

Star-Telegram FORT WORTH

Will Bigger Be Better for Cowboys Stadium?

March 18, 2006

By ANDREA AHLES
STAR-TELEGRAM STAFF WRITER

For the Dallas Cowboys, size matters.

The team has not released design plans for the 20-story-tall stadium to the public, but owner Jerry Jones has made one thing clear: The new home for the Cowboys will be Texas-sized.

It won't be the biggest in the NFL -- that honor belongs to FedEx Field, home of the Cowboys' archrival, the Washington Redskins -- but its 75,000 seats will land it in the top five.

"The Cowboys' goal all along is to create a venue that is capable of hosting large mega-events like the Super Bowl and the [college basketball] Final Four," said Dallas Cowboys spokesman Brett Daniels. He added that Texas Stadium has never been considered for these types of events because it is too small and does not have a roof to control the indoor temperature.

Sports facility analysts say football stadiums have gotten larger in the past 10 years, usually ranging from 65,000 to 85,000 seats. The new \$1 billion New York Giants/New York Jets stadium scheduled to open in 2010 will seat 81,000 fans.

But size alone doesn't guarantee that a stadium will host a Super Bowl. FedEx Field, for instance, has never hosted one. League spokesman Brian McCarthy said the NFL requires Super Bowl stadiums to seat at least 70,000 and have a typical average temperature of at least 50 degrees in the month before the big game.

The NFL has said it would consider holding a Super Bowl in North Texas once the new Cowboys stadium opens, which officials have said will be in time for the 2009 season. The first possible Super Bowl would be in 2011, as the NFL owners have selected sites for the games through 2010.

The economic effect of the game is sizable. According to a report commissioned by local officials in 2004, a Super Bowl in Arlington could generate \$425.8 million as thousands of visitors descend upon the area.

Preliminary plans put 75,000 permanent seats in the new Cowboys stadium, which is about 10,000 more than Texas Stadium has. In addition, room in the end zones would allow enough temporary seating to push capacity to 100,000.

"We could increase actual seating capacity if we desired by using that space for temporary bleachers or leave it as standing room," Daniels said.

That's what was done at Raymond James Stadium in Tampa when it hosted Super Bowl XXXV in 2001. The stadium will also boost its seating capacity from 65,000 to 75,000 by adding bleachers around its pirate ship in the end zone when it hosts the Super Bowl again in 2009.

Analysts said they were not surprised that Jones wants a big stadium but added that many teams that have recently built stadiums kept seating around 65,000, even if it meant they did not automatically qualify for a Super Bowl. Qwest Field in Seattle and Ford Field in Detroit both opened in 2002 with fewer than 70,000 seats. Qwest does not have a roof and is not eligible for the Super Bowl; Ford Field hosted the Super Bowl in February.

"Generally, you don't want to build too big. You want to build the right size for your market," said Chris Dunlavey, president of the sports-facility consulting firm Brailsford & Dunlavey. "It's not cost-effective to add the additional permanent seats just to try to get the Super Bowl."

They caution that the Cowboys stadium should not be built so large that it makes fans feel separated from the action on the field.

"When you make a larger and larger facility, some of the seats are further and further away from the field, and it's not as pleasurable for the fans," said Andrew Zimbalist, an economics professor at Smith College who follows the professional sports leagues. "And if you go through a dry patch when your team is not very good, you don't want to have large sections of empty seats."

The Carolina Panthers, who opened their 73,000-seat stadium in 1996, had difficulty attracting fans when the team posted losing seasons from 1997 to 2002. In its worst season in 2001 when the team went 1-15, the stadium was less than 70 percent full, averaging a turnstile attendance of only 49,205 fans per game. Attendance has since rebounded as the Panthers made the playoffs last season.

Of the five largest NFL stadiums, only one has hosted the Super Bowl -- Dolphins Stadium in Miami. The 79,000-seat Arrowhead Stadium, home of the Kansas City Chiefs, has been promised Super Bowl XLIX in 2015, if Kansas City voters approve a tax to fund \$575 million in renovations to the football and baseball complex, including a mobile roof.

The number and layout of seats in a new stadium may also affect ticket prices, analysts say. With more seats, Jones will have more flexibility when it comes to ticket prices, they say. Fans may have a larger selection of cheaper seats than in the smaller Texas Stadium, where the cheapest seats cost \$48 a game for the 2006 season.

Regardless of the price, it will still be important for the Cowboys to sell all of the tickets in the new stadium. If the Cowboys are unable to sell out a regular-season game in their new, bigger stadium, local football fans could not watch the game on television under blackout rules.

The blackout rules have prompted some teams, like the Baltimore Ravens, to keep stadium seating below 70,000, Dunlavey said.

The Cowboys have sold out every regular-season game since Dec. 16, 1990.

"There are certain markets where demand is so great with the tradition of the team that you can get a higher capacity and keep it filled," said Dunlavey, who was involved with the planning of the Ravens stadium several years ago. "A few star markets have been going to grand and luxurious extremes, and for example, in Washington, D.C., they haven't had any problems keeping the stadium filled."

Although the new Cowboys stadium won't beat the Redskins facility as the NFL's largest, the team's giant plans for the Arlington stadium include having every one of those 75,000 seats filled.

Daniels said filling the seats is important for a reason other than money: "A larger crowd in a very big game, or a high-profile game, can certainly have an impact on the opposing team."

IN THE KNOW

NFL stadiums

FedEx Field

Location: Landover, Md.

Home of: Washington Redskins

Capacity: 91,665

Opened: 1997

Cost: \$250 million for initial construction, additional \$130 million spent on improvements

Extra points: 243 luxury suites in three tiers, escalators for fans seated in the stadium's upper tier

Giants Stadium

Location: East Rutherford, N.J.

Home of: New York Giants and New York Jets

Capacity: 80,242

Opened: 1976

Cost: \$75 million

Extra point: 119 luxury suites

Arrowhead Stadium

Location: Kansas City, Mo.

Home of: Kansas City Chiefs

Capacity: 79,451

Opened: 1972

Cost: \$53 million for football field, baseball stadium, parking lot

Extra points: Kansas City residents will vote on whether to spend \$575 million for improvements to Arrowhead and baseball's Kauffman Stadium. Awarded Super Bowl XLIX in 2015 if the renovations are approved.

Invesco Field at Mile High

Location: Denver

Home of: Denver Broncos

Capacity: 76,125

Opened: 2001

Cost: more than \$400 million

Extra points: 132 luxury suites with its first row of Level 4 suites officially one mile above sea level

Dolphins Stadium

Location: Miami

Home of: Miami Dolphins

Capacity: 75,192

Opened: 1987

Cost: \$115 million

Extra points: More than 100 executive suites were sold to help finance the stadium's construction. The stadium has hosted three Super Bowls and will host the game in 2007 and 2010.

SOURCES: NFL, individual teams

Andrea Ahles, (817) 548-5523 aahles@star-telegram.com