

Cutting Down the Nets

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH



When it comes to coaching basketball, no school in the country can match the dynamic duo of Sherri Coale and Kelvin Sampson.

VALIDATION WITHOUT RESERVATION. The kind with no ifs, ands or buts attached. Only respect. The University of Oklahoma's two basketball programs returned to Norman the first week of April with that very stamp of indisputable authentication.

The fantastic odyssey began in October and culminated with both the men's and women's teams earning trips to their respective Final Fours, with the women advancing to the final game. The word "Sooners" became synonymous with basketball; national perception was changed, at least for the moment, if not forever.

Media attention normally reserved for Oklahoma's celebrated football machine spilled over into a pair of fast-breaking success stories featuring different authors and different characters, but a shared plot line.

Legions of fans, old and new, rallied to show their allegiance and bear witness to one of the most significant accomplishments in collegiate athletics. Only two previous times in history had a school delivered both of its basketball teams into the Final Four in the same season. Georgia did it in 1983. Duke followed 16 years later. And now it was Oklahoma's turn.

"Obviously, it has historical significance because it's only the third time it's ever happened. But that doesn't even scratch the surface," says Joe Castiglione, OU's director of athletics. "It's hard to quantify the value of exposure this program received. It's almost immeasurable. It certainly elevated the respect for our program around the country."

The Sooners took somewhat different paths to their respective perches atop the national hoops scene.

Coach Sherri Coale's women began their climb already tabbed as one of the favorites and ranked as high as No. 1 in one preseason poll. Led by All-Americans Stacey Dales and LaNeishea Caufield, they rolled to a third straight Big 12 Conference title and a 24-3 regular-season record.

The Sooner women capped their marvelous run by going 8-1 the rest of the way, which included winning the Big 12 Tournament title and the NCAA West Region. The trip to the Final Four was the program's first ever.

Meanwhile, Kelvin Sampson's team faced some rebuilding after losing five of its top eight players from the previous season. The accelerated maturation of three junior college players and a sophomore transfer was almost too much to ask.

But Sampson again proved to be a master at getting the most from his players. When Hollis Price and Aaron McGehee stepped up with All-Big 12-caliber performances, the Sooners were back in business as legitimate contenders, producing a 13-3 conference mark, and then winning the league tournament for the second straight year. By the time the Sooners were finished, they had earned their first Final Four berth in 14 years with a 31-5 season, an OU record second only to the 1988 national runner-up team.

"We didn't need the Final Four to make us appreciate the talent and dedication of Sherri Coale or Kelvin Sampson—we were already well aware of that. But it is a necessary step in the



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TOP: It's on to San Antonio and the Final Four for the Sooners and their coach, Sherri Coale, here waving the net earned by their 94-60 victory over Colorado in the NCAA Elite Eight clash in Boise, Idaho. ABOVE: OU Coach Kelvin Sampson claims the net and the NCAA West Regional title in San Jose, sending his team to the Final Four in Atlanta.

“I don’t know that I will ever be able to adequately describe what this senior class has meant to

development of the most respected programs,” says Castiglione. “What the Final Four did was create an awareness. People everywhere are talking about our basketball teams in a whole new light. In my opinion, we have joined some very select company.”

While neither team was able to bring home a national title, the 2001-02 season propelled Oklahoma basketball into the history books and offered a glimpse of things to come.

“To be part of history is gratifying—both teams having such outstanding seasons,” says Dales, who was the third overall selection by the Washington Mystics in the recent WNBA draft, which also saw Caufield and 3-point specialist Rosalind Ross picked in the first round. “I’m very proud of the men’s team and what they accomplished. There is a great deal of mutual respect between us.

“Maybe the best thing is both programs have such bright futures. It’s going to be fun to see where they go and what they do over the next few seasons.”

All-American LaNeishea Caufield, one of the best ever to play at OU, caps her four-year career with a team run to the Final Two before falling to Connecticut, 70-82.

Living the Dream

OU’s women come within sight of their ultimate goal, the national championship.



