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**Sooner Magic is back with a vengeance
as Bob Stoops' troops bring home
National Championship No. 7
with an unprecedented 13-0 season.**

THE MAGNIFICENT SEVENTH

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

In the end, the outcome was normal. Expected. Routine, even. These Sooners had done exactly what they were supposed to do. Still, it was quite unbelievable.

Torrance Marshall, providing the epicenter for a mass of adoring fans, celebrating teammates, and quote-hungry media types, had to do one more double-take at the Pro Player Stadium scoreboard, just to make sure his eyes weren't deceiving him—that it wasn't all one big dream.

It wasn't.

Marshall, an imposing 6-foot-2, 255-pound linebacker, just moments earlier had delivered the performance of his career in helping No. 1 Oklahoma complete one of the most amazing stories in college football history via a 13-2 Orange Bowl victory over No. 2 Florida State. The Sooner senior, in front of his hometown fans in Miami, Florida, earned Most Valuable Player honors while spearheading a defensive assault that shut down the Seminoles' previously unstoppable offense.

The reality of a magical 13-0 run that culminated with a national championship title left Marshall in a state of euphoria.

"It was a storybook ending for me to have it play out like it did. I've come such a long way in my lifetime, and ever since I got to Oklahoma, everyone around me has been so supportive—like family," said Marshall, who arrived in Norman prior to the 1999 season after stints at Miami-Dade Community College and Kemper Military College in Missouri. "A lot of people really didn't believe we were for real, but . . . honestly, every player on this team believed we could do this, and that says a lot about our coaches."

That is where this success story begins—with second-year coach Bob Stoops and his young staff preparing for another late-night, mid-summer study session in one of the film rooms. Maybe it was June or maybe July, but during one of those sessions, the blueprint for the 2000 football season was devised, tweaked, and put into motion.

Positive energy, confidence, discipline, work ethic—ingredients lacking under the previous regime—were a crucial part of the Stoops plan that had been launched upon his arrival at Oklahoma. Each element took root during his first season, then blossomed this past fall.

Sure, Stoops had promised success and delivered some encouraging results during that first season, producing a 7-5 record and the program's first bowl appearance in five years. But few outside the program believed it possible for the 40-year-old Ohio native to completely turn things



around in such dramatic fashion.

Sooner fans had heard the talk—and the promises—before, and the threads of faith and patience had become fragile over a 10-year period that saw the once-proud, tradition-rich program decline into the depths of obscurity.

But Stoops never wavered. He stressed tradition, welcoming back past heroes like Barry Switzer, Brian Bosworth, and Joe Washington. While his public speeches were filled with words like "improvement," "pride," and "contender," they barely scratched the surface when it came to the inspirational psyche he in-

stilled at practice every day. Stoops, along with every member of his staff, brought raw, unbridled passion, energy, and toughness back to OU, and it was evidenced in every corner of the program.

A good blend of new recruits and leftover untapped talent provided the makings of something special. But getting the job done on the field against opponents from one of the toughest conferences in the country would be the ultimate test.

Stoops was the first to admit the '99 Sooners fell short of their expectations despite dramatic improvements from the previous three seasons' all-time low of 12-22. The Sooners had a chance to finish that first campaign on a high note with a victory over Mississippi at the Independence Bowl. But a valiant comeback was thwarted by a late Rebel field goal, leaving OU to ponder what might have been during a painfully long off-season.

"A year ago in the Independence Bowl, we were down (21-3) in the first half against Ole Miss," answered Stoops, when asked to pinpoint a crucial moment in taking OU to the next level. "Our players have a great comeback and take the lead with about a minute and a half left in the game, and we're not capable of finishing. Our players . . . that made them hungrier."

That appetite did nothing but grow during spring practice and on into summer workouts and finally initial fall drills. There wasn't so much a feeling of urgency in the Sooners' preseason preparation as there was a sense of deep purpose and conviction.

