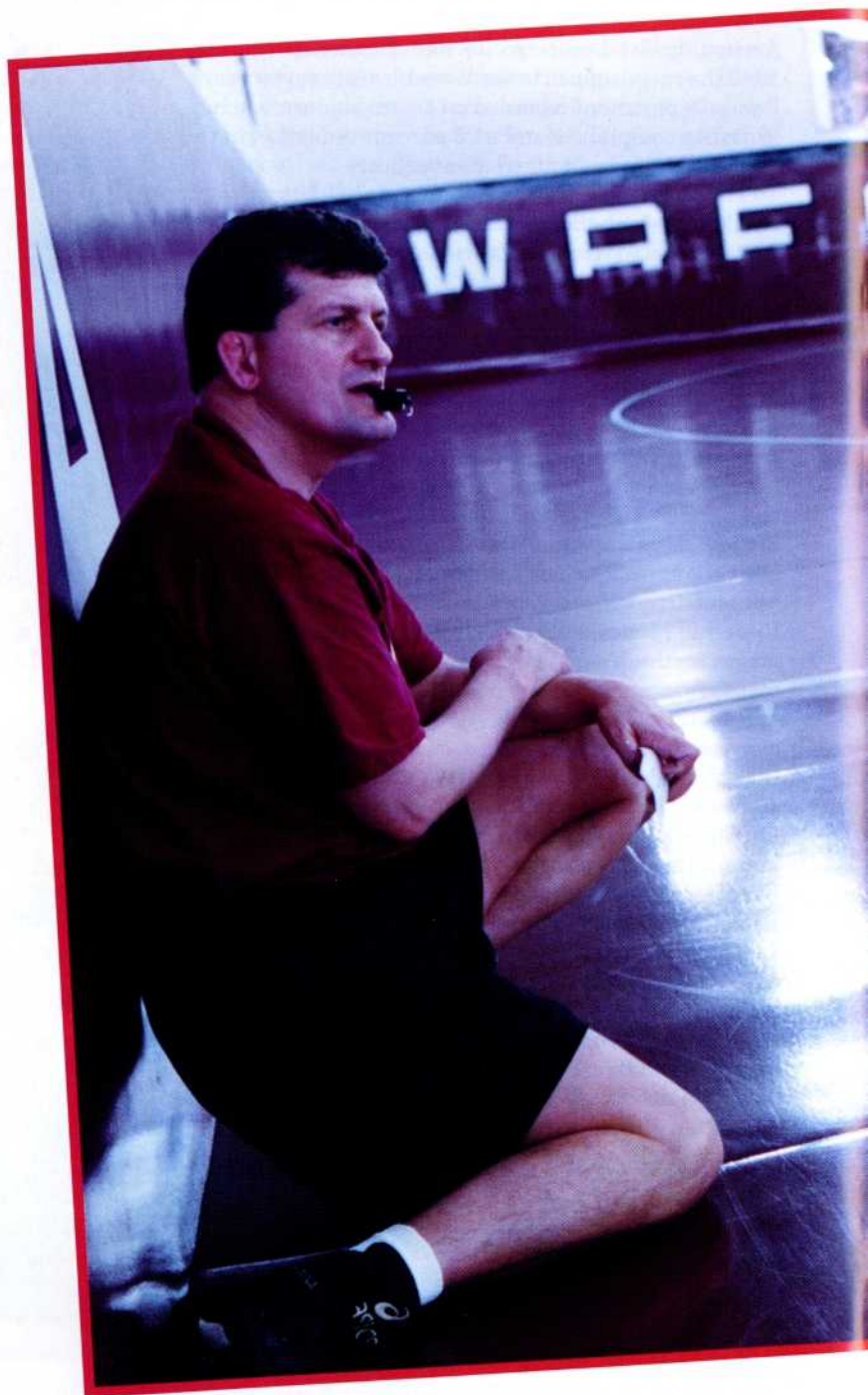
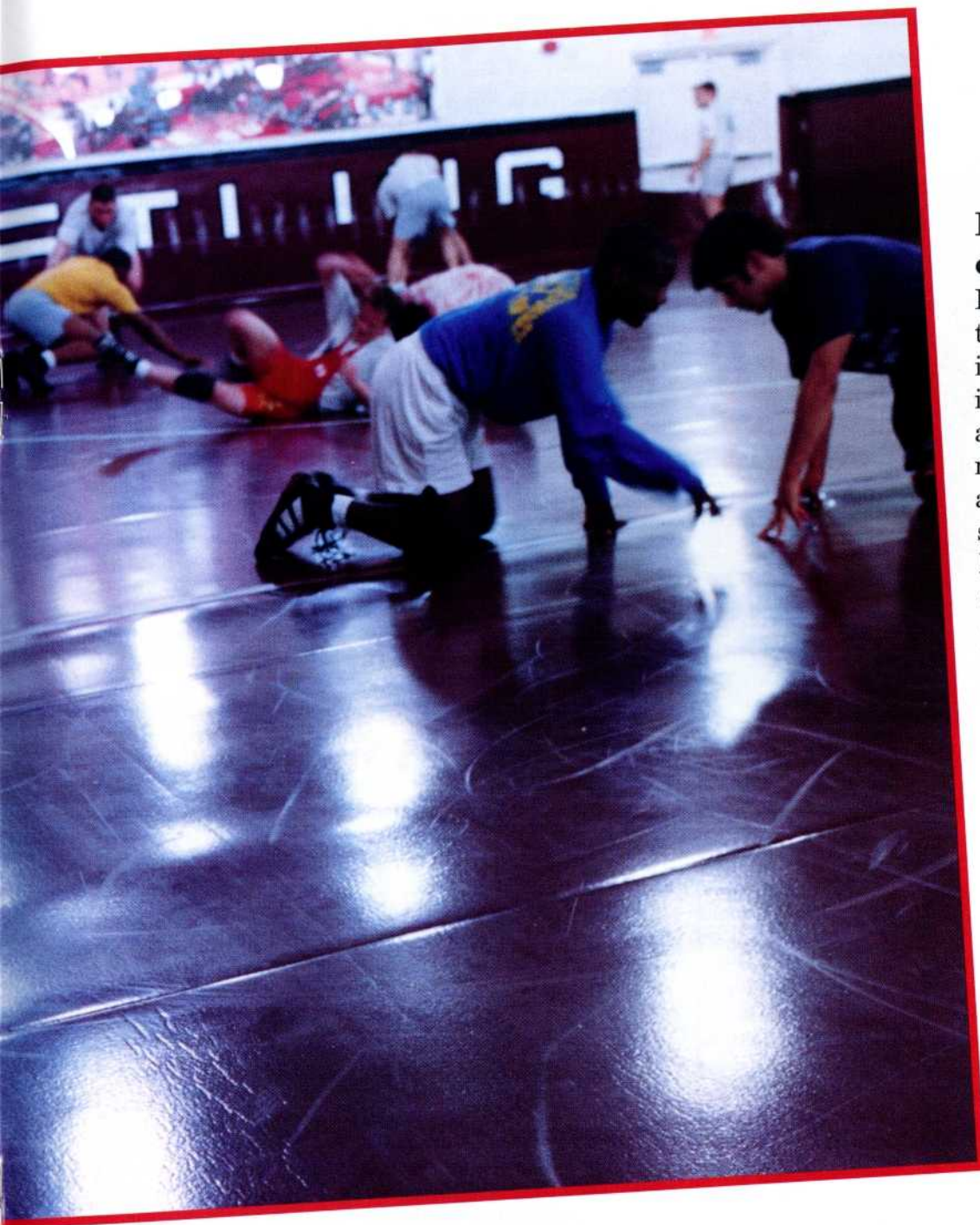


