



CALLING DOCTOR COALE

Once pronounced dead and still lingering on life support, the OU women's basketball program staged a remarkable recovery under the care of a feisty, blonde former high school coach.

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

Photos: OU Athletic Media Relations

Another road trip. Another loss. Fourteen straight. Or was it fifteen? No one was counting anymore.



It was early February 1997. Hope and optimism had long since given way to frustration, which in turn was quickly being replaced by an overall numbness that blurred the uncomfortably quiet and painfully long journey home.

Unfortunately for Sherri Coale, the numbness never set in. In fact, each loss introduced the first-year University of Oklahoma women's basketball coach to a new level of misery. Eventually, all of the emotions—frustration, anxiety, helplessness—came bubbling to the surface. Along with emotion came tears. Lots of them.

This particular night, leaving the supposedly friendly confines of Lloyd Noble Center after her team had suffered another demoralizing loss, self-doubt came creeping into Coale's thoughts. Unacceptable, she said to herself. But the questions would not go away.

What have I gotten myself into? Can I make this work? Can I really turn this seemingly impossible situation around?

"I'll never forget that night," says Coale. "I think it was Texas Tech that had just beaten the dog out of us—really embarrassed us. It was never a ball game, and I was so disappointed. I went home after the game, got out of my car and literally fell down at the back door in a heap of tears. I couldn't go in."

Just then, Coale's husband, Dane, appeared at the door, a curious look on his face, and helped her inside.

"When Dane asked me what was wrong, I said 'I don't know if I can do this,' " she recalls. "One of the neat things about Dane is he always knows how to respond to me. He simply said, 'Are you kidding me? Of course you can do it.' He left me standing there crying in the kitchen, and I looked



Chuck Porter



Lisa Hall



Colleagues credit Sherri Coale's success to her passionate approach to life—her family, her job and her friends—and to her ability to relate to her players.

around like, 'What choice do I have?' The next day I had 15 new things we could try to see if we could get a little closer next time."

The season was about to get worse, yet Coale managed to regain her composure.

Although the Sooners closed 1996-97 on a 16-game losing streak, finishing with a 5-22 overall record, which included a 1-15 mark in the Big 12 Conference, the initial building blocks were quietly in place.

Coale, who just 12 months earlier had led the Norman High girls to a 27-1 record and their second state championship in three years, understood the importance of creating a solid foundation for purposes of rebuilding. She inherited an OU program with limited resources, but she had no way of knowing the full magnitude of that endeavor when she was hired.

"Honestly, there were several points during those first two seasons that were about as rock bottom as you can get," says Coale, who guided the Sooners to an 8-19 mark in her second season at the helm. "I knew it was going to be a challenge, but almost every day was a struggle. You had to make yourself find something good in this week, not just in this one practice.

"If I hadn't had my family, I would never have made it, because you go home and rock that baby or see that little 5-year-old boy playing outside, and everything falls back into perspective."

The Sooners' well-documented struggles under Coale could have been cause for concern, especially with a number of detractors publicly voicing their criticisms, questioning the wisdom of OU's hiring a high school coach. But associate athletic director Marita Hynes, whom Coale has referred to as a "lifeline," and the rest of the OU higher-ups never wavered in their support. They realized the rebuilding process was not something that could be rushed.

"I never had any doubts about Sherri's ability. Granted, there were times when it was downright hard to go down that tunnel—it hurt every step of the way," says Hynes, who is the senior women's administrator entering her 25th year at OU. "Near the end of her second season, I was

Norman Photography



Win or lose, Coach Sherri Coale finds her biggest supporters on the home front—her husband, Dane, the baseball coach at Purcell High School; son Colton, 8, left; and daughter Chandler, 4.

concerned that she was so disappointed, but you could see she was doing it the right way. Sherri didn't go for the immediate fix. Her goal was to build a foundation that was just going to get stronger and stronger with time."

Phylesha Whaley, a member of Coale's inaugural recruiting class, developed into the team's cornerstone during those first two seasons. Her maturing presence, along with Coale's passion and ability to sell a fledgling program, helped provide a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel.

"Even after those first two seasons, there was no doubt Sherri could be successful at this level. She's so well rounded and very intelligent, not only when it comes to basketball, but about life," offers OU assistant coach Jan Ross, one of Coale's teammates at Oklahoma Christian College. "She is passionate about everything, her family, her job, her friends—and she relates so well with her players. It was just a matter of time."

