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COLLEGE FOOTBALL

College Football's Growing Problem: Empty Seats

Announced attendance dropped 3.2% in football's top division last season, but schools' ticket scans show even fewer fans in stands



Arkansas quarterback Cole Kelley gets hit by Auburn defender Dontavious Russell during the second half of a game in Fayetteville, Ark., on Oct. 21, 2017. PHOTO: MICHAEL WOODS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Rachel Bachman

Updated Aug. 30, 2018 9:48 p.m. ET

When Minnesota hosted Nebraska at TCF Bank Stadium last year, the game featured charismatic new Golden Gophers coach P.J. Fleck, a home team fighting for a bowl berth and a big-name opponent. The announced attendance was 39,933—an OK crowd for a crisp November day in Minneapolis—but it didn't tell the whole story.

Only 25,493 ticketed fans were counted at the gates, 36% lower than the announced attendance and about half of the stadium's capacity. More than 14,000 people who bought tickets or got them free didn't show up.

College football has an attendance problem. Average announced attendance in football's top division dropped for the fourth consecutive year last year, declining 7.6% in four years. But schools' internal records show that the sport's attendance woes go far beyond that.

The average count of tickets scanned at home games—the number of fans who actually show up—is about 71% of the attendance you see in a box score, according to data from the 2017 season collected by The Wall Street Journal. In the Mid-American Conference, with less-prominent programs like Central Michigan and Toledo, teams' scanned attendance numbers were 45% of announced attendance.

Even teams in the nation's five richest conferences routinely record thousands fewer people passing through stadium gates than they report publicly. The no-shows reflect the challenge of filling large venues when nearly every game is on TV, and they threaten a key revenue source for college athletic departments.

"Attendance drives recruiting, attendance drives donations, merchandise sales," said Rob Sine, who until earlier this year was president of IMG Learfield Ticket Solutions, which works with

dozens of colleges. If fans don't use their tickets, he added, "they're more likely to not come back."

Most schools scan and keep count of tickets used at football games. The Journal requested access to those counts under public-records law, and most public schools supplied them. Private schools aren't subject to public-records law.

Minnesota's gap between scanned and announced attendance could have been worse—its announced attendance doesn't include stadium staff, marching bands or media, as many other schools do. A Minnesota spokesman said officials were unavailable to comment.



When Minnesota hosted Nebraska at TCF Bank Stadium last year, only 25,493 ticketed fans were counted at the gates, 36% lower than the announced attendance. PHOTO: HANNAH FOSLIEN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

When Arkansas hosted No. 21 Auburn, scanned attendance was more than 25,000 lower than announced attendance. Overall last season, Arkansas's scanned home attendance was 58% of its announced attendance as the Razorbacks went 4-8. Nonetheless, Reynolds Razorback Stadium is reopening Saturday after a \$160 million renovation that increased capacity by about 4,000. An Arkansas spokesman declined to comment.

Florida State, which won the 2013 national title, last season had a scanned attendance that was 57% of its announced attendance. FSU spokesman Rob Wilson blamed personnel and technical issues in scanning tickets and said, "We do not believe the difference is as large as the data appears to show."

Sine, the ticketing expert who's now chief revenue officer at ticketing company AXS, said technology has improved to the point that scanning errors generally have a minor effect on ticket counts.

Attendance is more than a vanity issue. The NCAA requires schools to maintain a 15,000 "actual or paid" home attendance on a rolling two-year average to stay in football's top division.

Many schools take a generous approach in compiling announced attendance, by including ushers, security guards and even the guy at the concession stand who sells you a Coke. That partly explains how Purdue's announced attendance last season spiked 13,433 per game—the largest jump in college football. (Purdue didn't report how many tickets it actually scanned last year, citing what a spokesman called "outdated equipment, connectivity problems and user error.")

The NCAA accepts the announced attendance numbers schools submit "at face value," NCAA spokesman Christopher Radford said.