Jack Spates' warriors have taken a program with a history into sparkling new quarters bearing a time-honored Sooner name.



Wrestling with



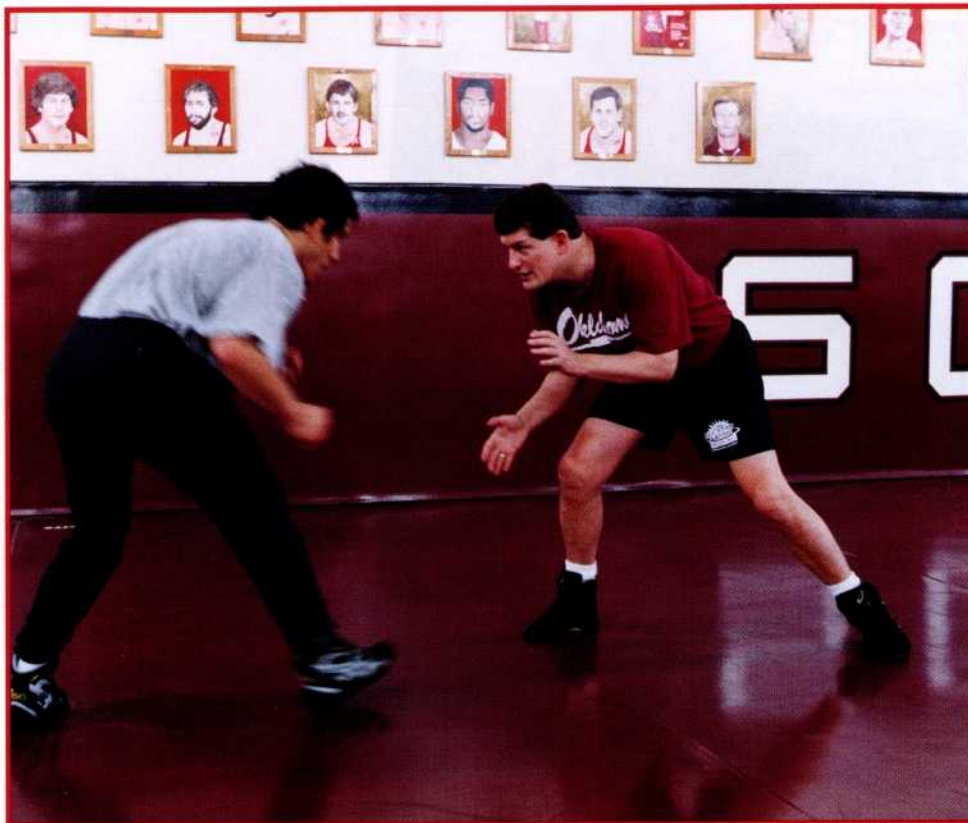
Dark, dank and cramped for space.