More experienced, deeper in talent and better prepared, the Sooners charged into the 2000 season expecting success from the opening kickoff. Leaders emerged at every juncture—quarterback Josh Heupel and linebacker Rocky Calmus were obvious, followed by Marshall, Bubba Burcham, Roy Williams, and Seth Littrell. The list grew with every practice and every game.

Two wins. Then four, six, seven, eight . . . *continued*

This unbelievable ride shocked the college football world and pleased Sooner fans to no end. Stoops originally had asked only his players to believe, then each step the Sooners took throughout the fall helped spread that faith to the masses.

"You don't just say you expect to win. You earn the right to expect to win by the way you've prepared, by what you've invested, by the way you've played," said Stoops, describing his team's confidence level and overall mindset going into the Orange Bowl. "We believe we've done what's necessary to hold that confidence and not just talk about it . . . I believe our players have earned the right to play that way."

By the time top-ranked Oklahoma had beaten Florida State on January 3, 2001, every opponent had been slain, all doubters silenced.

THE ROAD TO THE TITLE

Game One:
Oklahoma No. 20

Fast start vs. UTEP

The season started innocently enough on the first weekend of September with an old acquaintance making his first return to Norman as coach of the opposing team, Texas-El Paso. Head Coach Gary Nord had served as offensive coordinator during the tumultuous and short-lived regime of Howard Schnellenberger, losing his job after a disappointing 5-5-1 season in 1995.

Much was made of Nord's return visit, but the actual game failed to live up to the pre-battle hype. UTEP was a 27-point underdog and played like one in the 106-degree heat, wilting early after several failed gambles, then totally collapsing under the strain of seven turnovers.

The much-ballyhooed Sooner offense started slowly, but managed to turn the myriad of UTEP miscues into a 55-14 season-opening romp. Heupel, the 1999 Big 12 Conference Offensive Newcomer of the Year, settled in to throw for 274 yards and two touchdowns, while freshman running back Renaldo Works stole the show late by running over, around

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"Touchdown Quentin Griffin!" became a familiar cry during the 2000 season as the diminutive running back added a ground threat to the Sooners' pass-happy offensive attack, notably six TDs against Texas.

and through the UTEP defense for three fourth-quarter touchdowns.

The Sooner defense applied the bend-but-don't-break principle against the Miners, surrendering 342 yards of offense, most of it meaningless.

Game Two:
Oklahoma No. 19

Chalking up another big win

Arkansas State came to Norman for what was expected to be a non-conference clash of anticlimactic proportions. And that's exactly what it was.

Heupel led the Sooners on a 15-play, 80-yard scoring drive to open the game. The senior signal caller capped the march with a 1-yard touchdown run that opened the flood-

gates on a 45-14 blowout.

The game also marked the emergence of Norman senior J.T. Thatcher, as he scored on a 66-yard punt return to put the Sooners on top early 14-0. Thatcher, who had not started a game since his freshman season, finished the evening with a school record 160 yards on five punt returns.

Heupel tallied 301 yards through the air and three TD passes, while Works continued to be the biggest surprise of the young season, rushing for 109 yards and one touchdown on only 12 carries.

"We were sharper than we were a week ago," noted Stoops, "but we still need to improve on the penalties, and we need to play smarter. J.T. Thatcher had a great game on both special teams and defense

(safety). He's only going to get better as the season goes on."

Prophetic words from the man in charge, as Thatcher would indeed become a key piece to the puzzle the Sooners were set on solving.

Game Three: Oklahoma No. 16

The little man comes up big

Entering the season as the Sooners' No. 1 running back, Quentin Griffin had taken a back seat to freshman teammate Works during the first two OU victories. Undaunted, the 5-foot-6 Griffin proved he had plenty to contribute during the Sooners' 42-14 romp over Rice.

In helping OU improve to 3-0 after a week off, Griffin rushed for 117 yards and three touchdowns. The speedy sophomore also caught three passes and was the perfect decoy in sparking the OU passing game to its best performance of the season so far.

