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## PROLOGUE

# The message is simple enough; timing is everything

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There is a poster on the wall in my office, my personal favorite of all the posters ever produced by the University of Oklahoma. Issued in 1985, the poster features an OU football player; this is not, however, a football poster. Oh, the player is pictured in full game regalia, all right, but instead of a football in his hands, he is supporting a very classy ballerina from the OU department of dance. The legend reads: "We've got it all!"

It's just the sort of cocky, up-from-the-frontier, get-out-of-the-way sentiment that should be the motto of a place like the University of Oklahoma. "We've got it all! . . . Well, maybe not yet—but someday; we're working on it. Sure, we're proud of our winning tradition in athletics, but look what we're doing in teaching and research and the performing arts and public service."

Most academicians probably would not share my fondness for this poster, for clearly it is the presence of the football player, two-time consensus All-American Tony Casillas, that sends the message. 1985 was a national championship year; everyone knew all about Tony Casillas, winner of the Lombardi trophy, UPI lineman-of-the-year. I have yet to find anyone who remembers the ballerina.

But like it or not, the destinies of our athletic programs—especially foot-

ball—have been sending messages about the University of Oklahoma since the Wilkinson days, some good, some bad. Balance the pride in a long winning tradition against the pain of public disgrace in the spring of 1989.

Major NCAA sanctions. Criminal charges against several players. The head coach resigning under fire. Football players weren't posing for posters in 1989. Embarrassed, humiliated and defensive like the rest of us, they were trying to cross the campus without tripping over a national media hell-bent on making a bad situation intolerable.

And if we were suffering on campus, at least we were among friends. For our alumni in Washington and Los Angeles and Houston and other alien lands, where they heard only the gospel according to *Sports Illustrated* and "Nightline," it was a bleak and lonely time. This scandal wasn't just about football; it impugned by association the reputation and integrity of the entire institution, top to bottom.

The new head coach, entrusted with (1) cleaning up and (2) rebuilding the football program, came from within. He did not inherit a level playing field on which to accomplish these objectives. By their very nature, NCAA sanctions are designed to punish a school for its sins, to thin the ranks and dilute the talent—and they work.

The choice of this coach was meant

to send another kind of message. The squeaky clean, humorless M.B.A. Gary Gibbs was the antithesis of the wise-cracking, high-voltage, fun-loving Barry Switzer—but by then we had had just about all the fun we could stand. Now in his fourth season after "the troubles," Gibbs has accomplished, by all accounts, objective (1) cleaning up the program. His vocal critics contend he also should have achieved objective (2) restoring the program to its previous heights.

Although I have called many a dynamite play from Section 3, Row 57, I will leave to others the final judgment on Gibbs' coaching abilities and his prospects for long-term employment. I do know something about sending messages, however.

If we want to broadcast nationally once more that winning is all that matters at the University of Oklahoma, that we don't have the class to persevere until the field is level again—if we want to endure a rehash of the stories of 1989—we can do so by dismissing the physician before the patient has had a reasonable time to recover. It's a long, agonizing job to regain respect, and it takes only a moment to lose it again.

In the meantime, clinging to the belief that someday we *can* have it all, I'll keep my favorite poster on the office wall. I'll even try to unearth the name of that ballerina. —CJB