Pillars every few feet that hampered mobility and made it almost impossible to simulate a competitive match atmosphere. Very little about the antiquated second-floor room at Memorial Stadium could be portrayed as positive, yet the University of Oklahoma wrestling program managed to produce seven NCAA team championships and 60 individual national champions from within those walls. *continued*

■ OU Wrestling Coach Jack Spates has his whistle at the ready as his team works out in the Stan Abel/Tommy Evans Room of Champions, in the new Port Robertson Wrestling Center.

Success

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH
PHOTOS BY ROBERT TAYLOR



■ Coach Spates, right, demonstrates a move to one of his wrestlers during workouts in the new wrestling center at the north end of the OU Field House.

Defficient facilities or not, that kind of tradition is hard to beat—unless of course, your program happens to share the same state with a school that literally dominated college wrestling for most of the past 80 years. Compared to Oklahoma State’s mat exploits, the Sooners seemed almost light-years behind.

But while every OU coach at some point bemoaned the fact the program was being limited by underdeveloped wrestling facilities, it took a stretch of sub-par seasons in the late '80s and early '90s, and a persuasive new voice to finally get the point across.

The moment Jack Spates assumed the reins in 1993, his inescapable enthusiasm became infectious. He was ever determined to drag the Sooner wrestling program out of the dark ages and into a new century full of unlimited promise.

Six years after arriving from Cornell, where he turned the hallowed halls of an Ivy League also-ran into a national power, Spates finally realized the dream he shared with so many other Oklahoma faithful. A \$1 million renovation project turned the back portion of the 72-year-old OU Field House into the new home of Sooner wrestling.

The Port Robertson Wrestling Center, which features the Stan Abel/Tommy Evans Room of Champions, is a state-of-the-art facility that is further proof of the University’s renewed commitment to academic and athletic excellence. In the past five years, OU has completed work on a redesigned golf course and high-tech golf learning center, a new softball complex, an incomparable new strength training facility and a renovated baseball park.

“When I interviewed for the job here, I had heard the (wrestling) room was bad. But, I had no idea how bad until I saw it,” says Spates. “It literally was one of the worst

ing with a \$50,000 donation. Other alumni really got behind the project after that.

But even with support growing, it was not enough. “We never really thought about who it would be named after; we hadn’t really gotten that far to be honest,” says Spates. “But when the funding stalled, we went to Port (Robertson) and asked if he would lend his name to the project. At first, he was extremely resistant. He’s a very humble man, and the thought of having the facility named after him was a bit distressing. But finally he agreed, and it’s worked out wonderfully.

“Port is someone who so many people respond to. Not just wrestlers. He touched so many athletes during his time here.”

Robertson’s initial reluctance ultimately gave way to his deep love for Oklahoma wrestling. While he still is not convinced that the facility should bear his name, he is proud to be a part of something so crucial to present and future generations of Sooner wrestlers.

“I was happy to help, but my way of looking at it is very logical,” explains the 85-year-old former OU coach and guidance counselor. “All of my contemporaries are old people like me. I think you lose your carry-over identity when things are named after people. All of us like to have a bone pitched our way every now and then, but I felt it should be named after the school. I realize it was intended as an honor, and that’s fine too.”

Spates also credits three different athletic directors for making the dream a reality—Donnie Duncan, Steve Owens and current A.D. Joe Castiglione.

“Donnie got it started, Steve Owens gave the project wings, and Joe Castiglione has seen it through to comple-

tion,” says the OU coach. “This is one of the premier programs in the country, and now we have a facility befitting it. Honestly, it’s one of the best in the country and by far the classiest.”

