

If Idaho wants to improve the Dome, take off the roof

By Tim Sullivan
For the Daily News

A picture speaks a thousand words, and in the University of Idaho's case, perhaps more.

The 1962 book, "Beacon for Mountain and Plain: Story of the University of Idaho" displays a photo of a football game played 60 years ago this fall, the 1947 contest between the Vandals and Washington State in Moscow. At a time when both universities and neighboring towns were but a fraction of their current sizes — an astounding 23,500 people were in the stands and on the sidelines for this contest.

Why does this picture still speak today? While Moscow and the surrounding area have grown dramatically, attendance at Idaho football games has diminished. Why the decline in interest in football? I believe it's because the Vandals' home games are played in the stale indoor environment of the Kibbie Dome, a facility that has outlived its usefulness as a football stadium.

Now is the time for Idaho to return to those days of yesterday and move football outdoors. The Kibbie Dome is not and never will be a Division I stadium — no matter how it is upgraded.

The university and Moscow need an outdoor stadium that would attract alumni and friends back to the region to experience those beautiful fall days on the Palouse and witness college football the way it was meant to be played.

Idaho would not be the first athletic program to migrate back to the outdoors. Major League Baseball has set attendance records by demolishing indoor stadiums in favor of fan-friendly outdoor ballparks designed to showcase the sport.

I don't support the current football facilities arms race. But for Idaho to move forward in all sports, it's time to take off the roof and expand the stadium.

So how does this happen? Well, a crane lifted the roof into place; a crane can remove it. (See another fine book, "This Crested Hill" for a picture of the dome's construction.) The grandstands that once were part of an outdoor stadium are still in place, which cuts some of the remodeling costs. End zone horseshoes need to be built, and the playing field needs to be excavated several feet to improve sightlines. These renovations are not possible in the Kibbie Dome's current configuration.

Roof

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The Dome has become a jack of all trades and master of none. The Lionel Hampton Jazz Festival is excellent, but that event also doesn't belong in a domed stadium; it can be moved to Memorial Gym and other smaller venues, where jazz was meant to be heard. Recreational vehicle shows? Who said they belong on college campuses? Graduation ceremonies for each college can be held in smaller auditoriums around campus.

And what about other sports? Sacrifices need to be made. Men's basketball — which averaged 900 fans a game last season — should be moved to Memorial Gym until the team improves, attendance rebounds and a separate arena is justified. A more intimate atmosphere will improve the experience for fans and might help the Vandals play better. Meanwhile, inflatable bubbles can be installed to protect track and field events and tennis matches from bad weather during the winter.

Idaho is failing to attract as many as 10,000 fans a game by playing indoors. Here's why: The die-hard UI fans will attend a game anywhere; the occasional college football fan — which UI desperately needs to engage — wants to watch outdoor football.

The numbers don't lie: Idaho's largest-ever attended game in 1999 vs. Boise State,

25,867 fans showed up in the biting chill of November. That same year, Idaho reported to the NCAA that it averaged 25,201 fans per game — that's nearly 10,000 fans beyond Kibbie Dome capacity and it was achieved on someone else's campus. If each spectator paid \$20 a ticket (low by Division I standards), UI is losing \$200,000 a game and close to \$1 million a year in revenue by playing in the Dome.

Idaho now has the right people in place: Athletic Director Rob Spear, whose vision goes beyond landing his next job; and football coach Robb Akey, who unlike his predecessor, is a coach who appears to be building a true program in Moscow. These guys might be here a long time, but both of them need to be able to move the program forward.

Last, but certainly not least, are the students and fans, who would embrace the Saturday experience in Moscow. One can picture it now: You're walking across the Administration Building lawn as the leaves fall, the afternoon sun high-lighting one of the most beautiful campuses in the nation. As you get closer to the stadium, you hear the band and the fans. It's called outdoor football and it's a great part of autumn, particularly on a college campus. A proud university like the University of Idaho not only needs outdoor football, it deserves it.

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Nov. 24, 2007

Daily News