Despite the rising value of TV-rights contracts, football ticket sales and donations often make up more than half of athletic-department revenues. College sports officials say many factors are

incenting fans to stay home including: affordable big-screen TVs; the availability of more games on TV; ever-changing kickoff times that make it difficult to plan ahead; games that span more than four hours; traffic; and rising ticket prices.

How many college football fans are actually in the stands?

At many Football Bowl Subdivision schools, the number of tickets scanned at the stadium falls far short of a team's announced attendance.

SCHOOL	ANNOUNCED ATTENDANCE	SCANNED TICKETS
Coastal Carolina*	89,754	15,248
Louisiana Monroe	49,640	13,302
Buffalo	80,102	22,233
Eastern Michigan	73,649	23,282
Miami (Ohio)	98,666	35,582
Akron	117,416	43,675
Arkansas State	119,538	45,631
San Jose State	85,235	33,892
Ohio U	116,325	47,579
UTEP	97,740	45,444

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*Coastal Carolina, East Carolina, Oklahoma and UAB officials say these counts are inaccurate due to operator, system or equipment error, or for other reasons; Coastal Carolina was in second year of two-year transition to FBS; Two of Arizona State's games omitted because of scanner glitches; Virginia Tech's scanned counts were 6-8% low due to network outage, operator error and new-staff training; South Alabama's game against Louisiana Monroe omitted because of scan-count error; Georgia Southern's first game is omitted, as it was relocated; teams not included in the data said they don't keep scanned ticket counts, had invalid counts, didn't respond or are exempt from public-records law; private schools are not required to comply
Sources: school records; athletics website box scores

Sagging student attendance remains a problem, even at perennial power Alabama. As part of a recently announced renovation of Bryant-Denny Stadium, the school plans to add a student terrace to create "a more interactive and social environment," athletic director Greg Byrne said.

The renovations also will add more club and lounge areas and slightly reduce the stadium's 101,821 capacity, part of a trend of downsizing college football stadiums.

Crowds at South Carolina have ebbed in recent years and scanned attendance made up 78% of the Gamecocks' announced attendance last season. South Carolina held a one-day sale for the season opener against Coastal Carolina: \$18.01 per ticket in honor of the school's founding year. It sold 3,100 of those.

"If you're in the upper deck and buying a ticket for 45 bucks, and the choice is, I can sit on my couch and have a really good view, you might do that," said Lance Grantham, associate athletic director for ticketing and customer relations. "The [TV] product is just outrageously good."

Public attendance numbers are part of some schools' identity. Michigan Stadium, the "Big House," whose 107,601 capacity is the nation's largest, still claims a streak of 100,000-plus attendance games dating back to 1975, even though two games last year showed fewer than 80,000 scanned tickets.

A Michigan spokesman said surges of fans at gates just before kickoff sometimes prompt workers to tear tickets rather than scanning them. Michigan counts the media, stadium workers and marching bands in its announced attendance.

Nebraska boasts a sellout streak that dates to the 1962 season. But during last year's 4-8 record, there was an average gap of more than 18,000 per game between scanned and announced attendance—mostly no-shows, a spokesman said.

Free tickets often are counted among attendance figures even if they're never used. California, on

the hook to repay the cost of a \$321 million renovation for Memorial Stadium unveiled in 2012,

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gave away 57,108 tickets last season. That's nearly an entire free game at the 62,467-seat stadium. About 35% of the free tickets were used, school officials say.

“Our sales and marketing team continues



A general view of Memorial Stadium in Lincoln, Neb. Nebraska boasts a sellout streak that dates to the 1962 season. PHOTO: NATI HARNIK/ASSOCIATED PRESS

to look for more creative and unique ways to bring fans to Memorial Stadium,” said Joe Mulford, senior associate athletic director and chief revenue officer.

Not every school pumps up its attendance figures. Of the nearly 100 football programs that gave data to the Journal, just one used a turnstile count for its announced attendance: Navy.

Said athletic director Chet Gladchuk: “It is just the way we do business.”

—Tom McGinty contributed to this article.

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Appeared in the August 31, 2018, print edition as ‘College Football’s Empty Seat Problem.’

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