The new facility was built onto the north end of the historic Field House, on the spot previously occupied by the old Field House pool, a six-lane, 25-yard pool that was constructed in the 1930s. The Field House pool was home to the OU swim team until 1961, but it also hosted a synchronized swimming organization for young women in the early 1950s known as the Ducks Club, as well as the Norman High and Sooner Swim Club teams in more recent years.

“Initially, we wanted to fill in the pool, redo the walls and refurbish everything in that building, but it just wasn’t going to work out,” says Spates, noting the pool area had become available after the facility closed its doors for good in 1996.

The approved plan was a totally original design, incorporating a wrestling room, weight training area, locker room and showers into one complex. The finished product included wall-to-wall mats, a computerized mural, a wall of champions and every amenity a wrestler might need.

“I’ve been to every major college facility in the country,

and this is by far the best,” boasts junior Michael Lightner, a three-time Big 12 champion and two-time All-American from Marlow. “It’s a whole different environment than we’re used to. It literally lifts everybody up when they walk in there. When we moved over there in February, it was like starting a whole new season.”

While recruiting is expected to be the most obvious beneficiary, most of the current Sooners are looking forward to a little extra elbowroom and some decent lighting.

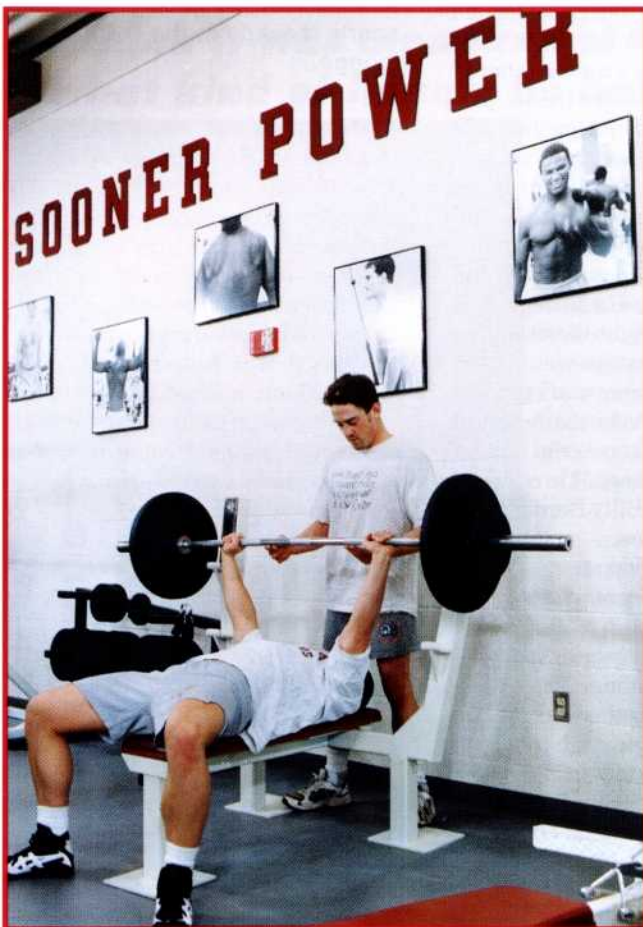
“It’s been great so far—it’s like two different worlds,” says sophomore 174-pounder Rowdy Lundegreen. “I lost three weeks earlier this season when I rammed my shoulder into one of those pillars in the old room. So, obviously I’m happy to be in our new room.”

As for Port Robertson, he is still trying to get used to the idea of having his name attached to the sign out front. But he is thrilled with the way things have turned out.

“The facility is almost unbelievable,” Robertson adds. “Jack has done such a great job helping get this deal done, and the current regime, with Mr. Castiglione and his staff, has done a terrific job of tying the past to the present and future.

“It’s definitely something to be proud of.”

“It’s a whole different environment than we’re used to. It literally lifts everybody up when they walk in there.”



Instant Results?

Just six weeks after moving into its new home at the Port Robertson Center, the Oklahoma wrestling team lived up to its No. 4 national ranking by finishing fourth at the 2000 NCAA Championships in St. Louis, Missouri.

The fourth-place finish was the Sooners’ best showing at nationals since 1989, when they also wound up fourth. It is also the first time an Oklahoma team finished ahead of Oklahoma State since 1985.

Highlighting the Sooners’ performance was senior Byron Tucker, who completed a perfect 34-0 season by winning the national title at 174 pounds. Tucker is OU’s first national champion since John Kading in 1996.

Overall, Coach Jack Spates’ Sooners produced three All-Americans, including Tucker, senior 197-pounder Orville Palmer and junior Michael Lightner, the 141-pound NCAA runner-up for the second straight year.

■ Sooner wrestlers scarcely can believe their good fortune in gaining a world-class weight training area in the new Port Robertson Wrestling Center.