STACEY DALES BOUGHT INTO THE DREAM. LaNeishea Caufield followed.

It was not a promise. There were no guarantees. Just a vision and shared aspirations. Oh, and the fiery little blonde coach who spoke so passionately and with so much conviction, as if she were the person at destiny’s control center.

The future, she said, could be magical. And she surrounded herself with true believers, players who possessed talent, imagination and the desire to dictate their own destiny.

If the road to the top of Division I women’s college basketball was paved with high school All-Americans, Sherri Coale was determined to build an alternative route. And that is what she set out to do in her first season at the University of Oklahoma in 1996, taking a program in the shadow of disrepair and carefully transforming it into a national title contender.

“It was tough,” says Coale, describing the difficult task of recruiting potential impact players on the heels of 5-22 and 8-19 seasons her first two years at the helm. “But I had a vision of where I wanted this program to go and what I wanted it to be. I painted a picture and showed each of them where they fit into those plans.

“There was never a timeline. But I knew if I could get some talented athletes in here who accepted the challenge and wanted the chance to be a part of something significant, we could accomplish our goals relatively fast.”

Six seasons, three Big 12 titles, three Sweet 16s and a Final Four appearance later, the only unfulfilled goal remaining on Coale’s initial want-list is a national title. And her Sooners were within minutes of obtaining that once unimaginable objective this season.

Oklahoma dropped a hard-fought 82-70 decision to top-ranked and undefeated Connecticut in the NCAA title game on March 31. A tough end to an otherwise magnificent 2001-02 season, which included a school-record 32 victories and so much more.

the legacy of Oklahoma women's basketball.”

“Magical is the best way to describe it. If I would have sat down to write a movie about this team, I couldn't have written it any better, other than having a better ending,” says Coale, whose program has forged an 85-18 record over the last three seasons. “This is an amazing group of kids. What they did this season will carry over to future success.”

Almost 12 years to the day after OU officials dropped women's basketball from its intercollegiate athletic program (a decision reversed eight days later), the Sooners capped the most successful season in school history with their first ever Final Four appearance.

Despite the bittersweet conclusion to their careers, Dales and Caufield, along with fellow seniors Rosalind Ross, Shannon Selmon and Jamie Talbert, accomplished what they originally came to Oklahoma to do. They lived the dream.

Thanks to their hard work and dedication, the Sooners figure to be potential contenders for years to come. And certainly, a national championship is now within reach.

“I don't know that I will ever be able to adequately describe what this senior class has meant to the legacy of Oklahoma women's basketball,” explains Coale. “The banners we'll hang in the gym won't do it justice. The rings we'll all wear forever won't do it justice, because what these seniors did was change the perception of a program, not just on a local basis but from coast to coast.”

That perception gradually had been altered over the course of Coale's first five seasons at OU. By her third season, the Sooners had improved to 15-14, and just a year later, they earned a share of the Big 12 Conference regular-season crown, going 25-8 in the process while making only the OU program's second Sweet 16 appearance.

Every step forward brought their long-term goals that much more into focus.

“It was so amazing to be a part of this program, to come as far as we did and to experience what we experienced,” says Dales, the two-time Big 12 Player of the Year. “We all shared the same vision for Oklahoma basketball, and we did everything within our power to make it become reality. I feel very fortunate to have been a part of something so special.”

Dales sees the OU program as a reflection of its spirited coach, and it was Coale's passion and determination that proved to be the most motivating factors during the Sooners' journey.

Oklahoma actually entered the 2001-02 season ranked as high as No. 1 in at least one preseason poll. That alone was testament to the Sooners' push for elite status.

Led by Dales and Caufield, OU lived up to some lofty expectations by slicing and dicing its way through the toughest conference schedule in the country. The Sooners captured a third straight Big 12 title and polished off the pre-NCAA Tournament slate by winning their first Big 12 Tournament championship.

“This team had so many positives working for it. We had such great chemistry and an unbelievable coaching staff,” says Caufield, who owns or shares 10 school records, including all-time steals leader. “There were a lot of pieces to the puzzle that eventually all fit together. It was amazing being a part of that and watching it develop.”