"I had been a little disappointed,

but I learned that you can't get discouraged when things don't always go your way," offered Griffin, reflecting the sentiments instilled by Stoops and his staff. "I prepared myself the same as I did the two previous weeks, and today I was able to come up with some big plays. It feels pretty nice."

It looked even better. Suddenly, the Sooners had two legitimate threats in the backfield, and one of the best blocking fullbacks in the league in Littrell. That was great news for assistant Mark Mangino, who took over as offensive coordinator when Mike Leach departed for Texas Tech in the off-season.

Known more for its wide-open passing attack in 1999, the Sooners displayed an offensive balance that turns ordinary teams into something extraordinary.

The Rice victory also exhibited the first signs of a potentially great defense. The Sooners held the Owls' offense to 108 second-half yards and used a pair of late turnovers to slam the door shut.

Game Four: Oklahoma No. 14

The Sooners get defensive

The Sooners took their fans on a roller coaster ride in their Big 12 Conference opener against the Jayhawks, a team that had beaten OU five straight times coming in.

Despite being a 24-point underdog, Kansas threw the ball against a porous Sooner defense plagued by busted coverages and an inability to pressure KU quarterback Dylon Smith. Smith maneuvered the Jayhawk offense for 284 yards and 16 points through the first 23 minutes of action.

The Sooner defense was shell-shocked.

"We gave up some big plays off of mental errors early," said OU defensive back Oteji Jones. "It just seemed we were able to make some adjustments and correct those mistakes, especially in the second half."

Defensive coordinators Mike Stoops and Brent Venables were ready with the corrections, beginning in the second quarter when defensive tackle Ramon Richardson sacked Smith and forced a fumble recovered by Corey Callens, thwarting a golden KU scoring opportunity. The Sooners capitalized by marching 82 yards in eight plays to take the lead for good at 17-16.

From that point on, Smith and the Jayhawks didn't have a prayer. The previously shoddy secondary play improved dramatically, and the Sooners applied pressure Smith simply couldn't escape. By the end of the day, the OU defense had sacked the KU quarterback six times and forced seven turnovers, including five interceptions.

Safety Williams stepped squarely into the spotlight with a game-high 13 tackles, and Thatcher added three interceptions. As a side note, Heupel threw for 346 yards and was beginning to earn some Heisman Trophy consideration.

OU had won 11 straight home games, but things were about to get interesting with their first "road trip" to Dallas to meet arch-rival Texas.

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Tailgaters came early and stayed late, reveling in a winning season that just wouldn't stop. Season ticket sales had been respectable even during the down years but the Stoops era saw a return to sold-out games and a waiting list for season tickets several thousand strong.

Curtis Fagan goes high for a Josh Heupel pass as the senior quarterback continued to keep his receiver corps busy in a 41-31 triumph at Kansas State.

Game Five: Oklahoma No. 11

Red River blowout

Red River Showdown time was the Sooners' first real test of the 2000 season. After all, Texas came into the much-anticipated battle as a 5-point favorite, ranked No. 10 in the land.

With Kansas State and Nebraska next up for Bob Stoops' troops, many were calling this stretch "Black October." The wisdom was that if the Sooners could emerge from this abyss with a 5-2 mark, it would be a positive springboard into the rest of the season.

Oklahoma wasn't buying any of it.

Stoops' "all for one, one for all" outlook seemed like a cliché, but try telling the Longhorns that after suffering a 63-14 loss at the hands of their rivals.

Incredibly, the Sooners stalked into the Cotton Bowl and in one fell swoop, erased years of misery and mediocrity by running, passing, and defending their way to one of the most lopsided wins in the series' storied history.

The Sooners, who improved to 5-0 for the first time since 1993, scored the first 42 points of the game. Much of the talk focused on Heupel and the OU passing attack, but Griffin made headlines this week with his six-touchdown performance.

Led by some brilliant secondary play, the Oklahoma defense was too good as it held the high-powered Horns to only 154 total yards, including minus-seven on the ground. Calmus scored on a 41-yard interception return in the second quarter, and over all the Sooners forced three Texas turnovers.

