

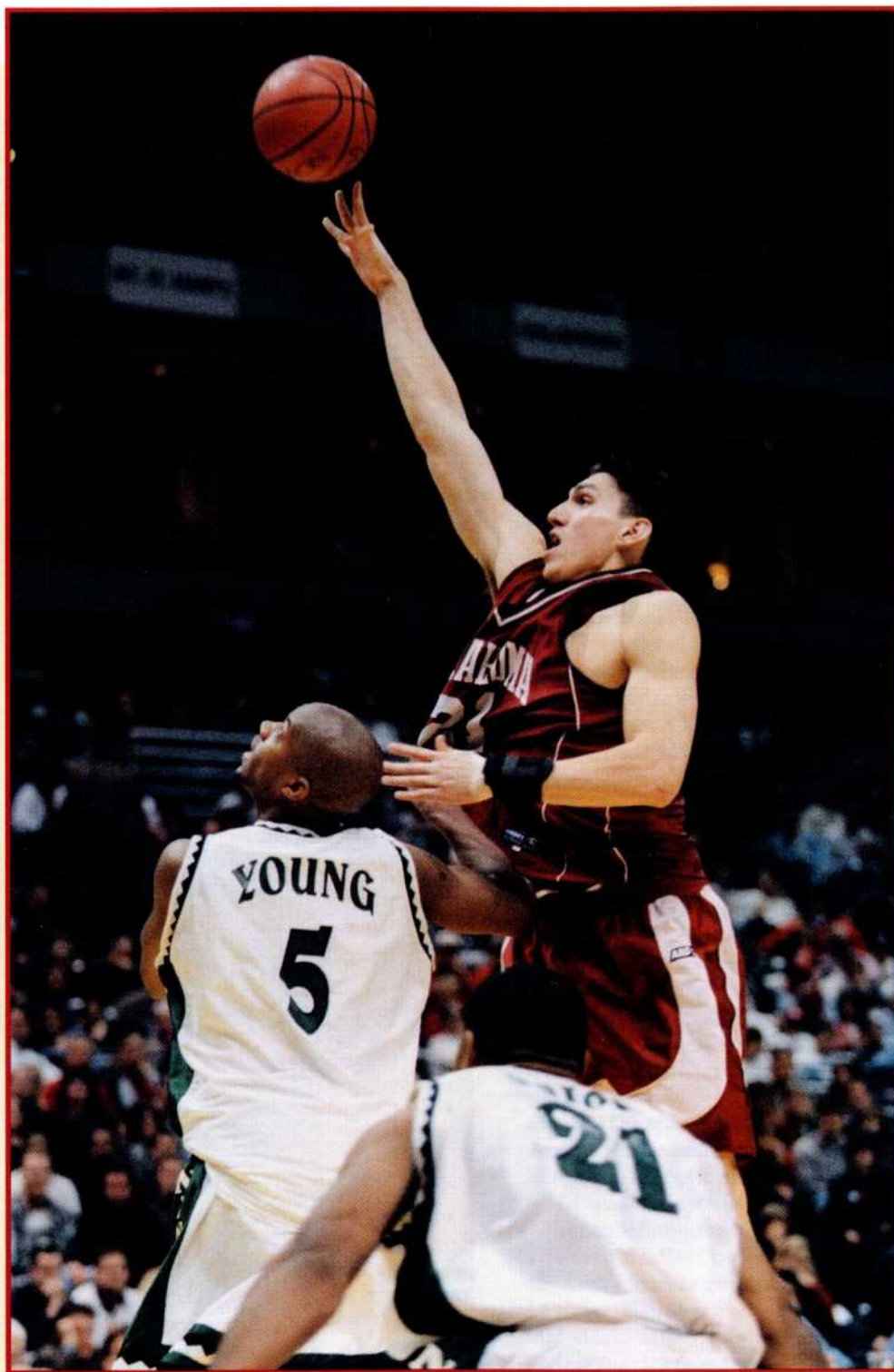
Coach Kelvin Sampson struck gold with a charming young man from Mexico who can flat-out play basketball.

BY JUDITH WALL  
OU Public Affairs

■ It's not something anyone would have predicted—that one of the best college basketball players in the country would come from Mexico.

But OU's standout forward Eduardo Najera—a native of Chihuahua, Mexico—is definitely one of America's best. He was named to the preseason *Playboy* All-America team and to the list of 25 candidates for the 2000 Wooden Award honoring the nation's outstanding collegiate basketball player. In addition, Najera appears on the *Basketball*

Lisa Hall



## EDUARDO NAJERA: Just One of the **Family**

News third-team All-America list. And with 1,021 points in his first three seasons as a Sooner, he has a legitimate chance of becoming one of OU's all-time leading scorers during his senior year.

Yet, unlike American kids who bounce basketballs from the time they are toddlers, Najera did not grow up playing the game. Baseball was the game of his childhood. His father, Servando, had played baseball in his youth and encouraged his athletically talented son to participate in the sport.