Turning It Around

After improving to a respectable 15-14 a year later, the Sooners were ready to turn that glimmer into a full-blown spotlight. And they would bask in it as long as it burned, which turned out to be the entire 1999-2000 season.

With Whaley leading the way, and young talent like Stacey Dales, La' Neishea Caufield, Caton Hill and Jadrea Seeley stepping in to play key roles, Oklahoma proved ready to join the upper echelon of Division I basketball programs by earning a share of the Big 12 Conference title and advancing all the way to the NCAA Tournament's "Sweet 16."

Ten years earlier, the women's basketball program had been unceremoniously dropped by the University—ultimately to be resurrected only after a public outcry. Three seasons earlier, the Sooners were reeling from a 5-22 campaign. Yet here they were, practically sitting on top of the world with a 25-8 record and a No. 13 national ranking.

"It's hard to put into words what the completion of last season was like. It's almost like instant legitimacy," says Coale, whose team rallied to beat defending national champion Purdue 76-74 to earn its spot in the Sweet 16. "We knew we were getting better. We knew we were close to that point, so it was not a surprise to any of us. But for the rest of the country, it was like, 'Wow! Where did you come from?' On a national scale, it puts us right there with the people we want to be mentioned with.

"I've had this vision of what I wanted this program to be about when I took this job. I took our kids in the locker room after we beat Purdue and told them, 'What you did tonight is what I dreamed about for four years.' Everything I wanted us to be about happened in West Lafayette (Indiana) that night. Everything—the way we played, the way we stuck together, the way the players handled themselves afterward. I was so proud of what we had created."

The portion of the story that most pleases Coale is the road the Sooners traveled to find success. No short cuts, just lots of blood, sweat and tears.

"You have to have players, there's no doubt about it," adds the 35-year-old Healdton, Oklahoma, native. "I think one of the neatest things about this whole deal is the fact we've done it with the kind of people we want representing this institution. We've done it with great kids who are great communicators, who aren't afraid to work in the community and work their tails off in the classroom.

"If it had not been for Phylesha, Roxanne Long, Jenny Bramer, Michele and Kelley Workman, Miranda Stacey, Jaimie Anderson and so many others—if those kids had not been willing to buy into our vision and work ethic, there's no way we're playing in West Lafayette with a chance to go to the Sweet 16. No way."

Besides acknowledging players past and present, Coale points to a large cast of supporters who also played a major part in the turnaround, including Ross and fellow assistants Bo Overton, Kristi Hayes and Deren Boyd. Hynes led the behind-the-scenes support network, and growing ranks of fans helped transform OU women's basketball from an unknown entity into a popular phenomenon.

A total team effort, no doubt, but there are still questions to be answered and work to be done—beginning with maintaining their newfound status.

"There is an age-old debate over what's harder, getting to the top of the mountain or staying there," Coale says. "Being in the position of trying to change perception is so difficult because there is nothing you can do immediately; it takes time. Now, we

have a new challenge. There are whole new circumstances, different parameters and different pressures."

The Windfall

The Sooners' postseason success has helped open the eyes and ears of young basketball talent across the country. Players who may not have given Oklahoma a second thought in the past are now sitting up and paying attention.

"It's been so nice to be able to tell kids, 'when you come here you're going to be competing for a national championship every year.' I've never been able to tell them that before," says Coale, her face brightening at the very thought. "My pitch to Stacey (Dales) was come help us be respectable, come help us build something. I can't promise you we'll do anything incredible in your four years, but we'd love to have you.

"That's what's so great about Phylesha getting to share in our suc-



"Last season was nothing but the tip of the iceberg. Sherri is the type of person who is never going to sit around and be satisfied."

cess. So many times, players in her position do all the work and suffer through all the hard times to help build a program, only to see the success come after they have graduated. The fact she was here in the middle of it makes it that much sweeter."

Whaley, a four-time All-Big 12 selection and the top scorer in OU history, is gone, but the Sooners return four starters and nine of their top 10 players for the 2000-01 season. Plus, top recruits Jamie Talbert of Elkhart, Kansas; Rosalind Ross of Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and Stephanie Luce of Southlake, Texas, will join an already talented roster.

Although Coale's staff went outside the state for this year's recruiting class, the veteran coach stresses the importance of in-state recruiting and how success in that area will be beneficial.

