HOUSTON★CHRONICLE

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UH's new football stadium 'a game-changer'



Brett Coomer, Staff

TDECU Stadium on the UH campus was closing in on being game-ready on Tuesday.

By Jerome Solomon

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In the college athletics arms race, the University of Houston has been like a country that set aside almost no budget for its army.

The school barely contributed to the ludicrousness that produced \$15 billion in sports facilities spending between 1995 and 2005, according to Street & Smith's Business Journal.

But with construction on the new TDECU Stadium in its final stages – the grand opening is slated for an Aug. 29 tilt against the University of Texas–San Antonio – UH has joined the fray.

If you haven't heard, it is time to take note.

With a \$25 million basketball practice facility on tap, acknowledgement of the desperate need for a basketball arena, meeting rooms and locker room projects at the softball field, relatively new football practice fields and other work around the campus, UH athletics is indeed under construction.

TDECU is the highlight of all the work. Now that UH has built it, will you come?

"It's a big step in the right direction, particularly because it is football," said Mack Rhoades, UH's vice president for intercollegiate athletics. "It's not a renovation; it's a brand–new facility. I think overall as an athletic department, we're certainly trending at a pretty fast clip."

Single–game football tickets went on sale Tuesday. Judging from the availability of seats, local sports fans are holding their standard wait–and–see attitude. UH fans have no excuses.

The program could be on the verge of something special, but without a strong fan base aboard, the recent investment will not provide the necessary return to lift UH into a power conference.



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The shape of the Houston skyline is part of the north end zone at TDECU Stadium.

Revenue to spike

What is the difference between a power league and the American Athletic Conference? TDECU's price tag is less than half that of Baylor's new \$250 million McLane Stadium.

The \$120 million TDECU replaces Robertson Stadium, which opened during World War II and almost was past its prime before the phrase prime time was commonly used to describe evening television programming.

TDECU may not be an over-the-top expenditure with a look-at-me purpose, and its 2,584-square-foot video board isn't in the amusing "mine is bigger" arguments that Texas (7,370), Texas A&M (7,661), the Dallas Cowboys (11,520) and the Texans (14,549) have engaged in, but it should draw attention to UH.

With the downtown skyline nestled perfectly beyond the northwest corner of the stadium, it will look good on television. Recruits will notice.

"It's a game-changer," football coach Tony Levine said. "It has already made a difference, and it hasn't even opened."



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One of the features of TDECU Stadium is a view of the downtown skyline beyond the northwest corner of the facility.

Perhaps more importantly, football stadium revenue, previously constrained by dilapidated Robertson, will see an immediate boost.

Donations tied to specific seating area locations, suite buys and premium seating purchases – premium seats, including unique-to-Houston party decks and suite decks have sold out for this season – will be significantly higher than at Robertson. The school gives a low-end estimate of 30 percent for the increase in ticket revenue, but don't be surprised if the actual number becomes twice that in the coming years.

TDECU will seat 40,000, with a smart design that can easily accommodate a future expansion to 60,000 should that become necessary, and provide a cozy atmosphere for a program that has played some of the most exciting brand of football in the country since Art Briles turned the program around 11 years ago.

Levine, who is in his third year, has a squad that could make noise nationally. The Cougars' schedule may lack big-name opponents, but UH should be worth watching and TDECU ought to be a good place to do that.

A crowd-pleaser

UH is betting that once fans arrive they will like what they see. And that's a good bet.

The club level is a mere 25 feet from the playing surface, and prices are such that the breaking of one's bank isn't necessary for admission.

The takeaway from the views during a stadium tour Tuesday is that there isn't a bad seat in the Coogs' house, and fans on the move should appreciate the open, modern-day baseball stadium feel in which the field is visible from at least two-thirds of the concourse, according to Rhoades.

Oft criticized, Rhoades deserves credit for pulling this together. When he arrived on campus five years ago, many UH athletics facilities were in need of upgrades. He has taken steps to change that, none bigger than TDECU.

At least now fans should be proud to answer the "Whose House?" chant at football games.

"I'm happy for our fans," Rhoades said. "I think our fans have really been waiting for a facility of this stature for a long time, and I really think it'll help catapult our program.

"I think it's going to be a great facility that's going to do a lot, not just for our football program but for our entire athletics program and also for our university."

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