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Cornerback Michael Thompson provided the perfect microcosm of the game. While much of the pregame talk centered around Thompson as a potential weakness against Texas quarterback Major Applewhite, the sophomore answered any and all questions with four tackles, a forced fumble, and a fumble recovery.

The Horns never knew what hit them.

Game Six: Oklahoma No. 8

K-State's winning streak is over

After rolling over Texas in such unbelievable fashion, a road victory over second-ranked Kansas State seemed almost too much to ask the following Saturday. But the Sooners were only just beginning their climb back to national prominence, and the Wildcats stood in the way.

Not for long.

Even the confidence behind a 25-game home winning streak and 50,000 purple-clad fans were not enough to detour the Sooners' suddenly unstoppable Heupel-led juggernaut. The OU quarterback threw his name into the Heisman hat for good with a 29-

for-37, 374-yard, two-touchdown performance that propelled his team to a 41-31 triumph.

The victory came against the No. 1-ranked defense in the country and was representative of just how far the Sooners had come since Stoops took over at the controls.

"I'm going to say we're on a mission," offered OU receiver Curtis Fagan, who caught a 12-yard touchdown pass from Heupel in the opening quarter at Manhattan. "We're on a mission to put OU back on the map. We're not back yet, as far as winning a Big 12 title or a national championship, but this win was a step in that direction."

While Heupel continued to break just about every OU passing record in the books, receivers like Fagan, Antwone Savage and Josh Norman made sizable contributions, and the running game was still doing its part to keep the team moving in the right direction.

The Sooners hit the Wildcats with a 17-point first-quarter barrage and never really looked back as they built a 38-14 advantage. When the Sooners finally spoiled a late K-State rally, it was time to turn their attention to No. 1 Nebraska.

Game Seven:
Oklahoma No. 3

*Will the real Big Red
please stand up?*

In their previous seven meetings with Nebraska, all losses, the Sooners had been outscored 263-61. In 1997, the Cornhuskers demolished OU 69-7. Thatcher and Littrell played in that game as freshmen and were left with the bitter taste of one of the worst losses in school history.

This game presented a chance, not only to avenge that loss, but also to replace Nebraska as the best football team in the Big 12 Conference—and in the country. The Sooners would not let this opportunity slip through their collective fingers.

But it didn't look promising after

“The fans were great, the atmosphere was great. You want the fans to try to influence the game—make the opposing team feel like it’s up against not only us, but something bigger.”

the visiting Huskers jumped out to a 14-0 lead in the first quarter.

While some of the 76,000 fans may have sunk into their seats with expectations crushed, Memorial Stadium still rocked, and the OU football team wasn't about to back off or back down. Confidence burned brightly in Stoops' eyes, and his team fed off of that faith.

The OU defense stiffened, holding Nebraska to nine first downs, 136 total yards and zero points over the final three quarters. Meanwhile, the Sooner offense scored 31 unanswered points.

“The fans were great, the atmosphere was great,” said Stoops. “You want the fans to try to influence the game—make the opposing team feel like it’s up against not only us, but something bigger.”

Defense helped get the momentum

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turned back in OU's favor, and no one group played a bigger role than that of Calmus, Marshall, Roger Steffen, Williams, Thompson, Derrick Strait and Brandon Everage. Those seven players combined for 60 tackles, two sacks, a forced fumble, and an interception return for a touchdown.

A national television audience watched as a 1-yard run by Griffin cut the deficit to 14-7 and a 34-yard pass from Heupel to Fagan put things back on even terms. A Tim Duncan field goal put the hosts on top to stay, and an 8-yard run by Norman sent OU fans into a halftime frenzy.

Strait provided the clincher when he picked off a Eric Crouch pass and returned it 32 yards for a touchdown and a 31-14 lead.

"It wasn't exactly a great situation (down 14-0), but no one panicked," said Stoops, whose team improved to 7-0 overall and 4-0 in league play. "We settled down, got our reads down and got used to the pace and the speed. And once we did that we were in good shape. That shows character, and it shows we're not a fragile team."

