

OU announces Sooner Jr. program

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Dominic Carola, president and creative director of Premise Entertainment, draws a picture of Boomer as he speaks during a press conference inside Memorial Stadium in Norman on Monday. The press conference was held to announce Sooner Jr., a program designed for children. JOHN CLANTON / The Oklahoman

NORMAN - What if Tinkerbell flew over Norman, waved her wand and sprinkled pixie dust over Owen Field? Something like that happened Monday, when the University of Oklahoma announced its Sooner Jr. initiative.

In it, mascots Boomer and Sooner are brought to cartoon life by former Walt Disney animators who help make up Premise Entertainment. The mascot ponies appear in videos, on iPhone applications and on the front of T-shirts.

All in promotion of the acronym F.A.N.S.: Fitness, academics, nutrition and sportsmanship.

"The four pillars of this program," OU athletic director Joe Castiglione said. "It's good for us to talk about it. It's good for us to cite statistics. And it's good for us to have a plan that we think can bring about improvement.

"But we realize we have to find a variety of ways to reach people."

In this case, OU wants to reach kids. When assistant athletic director for marketing Charlie Taylor started brainstorming how, one thing was obvious.

"We knew we had to go digital. We knew that's where everything is at," Taylor said.

Taylor approached Orlando-based Premise. Company president Dominic Carola was the lead animator for the film "Lilo & Stitch" while contributing to "The Lion King," "Pocahontas" and "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" during his time at Disney.

"When Charlie reached out to us and said he wants to bring these characters (Boomer and Sooner) to life, we were like, 'Well, we have a little experience in that.' " Carola said. "When you are part of something that has such a positive message, it makes it extra special. When you have something that kind of comes together like that - I've got a couple young boys - I'm just really glad to be a part of it."

While Premise created the mascots, OU's Institutional Technology department developed iPhone applications.

There is a game room in the app, but activities promote the F.A.N.S. concept. There is also a locker room app, whereby users do exercises along with Boomer and Sooner, and score points based on performance.

"Kids will actually be able to hold their iPhone or put it in their pocket," OU licensing director Renata Hays explained. "The phone is able to detect their movement and track their points."

OU plans to have Sooner Jr. fully operational by the start of football season. University officials previewed the initiative Monday, unveiling some cartoon images and showing a three-minute music video in which live OU football action intersperses with those images.

Basketball coaches Lon Kruger and Sherri Coale took a look. Coale, a former English teacher, was wowed.

"I like it. It's very innovative," she said. "The concept, the premise, the idea, the mission ... All really, really good."