

Oklahoma baseball is alive and doing very well under third-year coach Larry Cochell.

# HITTING

## THE COMEBACK TRAIL

The trek back to the glory days of Oklahoma baseball began during the summer of 1990 when OU athletic director Donnie Duncan announced the hiring of Larry Cochell. Amazingly, Cochell became only the seventh boss of the Sooner diamond fortunes since the introduction of the sport at OU in 1898.

The new coach had a worthy tradition to draw on. His predecessors, Jack Baer and Enos Semore, had combined to pilot OU to a national championship, 12 conference titles and six appearances in the College World Series.

But the recent past was far from golden. Semore, the winningest coach in both school and conference history, was forced to retire for health reasons in January 1990. With the new season less than a month away, OU pitching coach Stan Meek jumped in to bridge the gap on an interim basis only to find that Murphy's Law prevailed. Anything that could go wrong did for Meek with a nightmare campaign featuring stronger league competition, injuries, weather problems and gut-wrenching losses. The Sooners finished in last place in Big Eight play for the first time since 1965.

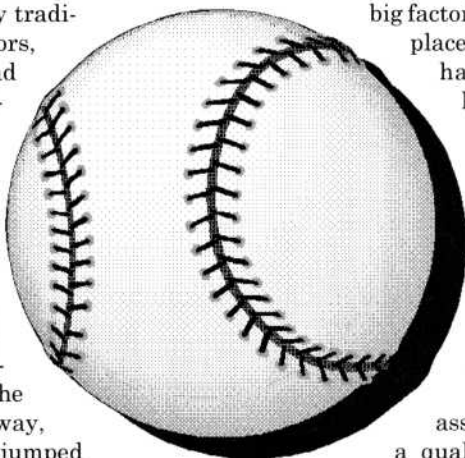
Cochell was faced with putting Humpty Dumpty back together again. It was a familiar task for the veteran coach who had turned around programs everywhere he had been, amassing an enviable record of his own by producing national championship contenders at three schools and winners at every stop.

The state of Oklahoma was not new to Cochell. In 10 years in Tulsa, he had created an Oral Roberts team that was a force to be reckoned with. Cochell took the Titans to the NCAA playoffs in seven of those seasons, his 1978 edition making it to the College World Series.

Now he was back after a sabbatical that saw him coach at Northwestern for one season and California State-Fullerton for three springs, two of which produced College World Series contenders.

His decision to return to the Sooner state was based on the commitment his bosses were willing to make to bring OU baseball back to prominence.

"I would not have come back without this commitment," he says. On a personal note, he adds, "I think Oklahoma is a wonderful place. My family loves the lifestyle and the people. That was a big factor in coming back. This is a great place to raise a family. We always have looked at Oklahoma as home."



It wasn't as if the new coach had to start from scratch. OU had the facility. L. Dale Mitchell Park was built and dedicated in 1981. Major-league-caliber lighting was added in 1988. Cochell's task was to put blue-chip performers in that facility.

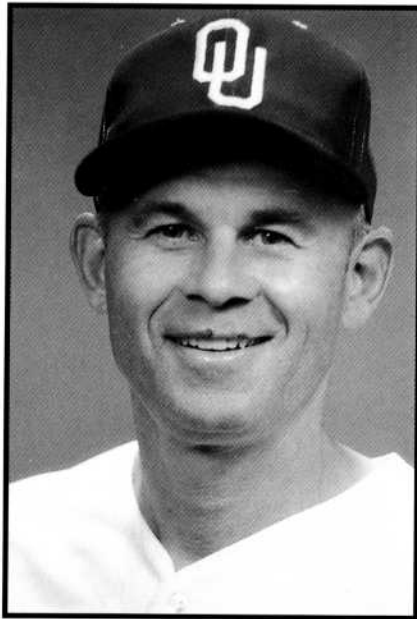
He began by acquiring two assistants, each of whom came with a quality label. Pat Harrison was lured from his position as head baseball coach at Master's College in Newhall, California. The two men didn't need to be introduced; they had been coaching partners at Cal State-Los Angeles and Oral Roberts. Harrison, a former All-American at Southern California and member of the Los Angeles Dodger organization, was installed as OU's hitting coach. For his pitching coach, Cochell tapped Vern Ruhle, a 12-year major league veteran who had been Cochell's assistant at Cal State-Fullerton the year before.

Recruiting was vital, but late summer was not exactly the time to make bids for difference-making prospects. Yet, Cochell had a lot going for him: his name and squeaky-clean reputation, his familiarity with the California gold fields of talent, his stellar assistant coaches and the prospect of bringing Oklahoma back to the big time again in college baseball. He was able to attract some people to Norman who would have a vast impact on the immediate future.

Cochell also set out to play the most attractive schedule, featuring the toughest opponents he could find. "I always have tried to play as hard a sched-

---

by **MIKE TREPS**



**Head Coach Larry Cochell**

ule as I can," he says. "I think it prepares you for late-season conference and tournament play much better than an easy schedule. Plus your fans are more apt to come out with a 'marquee' name involved than with a smaller school that might not even be Division I."

After a fall indoctrination to fuse the newcomers with those from the preceding regime and a January to fine tune, the Sooners were ready to kick off the 1991 season and the Cochell era. They responded immediately by winning 11 of their first 12 and 21 of the initial 26. Included was the championship of the Sun City Classic in El Paso, Texas, and victories over nationally ranked Texas and Creighton. The road through the Big Eight slate was a little rougher, but when the smoke cleared, OU had nailed down a second-place regular season finish by compiling a 13-11 mark.

The post-season tournament saw the Sooners take second to Oklahoma State but clinch a berth in the NCAA Regional in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. There they experienced both bad and good. The bad came from two losses in a row and elimination. The good stemmed from the fact that both losses were by one run—one in extra innings and the other to hometown LSU, the eventual national champion.