The Sooners were anything but fragile, bolting to the No. 1 spot in the national polls, including in the all-important Bowl Championship Series rankings.

Game Eight: Oklahoma No. 1

Sooners bomb the Bears

Baylor was next on the Sooners' list of victims, and the Bears barely put up a fight. Heupel continued to produce Heisman-like numbers in this laughter even though he played only the first half.

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Great defensive minds—such as the Brothers Stoops above, and Brent Venables upper left—think alike when shutting down the opposition.

Thatcher got things off and running for OU with a 60-yard punt return for a touchdown. And the Sooners added three more scores in the opening quarter. Heupel scored on a 4-yard run and then delivered two scoring strikes to Fagan to make it 28-0.

"Looking at all the teams and all the players that are involved with the Heisman hype, I think Josh has added the most value to his team," said OU receiver Damian Mackey. "(Josh) is very valuable to our team, and there is no telling where we would be if we didn't have him."

According to many Heisman voters, Heupel had moved to the top of the ballot by the time the Sooners exited Waco with a 56-7 victory. His numbers were comparable to any in the country, but his leadership skills

seemed to give him that extra edge.

The win improved the Sooners to 8-0 and put them in the driver's seat for the Big 12 Championship Game in Kansas City.

Game Nine: Oklahoma No. 1

Surviving the 12th Man

Very few places are tougher to play than Kyle Field in the heart of Aggieland in south Texas.

Texas A&M usually is ranked and always a worthy opponent. But the Aggies, when tucked inside the mass of humanity at their home stadium—well, they are practically unbeatable. On this day, 87,188 fanatics, also known as "the 12th man," stuffed themselves into the joint and sat back

hoping for a big upset.

And for the longest time, it looked like 23rd-ranked A&M just might pull it off.

But Oklahoma reached back to borrow a little Sooner Magic from the past, and Marshall delivered it with a fourth-quarter interception return for the go-ahead touchdown. The momentum-turning play helped OU rally from a 24-10 deficit and eventually pull out a 35-31 victory.

"During the course of a season, a lot of football teams find themselves in a game where they are not playing their best football, and you've got to find a way to win," said Heupel, who threw for 263 yards and a touchdown, but also was picked off twice. "This football team found a way to win."

The Sooners ultimately outscored their hosts 22-7 in the final quarter, keeping their expectations intact: to run the table in the Big 12 South, win the conference title game and a national championship. Yes, now the Sooners were actually thinking very seriously about winning it all.

Heupel played a key role in the

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Even with a nagging elbow problem limiting his late-season passing proficiency, Josh Heupel always found a way to win.

come-from-behind win, completing 10-of-13 passes for 81 yards and scrambling for 28 more during the final 16 minutes. But the OU defense kept the perfect season alive with two crucial goal-line stands in the closing three minutes.

Jones batted away one fourth-down pass at the Sooner one-yard-line and

then teamed up with Strait to make the clinching tackle on another fourth-down play moments later.

"We all wanted to be in the fire. There wasn't anybody who shied away from it," said Marshall, who had seven tackles to go along with his clutch interception. "We look forward to situations like this—to proving ourselves."

Nine wins, no losses. Another monumental win in what was fast becoming a season of monumental wins.

Game 10: Oklahoma No. 1

Familiar face, familiar results

The Sooners came out of the A&M game battered, but ready to meet their next challenge—Texas Tech. The Red Raiders, with Mike Leach at the helm, were familiar with OU's offense, and it showed during a slugishly played game won by the Sooners, 27-13. *continued*

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Defensive back J. T. Thatcher finally found his niche on the team and turned his senior year into a marquee season, keeping the Sooner faithful on their feet with thrilling punt runbacks and key pass interceptions.

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How do you make an athletic director like Joe Castiglione really happy? Chalk up 13 wins and a national championship.

day and the season when he batted away the potential game-winning pass on a fourth-and-goal situation with 3:15 remaining.

