

**The New York Times**

September 12, 2013

# A 'GameDay' Extravaganza, Minus the Game

By **RICHARD SANDOMIR**

The ESPN traveling circus known as “College GameDay” set up camp this week in College Station, Tex., where top-ranked Alabama will play No. 6 Texas A&M on Saturday. ESPN’s trucks, stages, video walls and sponsor tents, as well as the Home Depot Bus, have taken up nearly one-third of the drill field where the Aggies’ corps of cadets holds formal reviews. And starting with reports Thursday afternoon and running through its three-hour show Saturday morning, “GameDay” and other ESPN shows will spend hours analyzing the matchup.

But the showdown between the Crimson Tide and the Aggies — the rationale behind hauling “GameDay” to campus — is not on ESPN’s television schedule. CBS, which gets first choice for the top Southeastern Conference game each week, will televise Alabama versus Texas A&M.

“I’m looking for the best story of the day,” Lee Fitting, the coordinating producer for ESPN’s college studio shows, said by telephone. “This week was a no-brainer. We’ve been to plenty of non-ESPN and non-ABC games in my tenure.”

Fitting said that if not for Alabama, the defending national champion, facing Texas A&M, the only team to beat the Crimson Tide last year, “GameDay” would probably have traveled to the U.C.L.A.-Nebraska game in Lincoln, which ABC is carrying at noon.

“I wish it were being played next week,” Fitting said. “Next week is looking grim.”

ESPN will still dominate the college football day — 33 games will be shown on ESPN networks and on ABC — in part because of the scene-setting dominance of its roving studio show. Wherever “GameDay” goes, it is a major campus event, drawing thousands of partisan fans but also a major logistical operation. Top universities receive a letter each August from Fitting that outlines what “GameDay” will take to their campus and what it will need.

“As the show’s popularity and on-site attendance continue to grow,” Fitting wrote, in part, “we wanted to formally document our expectations in order to make a GameDay visit the best possible experience for your fans, our sponsors, the show’s production personnel and your school’s football program.”

Some colleges are veteran hosts. Some have never done it and might get about barely a week’s warning that “GameDay” wants to visit. For all, the national exposure to about two million viewers

on Saturdays, augmented by reports from the set on Friday, is irresistible. Because of the interest in the Alabama-Texas A&M game, those reports began Thursday from College Station.

"It's one of the things you can't say no to," said Van Hilderbrand, an associate athletic director at Clemson, the "GameDay" host on Aug. 31, the first Saturday of the season. In 2006, Clemson received the standard five-day notice that ESPN wanted to take "GameDay" to its campus. But this year, it was told of its selection on Aug. 1. Both times, the show emanated from the university's front lawn.

"The week afterward, we didn't want to see them again," Hilderbrand said with a laugh. The only problem he had with ESPN was Lee Corso, one of the "GameDay" analysts, picking Georgia to beat Clemson that day. Clemson won, 38-35.

"It made us mad at first, but he was 0-7 with Georgia, so it was a good omen," he said. (ESPN, however, says he is only 0-4.)

Texas A&M is hosting "GameDay" for the second year in a row, so Mike Caruso, the associate athletic director for events and game operations, understands what ESPN is looking for. Simpson Drill Field worked out well last year, and it was chosen again.

"They had a lot of room for everything and a lot of room for our fans," Caruso said. "And they weren't on top of our stadium."

But Fitting said that the set will be tweaked because, in such a large space, it looked a little small last year.

ESPN is taking 85 people, 10 trucks, a 35-foot-square TV stage (with a slanted roof), a 24-foot square field, two video walls, five sponsor tents, an aerial camera, crowd barricades, a public address system and an air-conditioner for the stage.

The television compound measures 200 feet by 130 feet. A separate radio compound, with its own stage, is 50 by 50 feet.

ESPN does not just take along the wherewithal to produce television or radio. It takes its sponsors, including Home Depot, Cheez-It and Coke Zero, and the tents where they display their products. And a two-year-old line of "GameDay" T-shirts and caps is made available by ESPN's consumer products division to campus bookstores and local retailers.

ESPN, in turn, needs help from the host program to get 20 phone lines, dozens of parking passes, security guards, catering, local labor, portable toilets, fork and scissor lifts, and golf carts. One of the goals of campus security and guards hired by ESPN is to "remove signs within camera view that use objectionable language, are in poor taste or ambush our sponsors," according to Fitting's letter.

Fitting said in the interview that between 5 and 25 signs are confiscated each week.

While ESPN will be a conspicuous pregame presence on campus at College Station, CBS presents a lesser logistical challenge for Texas A&M. CBS's pregame show, "College Football Today," will be televised from the sideline inside Kyle Field from 2:30 to 3:30, double its usual length. The pregame and broadcast production trucks will be right outside the stadium.

"We're on the inside; we don't look out," said Harold Bryant, the executive producer of CBS Sports. "It's great, additional hype for the game with 'GameDay' on site at a central location where students can gather." The networks will have little to do with each other.

Fitting, a longtime member of the "GameDay" crew, said that the show's trucks and trailers do not leave the country's roads.

"They're in a holding pattern until we decide where we're going," he said. "We may say that odds are the top three games are all on the west coast, so start heading that way. Or just wait in Oklahoma." He is uncertain about where the show will go next Saturday, so he recently sent out on a request on Twitter. "Somebody threw out Utah-B.Y.U.," he said. "I didn't know they were playing."