But the summer before he started high school, Eduardo grew five inches. Based on his height alone, he was recruited to play on a local basketball team.

As he tells it, "Someone just saw me walking around town and invited me to play."

**E**duardo estimates there were only five or six other really tall people in his hometown, and he's pretty sure he was the tallest by the time he hit 6 feet 8 inches.

His height came as a complete surprise to him and his family. At just over 6 feet, Servando is a tall man by Mexican standards. But his wife, Rosa, and their six other children are of average height. They watched in wonder as their youngest child grew. And grew.

"I couldn't find clothes," Eduardo recalls. "For a while I wondered when in the world I was going to stop growing—especially my feet!"

Finding shoes was a major problem. It is hard to find men's shoes in Mexico over size 11, and Eduardo's feet were on their way to size 15.

Buying shoes usually meant a three-hour trip to El Paso.

Until the game of basketball discovered him, Eduardo admits to being uncomfortable with his height. When he started playing basketball, however, he began to think of it as "a good thing." He had liked playing base-

ball, but he loved basketball.

He already had graduated from high school and been awarded a scholarship to the University of Monterrey when a high school coach from San Antonio saw him play in the Mexican national championship tournament for teams with players age 18 and under. In spite of the scholarship, when Eduardo was offered a chance to be an exchange student at San Antonio's Cornerstone Christian High School, he jumped at it. He liked the

idea of living in the states for a year.

"And I wanted to learn English," he explains. "That was really important to me."

At that point in his life, however, he had no expectations of playing college basketball in the United States. He did not think he was good enough.

"And I had no idea how everything worked—the recruiting process and all that," he says. "I was just playing basketball because I liked it."

His first notion of "how everything



Robert Taylor

■ Practice with Coach Kelvin Sampson, right, is an ongoing teaching experience, and he has one of his most apt pupils in star forward Eduardo Najera, the senior from Chihuahua, Mexico.

**“I’ve gotten to know lots of other people. Norman feels like home to me. People here have been really nice to me.”**

worked” came in December of that year, when he was approached after playing in a Dallas-area tournament by a junior college recruiter. By the end of that season, several Division I teams were recruiting him “pretty hard.”

Head coach Kelvin Sampson and assistant coach Ray Lopes had been hearing good things about the Mexican kid in San Antonio. They traveled to San Antonio to meet him and watch him work out with his team.

“We liked what we saw,” Lopes recalls. “He had good size and was very skilled for a big man, with good hands, good ball-handling—a good athlete. And he played hard. The intangibles—intensity, mental toughness—that are so important to our program were there. And his coach told us what a nice young man he was. We knew Eduardo was the type of player who would do well in our program and do a good job representing the University.”

There was a problem, however. Still struggling with English, Najera needed a higher ACT score to qualify for a basketball scholarship. Paying his own way, he came to Norman and enrolled as a part-time student at OU, with the goal of improving his English-language skills and preparing for the ACT. Since he was still classified as a recruit, he had almost no contact with the OU basketball team.

That first year in Oklahoma was a difficult one, Najera recalls. “I could understand and read English, but conversation was hard for me. It was hard to make friends. The only people I knew were Coach Lopes and Coach Sampson.”

The difficult year paid off, however. He made a qualifying score on the ACT and was offered an OU basketball scholarship. When he returned to Norman in the fall of 1996, he was a full-fledged OU freshman and a member of the basketball team.

“My freshman year, I did well in school, but the basketball was really tough,” Eduardo says. “It was tough to be playing for a Division I school.”

Tough or not, Najera started in 16 games and played in all 30 during the 1996-97 season. He was second in the voting for Big 12 Freshman of the Year and was selected to the Big 12 All-Freshman team. And he gener-

ated a lot of excitement among OU fans, who enjoyed the novelty of having a Mexican player on the team and appreciated his intense play, big smile and obvious passion for the game.

Loneliness ceased to be a problem for Najera. Very quickly, the basketball team became “like a family” to him. He became “Ed” to his teammates and coaches.

And he met Jennifer Methvin, a fellow freshman from Norman, at an OU baseball game. They have been going together ever since. In fact—according to Jennifer’s sister, Julie—Eduardo is like a member of the family. The Methvins attend his games and have met Eduardo’s parents. He shoots hoops and plays video games with the girls’ 13-year-old twin brothers. He attends church with the family at Norman’s University Christian Church.

“And I’ve gotten to know lots of other people,” Najera says. “Norman feels like home to me. People here have been really nice to me.”

His sophomore season, Najera ranked third on the team in both scoring (10.3) and rebounding (5.4) although a stress fracture in his left foot kept him out of two games and curtailed his playing time in the last 10. When he was not playing, he was cheering for his teammates. At the end of the season, he received the team’s “most courageous” award.

His junior year, Najera was no longer the only Mexican player on the OU team. He was joined by Victor Avila, a 6-foot-10-inch center from Culiacan. The two have become close friends and roommates.