"I'm very happy with the players we're bringing in, and we'll always want to go other places to look. But by

and large, Oklahoma basketball is so good you can take a player or two every year and really help your program," explains Coale. "I think you have to be solid where you live. These people are our fan base and our extended family here at Oklahoma. We will always look here first and try to keep the best kids at home.

"I think there is a certain amount of pride that comes from playing for your state institution. I see that in the people from Ada who haul up here to watch Caton and La' Neishea, and in the folks from Bethel who hold up signs for Jadrea. In the beginning, we had to go away a little more because the reputation here wasn't very good. But then you build it a little bit, and soon the good ones want to stay home."

"Last season was nothing but the tip of the iceberg," insists Hynes. "Sherri is the type of person who is never going to sit around and be satisfied. She is always striving to find

ways to be more successful. You can see it in the type of kids she is bringing in."

Sharing the Passion

"I think passion is so important in life, and it's important to me to do whatever I do as well as I possibly can," says Coale. "When you are passionate about something, the deeper you dig into it, the better it gets. For me, it has never been—and this is going to sound trite—about the championships. Championships really drive some coaches, and I don't think there is anything wrong with that. But that has never been my motivation.

"My motivation as a basketball coach is making it look and feel right. That's the thing that drives me in this game, that you can get five people on the court at the same time moving together as one. Five people who understand how to play, who believe in each other and value what they do can be so phenomenal. To me, that is



what we are all about, whether we are building skyscrapers or raising children. Basketball is an extension of how I like to live, how I think we should live.”

Coale’s enthusiasm is infectious and evidenced in the style of basketball her teams take to the court. The Sooners have become a direct reflection of their coach, powered by passion and hard work, and motivated by the desire to take another step up the mountain.

The talent is in place to make those strides. The one missing ingredient is people to share it with. While Oklahoma drew a record number of fans last season, the Lloyd Noble Center still had too many empty seats, especially when compared to other Big 12 programs like Iowa State and Texas Tech.

But Coale is working on that, too.

“I think the style of play, the way we play, is attractive to people. It’s fun for people who don’t even consider themselves women’s sports fans,” says Coale. “If you can get them there one time, they usually come back for more. I heard one booster club member say our motto should be, ‘Get them here once.’”



Sherri Coale’s new challenge—winning the conference title outright and going deeper into the NCAA tournament—will depend in large part on the leadership of veterans like Stacey Dales, left, a member of Canada’s 2000 Olympic team.



A key to Coale’s recruiting philosophy is keeping Oklahoma’s best women players, like La’ Neishea Caufield, left, at home—and wearing Sooner uniforms.

“I think part of our responsibility with the program is playing a great brand of basketball and being successful, but it’s also reflecting the balance. Balance is so important, and I think that’s one reason why the WNBA has done so well. Their players are accessible, they are helping in the community, and they are giving back. They are not just athletes in a glass box—they are real people. That is attractive to the fans and to the public. That’s what we want here at Oklahoma.”

The Encore

First, the Sooners must find a way to replace Whaley, who was the team’s heart and soul for the last four seasons. With players like Dales, Caufield, Hill and Sunny Hardeman ready to step it up, OU should have little problem replacing Whaley’s points and rebounds. That leaves the question of who will be the floor leader.

Dales, a member of Canada’s 2000 Olympic Team, is the obvious choice. The junior point guard from Brockville, Ontario, may be better known for her dazzling passing skills, but she has a take-charge personality that will lend itself perfectly to the situation.

“I think you’re going to see Stacey really blossom this season. Where this was Phylesha’s team in the past, Stacey has a chance to step into that role,” says Coale, who also points to veterans like Caufield, Hill and Hardeman as leaders. “As for goals this season, we don’t sit down and list the five things we want to accomplish. It’s more like, how do you want this season to go? What do we want this experience to be like? Everything feeds off of that.”

“I know we want to win the Big 12 title outright. Secondly, we’d like to go deeper into the NCAA Tournament. And our ultimate goal would be the Final Four. As for the team, it will be more about what we have to do together to make those things happen.”

Coale has delivered on her promise of turning the Oklahoma program into a contender. But as one of the hottest commodities in the coaching profession, will she be around to see it through?

“Is there a better job in America? I grew up a Sooner fan,” adds Coale. “I can’t imagine anywhere else I’d rather live. Oklahoma is home.”