Besides getting great leadership and performances from its senior class, Coale's team also received significant contributions from junior Caton Hill and freshman Dionnah Jackson. And if the Sooners had not lost starting center Jennifer Cunningham to a preseason, career-ending knee injury, the national title game with UConn might very well have had a different outcome.



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The best of the best at OU, All-American and Big 12 Player of the Year Stacey Dales leads her team to the Big 12 championship with a 84-69 victory over Baylor.



Lisa Hall

Kelvin Sampson encourages his team in the Big 12 Tournament championship game against the No. 1 ranked Kansas Jayhawks.

As it turned out, Oklahoma capped its season with a 5-1 NCAA tournament run, which included winning the West Regional.

"I have great, great memories of the entire season, but especially of San Antonio and the Final Four weekend," says Coale. "I will replay those moments over and over because I want to etch them so deeply that I never forget the way I felt or the looks on the players' faces."

A few days after the season finale, Coale found herself sitting on an Acapulco beach, reminiscing about every single detail right down to the crowd noise.

"I replayed all that happened, everything we experienced," Coale says. "It's not that I don't think we'll ever be there again, because I believe we will. And I think we'll win that final game. But there's nothing like the first time when it's so new, fresh and full of innocence."

Coale believes the impact of her team playing UConn for the national title in front of a record 29,619 Alamodome fans and the largest ESPN audience ever to watch a college basketball game—men's or women's—will be difficult to measure. The experience alone is invaluable, but there are any number of other potential benefits.

"The playing field will be leveled because of what this team accomplished. They opened a lot of doors for this program," she adds. "So even if I ever have a team with 10 high school All-Americans on it, I will never think that there could be a more significant recruiting class than the one that just passed through. Those kids came when it was hard. They bought into the dream. They shared the vision. And they made it happen."

Finally, the Final Four

Kelvin's break-through team propels OU basketball to the long-sought ranks of the country's elite programs.

TOP 25 EVERY SEASON. NCAA Tournament berth every season. An average of 22 wins every season. Impressive résumé material by almost anyone's standards. Good enough to create a lot of job interest from other schools and earn a lot of respect throughout coaching circles. But just not good enough for Kelvin Sampson.

Those numbers are a reflection of what Sampson's basketball program accomplished during his first seven seasons at the University of Oklahoma. However impressive, they did not add up, at least not in terms of the aspirations the veteran coach held for his team.

"A lot of programs might look at what we'd done the last seven years and say that's very successful," says Sampson. "I always thought we were one of the better programs in the country because of how consistently we won and got to the NCAA Tournament. But there was something missing. I wanted more. Our players wanted more.

"I've invested a lot in this program. I'm talking blood, sweat and tears. So many great kids have done the same, as well as our assistant coaches. We wanted to take the next step—get to the Elite Eight or Final Four."

Sampson's Sooners were close to breaking through during the 1998-99 season when they

“The bottom line is you have to have the talent, and we definitely had it.”

advanced to the Sweet 16. But a loss to second-ranked Michigan State foiled their bid and consecutive earlier-than-expected exits the last two seasons hardened the coach's resolve.

Some previous editions of Sampson's teams had faded during postseason play. Not because of a lack of desire or hard work—those are Sampson trademarks—but because they simply did not measure up in terms of talent.

“We always managed to get to the NCAA Tournament, but sometimes I think we tricked people,” says Sampson.

And that was Sampson's M.O. for a while—squeeze absolutely every ounce of production out of blue-collar teams that were short on star quality.

“I've always said give Kelvin Sampson a little bit of talent and he'll get more out of it than most guys who have more to work with,” offered ESPN analyst Dick Vitale.

The 2001-02 season would be different.

This time, there was no sleight of hand involved. No smoke; no mirrors. No deception of any kind. This time, Sampson never felt the need to delve into his bag of tricks. He had something better, more viable, at his disposal.