For two years, the “j” in Najera had been giving sportscasters fits. (NAH-her-uh comes close.) During the 1998-

99 season, his name began to roll off their tongues as they watched him lead OU to its first NCAA Tournament Sweet 16 appearance in 10 years.

**T**he season and the tournament ended for the Sooners with a loss to Michigan State. Millions of viewers held their breath when Najera was knocked unconscious in a collision with Michigan State’s Mateen Cleaves. Najera was able to return to the game, but the Sooners were down and struggling. The final score was 54-46.

But what a season it had been for Najera. He had started every game, averaging team highs in scoring (15.5) and rebounding (8.3). He posted a team-high 11 double-doubles and scored a career-high 27 points against Baylor in the final game of the regular season. He scored 20 or higher in 10 games. In his stunning performance against Texas A&M, he tallied 22 points, five rebounds, a career-high eight assists, four blocks and three steals. In the NCAA tournament, he was named CBS Player of the Game in OU’s second-round 85-72 win over the University of North Carolina-Charlotte.

When Najera was named second-team All-Big 12, many of his fans thought he deserved first-team honors.

In summarizing his junior season, however, Najera says, “As a team, it was a great year, but I could have played better.” He’d like another chance at the NCAA tournament. Another Sweet 16 game. Another chance to go further.

In the wake of the 1998-99 season, Najera surely has become one of Norman’s most recognizable residents. Wherever he goes, people want to shake his hand and wish him well. Kids are always asking for autographs. He does not consider his celebrity a burden, however. In fact, he says he likes it.

“It’s just another motivation to get better—so that the fans will like me.”

But doesn’t it get tiresome always having to be on his best behavior? He shakes his head. “That’s the way I was brought up. My mom wasn’t so tough, but my dad was real strict.”

When asked who has been his role model, Najera answers without hesitation, “My dad, of course.” He ex-

plains that his father, who is an inspector with the local water company, was not able to finish college. "He had to work hard to get where he is today. Having seven kids is really tough. He might have had a chance to play professional ball, but he stayed with his family. A lot of men wouldn't have done that."

**F**or the past three years, Servando and Rosa Najera have come to Oklahoma in December to spend Christmas with Eduardo and watch him play in the All-College Tournament. His entire family and most of Mexico watched him play in the 1999 NCAA tournament, which was shown on Mexican television.

And last summer, his fame south of the border increased as he led Mexico's national team to a fourth-place finish in the World University Games, played in Palma de Mallorca, Spain. With girlfriend Jennifer and her mom, Renita, in the stands, Najera became the tournament's second-highest scorer, averaging 20.1 points a game. His best performance came in Mexico's overtime win against Russia when he scored 29 points and grabbed 12 rebounds.

Back home in Mexico, he was the main drawing card for an exhibition game attended by more than 13,000 fans. It was a great summer, but Najera says he was eager to get back to Norman and begin his senior year.

Once he was back in Oklahoma, it probably did not take him long to head to his favorite restaurant, the Black Eyed Pea, for what has become his favorite meal—chicken-fried steak with mashed potatoes and gravy. "The food in Mexico is too spicy for me now," he admits with a grin. "My

family gives me a hard time about that."

He is grateful for all the help he has received at OU, both on and off the court. The coaches have been wonderful mentors and friends. He says that during his first two years, he spent most of his days in the Athletic Department's Academic Center, taking advantage of the tutoring, computers and math lab. "A player would have to be a fool not to use the center. It really helped me."

His OU academic counselor, C.B.

May, I'll finish next summer."

Najera acknowledges that his playing has improved a great deal during his years at OU, but he is far from being satisfied with his game. "I've got a long way to go," he says. He prepared for his final season as a Sooner by working on his shooting and ball handling.

He considers rebounding his greatest strength. "It's a wanting thing," he explains. "It's wanting the ball so badly that you out-compete everyone else. And you have to play smart.

You have to see where the bounce is going to be."

His favorite NBA player is Scottie Pippen. "I want to be like him on the basketball court. He can play from point guard all the way to power forward. He's very versatile."

When asked about his own chances for a professional career, Najera is reluctant to speculate. "I just want to enjoy my senior year and play hard. If it's meant to be, it will be there."

Yeah, but what if...? Surely, he has thought about it a little bit—like how he would spend some of the money.

He admits that he would like to be able to help his family and buy his mom a bigger house. "Our house is OK, but I'd like to do that for my mom. She raised seven kids in that house and deserves a new one."

So there he is—an exciting and gifted basketball player, an appreciative and loving son, a modest and charming young man. Head coach

Kelvin Sampson probably puts it best. "Eduardo is a special player because he's a special person. Special people last. I've been with Eduardo for four years now, and he's as good and special of a person as I've ever been around."



Robert Taylor

■ Last year Eduardo Najera, left, was joined by a fellow countryman, junior college transfer Victor Avila, a center from Culiacan, Mexico.

Elder, says that Eduardo has made tremendous strides academically. He is a serious student, works hard and makes good grades.

A sociology major, Najera insists that he definitely plans to complete his degree. "If I don't finish in