The Sooner offense simply never got going against the Pokes, who had dedicated the game to recently fired coach Bob Simmons. It was like a bowl game for the hosts, and they played very inspired football.

OU didn't, as Heupel admitted afterward.

"It's disappointing because we know we're better than that," he said after passing for a career-low 154 yards. "Lack of execution . . . The difference between being successful and not successful is a very thin line, and we were on the wrong side of it today. We need to get things corrected and get ready to go next week. The defense is playing great football—can't say enough about what they've done. They've been carrying this football team the last couple of weeks."

True, the OU defense was the only thing in sync for the Sooners late in the regular season. Calmus, Marshall and Williams were outstanding, and Thatcher picked off his eighth pass at OSU.

The offense needed to rev up before the 11-0 Sooners headed to Kansas City for the Big 12 title game.

The most feared linebacking duo in the country, Torrance Marshall and Rocky Calmus, contributed to the Sooners' destruction of the Florida State offense in the FedEx Orange Bowl with crushing tackles like these.

Oklahoma improved to 10-0, but suddenly looked vulnerable—on offense, no less. An elbow injury Heupel suffered in the Texas game flared up, and he was intercepted twice for the second game in a row. He threw for a season-low 248 yards and was unable to generate much in the way of big plays or big drives.

Fortunately, the Sooner defense picked up the slack again. Calmus and Williams had huge games, combining for 23 tackles, and Thatcher's 85-yard interception return for a touchdown was the big play of the first half. A 6-yard pass from Heupel to Trent Smith and touchdown runs from Works and Griffin accounted for the other OU points.

"The kids have set high standards for themselves, and they know they didn't perform to their potential today," said Mangino, whose offense

rolled up 384 total yards, but hurt its own cause with four turnovers.

Game 11: Oklahoma No. 1 *Getting out of Stillwater alive*

All that stood in the way of Oklahoma and its first undefeated regular season since 1987 was an Oklahoma State defense ranked 75th in the country. That and a lot of orange and black.

On their opening possession, the Sooners marched 99 yards in 11 plays to take a 7-0 lead. Heupel hit Fagan with a 3-yard scoring toss to start what looked like a blowout victory.

Final score: OU 12, OSU 7.

Obviously, the blowout never came, and victory almost slipped away all together in the closing moments. However, defensive back Strait saved the

Game 12:
Oklahoma No. 1
*The Wildcats run
out of lives*

For the first time in two months, the Sooners actually were facing more than a few skeptics as they prepared for a rematch against K-State in the conference championship game. The biggest question was the health of Heupel's throwing arm.

Could he deliver one more win to earn the Sooners a shot at the national title in Miami?

Anyone who doubted simply didn't know Heupel. As far as he and the rest of the Sooners were concerned, there was never any doubt.

On a frigid December night at Kansas City's Arrowhead Stadium,

**“It really was a
total team effort.
That’s the way
it’s been pretty
much all season.
This is a magical
time for
OU football—
I really
believe that.”**

Heupel, while far from perfect, was at his best with the game on the line in the fourth quarter. And the OU defense was, again, its usual dominating self. Together, they produced a 27-24 victory that clinched Oklahoma's first shot at a national title since 1987.

A win over Florida State in the Orange Bowl would be title No. 7 for the Sooners, but they weren't looking that far ahead on this night.

“It's been a long season, and it's been a great ride so far,” said Heupel, whose fourth-quarter heroics included a 17-yard touchdown pass to Andre Woolfolk. “To win the Big 12 championship, to beat a great Kansas State team twice, is something special, and you should enjoy it. There is a certain chemistry on this team.”

The Sooners trailed 10-3 early, but Heupel led the comeback by

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ESPN College GameDay commentator Lee Corso, who had been publicly downgrading the Sooners all season, received a good-natured visit from the 2000 National Championship team on the floor of Pro Player Stadium at the conclusion of Oklahoma's 13-2 Orange Bowl victory over the 10-point favorite, Florida State.

