

The lion's den awaits

Being No. 1 has its advantages: the throng of media attention week in and week out, massive amounts of exposure for the program and the confidence that comes with being considered the best.



BLAINE DIONNE

But there are disadvantages to being the best, and the Oklahoma Sooners will learn one of them the hard way this weekend.

When the Sooners travel to College Station to face the No. 24 Aggies in a game that could decide the Big 12 South championship, they will face one of the most hostile environments in college football history, Kyle Field.

Since 1989, the Aggies are 64-6-1 on their home turf, 23-1 since 1996. In recent years, the Texas A&M football team has turned around its reputation of folding under pressure when the big boys come to town by going 5-2 against teams ranked in the Top 10.

The most recent big victory was two weeks ago when then-No. 10 Kansas State came to town.

The Wildcats flaunted the nation's third best scoring offense with the swagger of a

team that planned to embarrass its adversaries in their home stadium.

The Wildcats would later tuck tail for home after a thorough 26-10 defeat, thanks in no small part to the Aggies' famous cheering section, the Twelfth Man.

K-State suffered five pre-snap penalties that could be directly attributed to the crowd's noise level.

A&M is known throughout the nation for its fans and their dedication to their team. It is a well-deserved reputation that has been earned over the years through traditions of standing during a game and never giving up on their team.

Time and again, the Aggie faithful have proved their mettle by confusing opponents and working A&M players into a frenzy.

Senior linebacker Jason Glenn said that the noise against Kansas State played a huge role in the Aggies' victory, and it should play an even bigger role against OU.

"I thought the Kansas State game was loud," Glenn said. "Every time I waved my arms up in the air, it seemed like a hundred million lions were just roaring. I mean, it was so loud and I love that."

"It brings something to me and to the whole team saying that, win or lose, we had

a crowd, the Twelfth Man behind us."

A&M coach R.C. Slocum said he looks at the Twelfth Man not only as a point of pride for his program, but also as a recruiting tool.

"The crowd here is an inspiration to our players, and I suspect is a distraction for our opponents," Slocum said. "I've been in a lot of stadiums, but for games like this, nobody is better than us."

"We're selling to these (recruits) this year that, since they've been in the first grade, we've only lost six games on this field. That usually impresses them."

It may impress recruits, but according to an article that appeared in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* Wednesday, the Sooners said they will not be affected by the crowd, even though 11 of their starters will be making their first start at Kyle Field.



FILE PHOTO

Kyle Field has developed into one of the most intimidating facilities in all of college sports for opponents. A&M linebacker Jason Glenn said when the stadium is full it sounds like "a hundred million lions roaring."

"Once you get to the point you can't hear, it doesn't matter if there's 50,000 or 80,000 people screaming," Oklahoma quarterback Josh Heupel told the *Star-Telegram*.

"It's just more noise. We have to be mentally focused and sharp to combat it."

Sounds like famous last words. The Sooners have not had a difficult road schedule this year. The only environment even remotely close to what they will face here

was when they played K-State in Manhattan, Kan. But the capacity there is 50,000.

Come Saturday, there will be 80,000 plus rabid Aggies raining down on the Sooners, and no matter what they know about crowd noise, their perception of it will soon be redefined.

Blaine Dionne is a senior journalist.

HOLLER HOUSE

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It's how they do so much with so little. Programs like Nebraska, which A&M defeated at home in both 1998 and 1999, and No. 2 Hawaii, which A&M upset on its home floor last season to get into the Elite Eight, sell out their gyms every night. Meanwhile A&M considers a big crowd to be just 2,000 fans, less than 25 percent of G. Rollie's capacity. Even with much smaller numbers, A&M is able to perform on par with the powerhouses.

"Their team feeds off that crowd," said Nebraska

coach John Cook. "We play in front of big crowds everywhere we go, so we're used to the noise, but the atmosphere here is different for volleyball because of how they cheer and the organization of it."

For A&M, feeding off the crowd becomes so natural, the team is forced to take a reality check to make sure it is playing at its best level without the crowd's energy.

"You do sometimes tend to rely on the energy and the feel on the court," said A&M middle blocker Heather Marshall. "But we have to rely on our volleyball and can't always rely on that energy. It's us, not external factors, that win games."

But the external factors always help, and A&M is sure to start on its next home winning streak right away.

"Nebraska must just be envious of what Aggieland has," Corbelli said. "They have winning tradition in volleyball, and they have sell-out crowds every match, but they don't have anywhere near what we have."

About the only thing better than what the "Holler House" provides A&M right now might be the energy of the Twelfth Man and a sell-out crowd.

If that were ever to happen, no program in the country could claim to compare to the Aggies' home-court edge.

"If we fill G. Rollie, I don't think we could play,"

Corbelli said. "I was there when Texas played Rollie and its 8,000 screaming fans. I don't know what I would do if I saw that for a volleyball match."

"He's a great group, with 2,100 — they are present. They're there to watch; they are there to participate, and that makes all the difference."

If A&M continues its success, and the Aggies continue to grow, chances are Corbelli will get a chance to break down and cry someday. The question is when.

Jason Lincoln is a junior journalist.

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