

Remodeling Cal's Memorial Stadium is a bear

Vittorio Tafur, San Francisco Chronicle, 5-11-11

What's shaking with Cal's football stadium? Glad you asked.

The first phase of the \$321 million renovation of Memorial Stadium - which was built on the Hayward Fault line in 1923 and was seismically unsafe - is all but complete.

The stadium is now an empty bowl after four months of demolition and dirt removal. The second of the four steps, the rebuilding of the structure and the installing of a press box, is under way and should take close to seven months as workers push hard to make their September 2012 deadline.

That when Cal will open its football season. The Bears will be playing their home games this year at AT&T Park.

"We're pushing hard to have games" in 2012, Cal assistant athletic director Bob Milano Jr. said. "It's very ambitious. The fact that we're sitting on the Hayward Fault line makes it more technically challenging."

The flexible retrofit will include the cutting of two sections of the seating bowl (that sit on the fault line) and turning them into free-floating surface-rupture blocks. The "concrete rafts," as Milano calls them for laymen, will move without crumbling even if the earth below shifts up to 6 feet.

The structural engineers, seismologists, geologists and architects needed a complicated plan for a simple task: replacing the concrete structure and rebuilding a historical place from the ground up.

"Collegiate football is very emotional," said Milano, who is in charge of the athletic department's capital planning and management. "The alumni have some great memories at Memorial Stadium, and we have to make sure not to lose the heart and soul of the place."

Thus, the historic facade - and the cracks on some of the walls - will remain, with the new building holding up the facade like a veneer.

On the west side, alumni seats are being installed, as well as a shiny, new press box that will be made of glass and steel - "not a historical look," Milano said. Cable-laced concrete support walls and 16 5-foot-long silicone-filled shock absorbers will be added to make sure the press box doesn't come crashing down in an earthquake.

Also on the west side, you already can see the outside of the new, 800-foot-long student center. It wraps around the bottom outside of the bowl, and will house the football offices, as well as those for 12 Olympic sports, and a high-performance gym and training center. On top of the student center, next to the stadium, will be a park.

When the structure has been totally rebuilt, the third phase should start at the end of this year. That's dealing with the "guts" of the operation - the mechanical, the plumbing, the ventilation, the electrical and the communication walls.

The last of the four overlapping pieces to the puzzle is the detailing, including the placement of the new turf.

Only two-thirds of the structure has been torn down.

The only things being repaired on the east side - the students' seating section - are the sound system and light towers. The splintered wooden student seats are being replaced by the recycled-aluminum seats from the old alumni section.

Because of the new theater-type seats on the alumni side and improved accessibility for disabled fans, the stadium's capacity is being cut from 71,799 to 63,000.

In another fan-friendly move, the field level will be brought down 3 feet to improve sight lines for the lower rows of the stadium.

"I have always thought that a football game is as much a celebration of the campus as it is (of) the sport," Milano said. "And that's why we're sticking with the tight bowl, good seat angles and Strawberry Canyon setting - nobody wanted a double-deck stadium."