Losing five of his top eight players from a team that finished 26-7 the previous season, Sampson managed to replenish his roster with more size, more speed and more athleticism. The addition of three junior college standouts and a 6-foot-10 sophomore transfer to a solid veteran core that included Hollis Price, Aaron McGhee and Daryan Selvy gave the Sooners a deeper talent pool than they had enjoyed at any time during the previous seven seasons.

Experience was the only missing ingredient. But Sampson figured if all the pieces came together and the chemistry was right, the experience factor eventually would take care of itself.

“This was the best group of players I've ever had,” says Sampson. “They gave us a chance to do something special, depending on how fast we matured as a team. I always knew we were going to win when we got good enough. But the bottom line is you have to have the talent, and we definitely had it.”

Even though the Sooners went into the season in a rebuilding mode—even the Lloyd Noble Center was undergoing \$16 million-worth of renovations—the prospect for immediate dividends was undeniable.

But it took a December 21 victory over eventual national champion Maryland in the midst of a 13-game winning streak to bring all of the Sooners' newfound potential into focus. Besides providing a huge shot of confidence, the 72-56 triumph served notice to the rest of the nation that Oklahoma was for real.

continued



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OU senior Aaron McGhee shoots over All-American Drew Gooden as the Sooners knock off Kansas 64-55 to win their second straight Big 12 Tournament in Kansas City.

Junior guard Hollis Price, whose gritty determination sparked his team throughout a magical season, goes for the basket in a losing cause as the Sooners' fall 73-64 in the Final Four to the Indiana Hoosiers.

"I knew the first day we practiced with Quannas, Ebi, Jason and Jabahri we had something special," says Price, a junior and one of OU's two returning starters. "After the win over Maryland, we felt like we could beat anybody in the country."

The next generation of Sooners was comprised of Quannas White, Ebi Ere, Jason Detrick and Jabahri Brown, along with redshirt freshman Blake Johnston and junior Jozsef Szendrei. They validated Price's sentiments by helping OU amass an impressive 24-4 regular-season record, including a school-best 13-3 Big 12 Conference mark. And by the time the Sooners arrived in Kansas City to defend their conference tournament title, they were ranked No. 4 in the country.

The maturation of McGhee into one of the top forwards in the country figured heavily into OU's quick ascent. The 6-8 senior averaged 21.3 points and 9.3 rebounds during the stretch run.

"When Quannas fit in at the point guard—which allowed Hollis, Ebi and Jason to concentrate on the wings—I thought that took us to another level early," says Sampson. "Aaron's development was big, and Selvy fitting into his role and Jabahri coming along. Everything just seemed to fit.

"This team was a perfect example of 'team.' We came together, we held hands, and we trusted each other. We surrendered to each other, and we shared each other's vision. We talked privately about going to the Final Four. And as we progressed and got better and better, the vision became more clear. And we believed it."

By the time Oklahoma marched through the Big 12 Tournament, dispatching then-No. 1 Kansas in the final, there were few non-believers remaining. And the Sooners quickly converted them by reeling off four straight NCAA Tournament wins to earn their first Final Four appearance in 14 seasons.

Although a loss to Indiana in the national semifinals provided a disappointing finish, nothing could change the fact the Sooners had elevated expectations and then lived up to them.

"Getting to the Final Four was an important step for this program," explains the 46-year-old Sampson. "It removed the ifs and the buts from Oklahoma basketball: 'They are really good, *but* they flamed out in the tournament.' 'They would be considered one of the top programs *if* they did this or that.' Well, they can't say that anymore.

"Now, when you talk about the top 10 or 15 programs in the country, I think you have to include Oklahoma in there. Our biggest challenge now is to stay there. There are no guarantees, but we're going to work and play our hardest to maintain this level."

What about the inevitable off-season rumors that will have Sampson taking a job at some school where basketball never takes a backseat to football?

"There's a reason why I'm at Oklahoma. This is a great place to be," Sampson says flatly. "All of your dreams and all of your goals can be realized right here at Oklahoma."



Jerry Laizure