Now the Sooners knew they were on the right track, that they could play with the best. Their inaugural campaign under Cochell had been a success.



**Pitching Coach Vern Ruhle**

Would things get even better? You bet!

Everything meshed for OU in the 1992 effort, which nonetheless got off to a comparatively slow start as the Sooners struggled early and by mid-March had posted a rather mediocre record of 14-9. Faced with playing their first eight conference games on

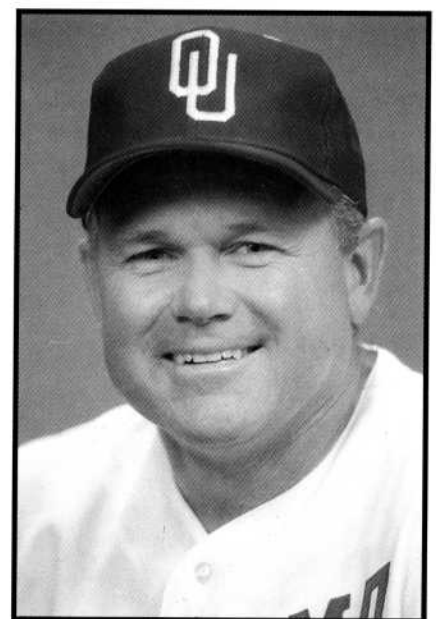


**Tough schedules  
prepare you  
for late-season  
play . . . your fans  
are more apt  
to come out for a  
"marquee" name.**



the road, OU roared back with six wins in those tests. After splitting a four-game set with Missouri at home, the Sooners took to the road again, beating nationally ranked Wichita State and taking three of four at Kansas.

On a roll, the Big Red was victorious in three of four meetings with OSU, a series that drew almost 24,000 fans, including a Mitchell Park record of 3,123. Another three out of four set



**Hitting Coach Pete Harrison**

with Nebraska clinched the regular season championship and top seed for the Big Eight post-season tournament in Oklahoma City. Unfortunately OSU again rose to the challenge to take the tournament title. However, the Sooners were rewarded for their season's efforts; the Big Red Rocket blasted off at Starkville, Mississippi, in the NCAA Mideast Regional Tournament.

Subduing UCLA took 13 innings, but a 9-6 setback at the hands of hometown Mississippi State was a downer. To win the Sooners had to fight their way through the loser's bracket by winning three straight games. No sweat. A perfect relay cut down the tying run in the ninth inning as Cochell's crew stopped Clemson, 7-6. Mississippi State again. Still no sweat. Down 6-1 in the fifth inning, the Sooners roared back 10-6 to avenge the previous evening. Only UCLA stood between Oklahoma and the first trip to the College World Series since 1976. No sweat. A six-run seventh inning broke open a tight contest, and the Sooners were home free, 10-0.

The 1992 College World Series opener pitted the Sooners vs. old rival and nemesis Texas. It was ugly for the Normanites as they took a 15-3 pounding to send them into another loser's bracket. Wichita State was the foe, and again the Sooners had to come from behind. Down 2-0 into the fifth, OU tied matters, then erupted for six

runs in the following frame for an 8-4 victory. Another test with Texas gave the Sooners a chance to remove the Longhorn albatross from their necks. Trailing only 6-5 in the eighth inning, Oklahoma gave up a pair of costly insurance runs and were beaten, 8-5. A fifth-place finish in the CWS punctuated a truly remarkable season.

Reviewing the two-year-old Cochell era so far reveals two NCAA playoff appearances, one trip to the College World Series, 83 victories, seven first team All-Big Eight selections, 13 major league draft selections and record attendance figures.

All of the above is fine, but what has this program done for us lately? Well, how about a \$150,000 improvement to



IMAGE IS NOT AVAILABLE ONLINE DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS.

A paper copy of this issue is available at call number LH 1 .O6S6 in Bizzell Memorial Library.

IMAGE IS NOT AVAILABLE ONLINE DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS.

A paper copy of this issue is available at call number LH 1 .O6S6 in Bizzell Memorial Library.

Randy Bennett

*TOP: 1993 Sooner baseball fans will see some improvements to L. Dale Mitchell Park—600 chair-back seats, lowered dugouts to improve sight lines and handicapped accessibility.*

*LEFT: Catcher Tim Cossins, here on the base paths during the '92 season, is expected to be a mainstay for the '93 team.*

*ABOVE: Shortstop Rich Hills—with Cossins, Kevin Lovinger and Greg Norton—is being touted for post-season honors.*

Randy Bennett

L. Dale Mitchell Park in the form of 600 chair-back seats, the lowering of the dugouts to improve sight lines and facility adjustment to conform to handicap regulations?

How about the most attractive home schedule in school history? Every Big Eight school will play in Norman for the first time ever plus visits from the likes of nationally prominent Texas, Arkansas, Michigan, Oregon State, Houston and TCU.

How about a return of four positions starters in third baseman Greg Norton, shortstop Rich Hills, catcher Tim Cossins and first baseman Mike Smedes? How about a first-rate recruiting job that has Cochell feeling this team could be the best defensively he has ever coached?

What does 1993 hold? If preparation and commitment mean anything, the Cochell era might use for its motto: "You Ain't Seen Nothing Yet!"



*ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Mike Treps is one happy fellow, recently having been named special assistant to the OU athletic director, with primary responsibility for his first love—baseball. A die-hard, lifelong Chicago Cubs fan, Treps has known adversity but sees nothing but blue skies for his day job—marketing, promoting and broadcasting Sooner baseball. For the previous 14 years, he was the University's sports information director.*