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Robert Taylor

Left: Team trophies galore attest to the 2000 football Sooners' amazing season.

Above: Country music star and Sooner fan Toby Keith performed the National Anthem at the Orange Bowl and the subsequent Sooner Celebration.

Below: An exuberant Patrick Fletcher, a senior backup quarterback, pumps up the crowd at the Sooner Celebration.

repeatedly hooking up with go-to guy Smith, who established career highs with eight catches for 96 yards. He also scored a second-quarter touchdown that tied the game at 10-10.

Heupel, who would finish second to Florida State quarterback Chris Weinke a few days later in the Heisman balloting, scored on a 7-yard run in the third quarter, then put the Sooners on top to stay with a strike to Woolfolk. Then late in the game, Heupel and Griffin led OU into field goal position, where Duncan booted a 46-yarder that proved to be the difference.

The defense did the rest, holding the Wildcats to 239 total yards and 14 first downs.

"It really was a total team effort. That's the way it's been pretty much all season," said Jones. "This is a magical time for OU football—I really believe that."



Robert Taylor



Above: Approximately 35,000 Sooner fans filled the north end of the stadium to celebrate the 2000 National Championship with Coach Bob Stoops and the team that brought the Sears Trophy home to Norman—where it belongs.

Below: The man of the hour, Quarterback Josh Heupel, brought along his camcorder to preserve every minute of the Sooner Celebration.



The Finale: Oklahoma No. 1

Bringing No. 7 home in style

Entering the 67th FedEx Orange Bowl as a double-digit underdog only served to further inspire top-ranked and undefeated Oklahoma. But who could have imagined that a 26-yard Duncan field goal in the opening quarter would be all the scoring the Sooners would need?

After all, No. 2 Florida State, owner of the No. 1 offense in the country, averaged 42 points and 549 yards a game during the regular season. On this night, however, OU's defense provided the biggest statement of the season by holding the defending champion Seminoles to zero points and 14 first downs in a historic 13-2 Sooner victory.

"We were mad. We didn't get much respect from many people around the country, and we felt we had something to prove," explained Jones, who had five tackles, forced a fumble and sealed the victory with an interception.

And prove it they did.

For all the pre-bowl buzz, Florida State's speed and talent never surfaced during the course of this one-sided battle. Weinke and the FSU

offense never built any momentum, finishing the evening a telling 1-of-15 on third-down conversion attempts.

The Sooners carried a 3-0 lead into the second half, and Duncan added a 42-yard field goal to make it 6-0. With just over nine minutes to go, Calmus stripped the ball from Weinke, and Williams recovered for OU deep in Seminole territory. Two plays later, Griffin sprinted 10 yards to paydirt, making it 13-0.

Only a botched snap on an OU punt attempt spoiled the shutout—but certainly didn't take any of the luster off the crowning achievement in the Sooners' fantastic season.

"I'm really proud of our football team for the toughness they showed and the way they have gone about "this entire year and the way they approached this bowl game and the way they played this game," said Stoops, who had been the defensive coordinator for Florida's 1996 national championship team.

"I said it all along; we came into this game fully expecting to win. Our players prepared the entire month with that in mind. It was never enough just to be in this game. Our players prepared for one thing and one thing only, and that was to win. That would be the only way this season would be complete."

Mission accomplished. The headlines read: "Oklahoma Sooners: National Champions."

In the wake of the national title, Torrance Marshall took one more look through the misty rain at the Pro Player scoreboard before making his final walk to the locker room. He and fellow Miami native Oteji Jones truly had given the home folks something to cheer about.

"We knew we were No. 1 all along, but the media kept doubting us," said Marshall. "The key was we believed in ourselves all season, and to be No. 1 is incredible."

Bob Stoops and his staff instilled that belief, that cornerstone of this team's success. After running the gauntlet of Black October and winning 12 straight in the regular season, how could anyone have doubted this Oklahoma team in the end?

The answer is, they shouldn't have.

