

2001-02 WAS A BANNER YEAR FOR OU ATHLETICS—PERHAPS THE BEST IN THE STORIED HISTORY OF SOONER SUCCESSES.

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH



OU Athletic Media Relations

The answer came without hesitation. It was emphatic and quickly put to rest any lingering doubts. In fact, Marita Hynes responded with such certitude it was as if she already had sorted through each of her 26 years as a coach and athletics administrator at the University of Oklahoma.

Was 2001-02 the best year in OU athletics' illustrious history?

"Yes. I honestly believe it was," says Hynes, associate athletics director and senior women's administrator.

"This was a wonderful year for our athletics department as a whole. The level of success we experienced in almost every sport is such a great accomplishment. I can't speak for what happened 40 or 50 years ago, but obviously back then they weren't competing in as many sports, and they didn't have women's athletics."

After finishing 18th in last year's race for the Sears Directors' Cup, presented annually to the best overall collegiate athletic program in the country, Oklahoma hovered near the top 10 for much of the 2001-02 campaign. Final Four appearances by the men's and women's basketball teams bolstered the overall efforts, and when the men's gymnastics team captured the national title in early April, the Sooners moved to No. 10 in the standings.

Although that momentum slowed later in the spring and OU wound up 17th, the effort still represents the school's best finish in the prestigious Sears Cup race.

"We scored a lot of points, but the final-season flurry of some other schools allowed them to pass us," says Joe Castiglione, OU director of athletics. "But when you consider the across-the-board success of our athletics program, whether it involves Sears Cup points or not, seven

A SEASON TO REMEMBER

of our 20 sports finished in the top 10, and 10 finished in the top 20. Those numbers, by any account, are impressive.”

What those numbers reflect is a commitment that encompasses every person and every facet of OU’s Athletics Department, right down to the smallest detail.

“The whole foundation we’re building for our athletics program is very solid. It’s not like we’re just putting them up on temporary stilts and waiting for them to topple over. We’re putting those bricks in place very carefully, and it’s going to be a solid base. And once you get that, it’s hard to break it down. It just continues to build and grow,” offers Hynes.

“First thing, you hire good coaches. Provide them with the resources they need to be successful, which is to bring in good student athletes. Then look at what we’re doing with facilities. Our leadership, with Joe, President (David) Boren and the Regents, is outstanding. It’s the total package. Add all of those components together, and you can’t help but be successful.”

A bold \$100 million capital drive, called “Great Expectations: The Campaign for Sooner Sports,” designed to provide OU with the best athletic facilities available, is the mortar holding those foundation bricks in place. The campaign includes a \$79 million renovation of Oklahoma Memorial Stadium, a \$17.8 million expansion of its basketball facilities and extensive work on 11 other projects.

“We want to be leaders. It’s important for us to realize we may only have this one opportunity to do it right, to build our facilities in a state-of-the-art fashion,” insists Castiglione. “We recognize our needs, and we have set out to not only meet those needs, but also to exceed those

needs. The reality is those needs will change down the road, and we will have already addressed some of those possibilities.”

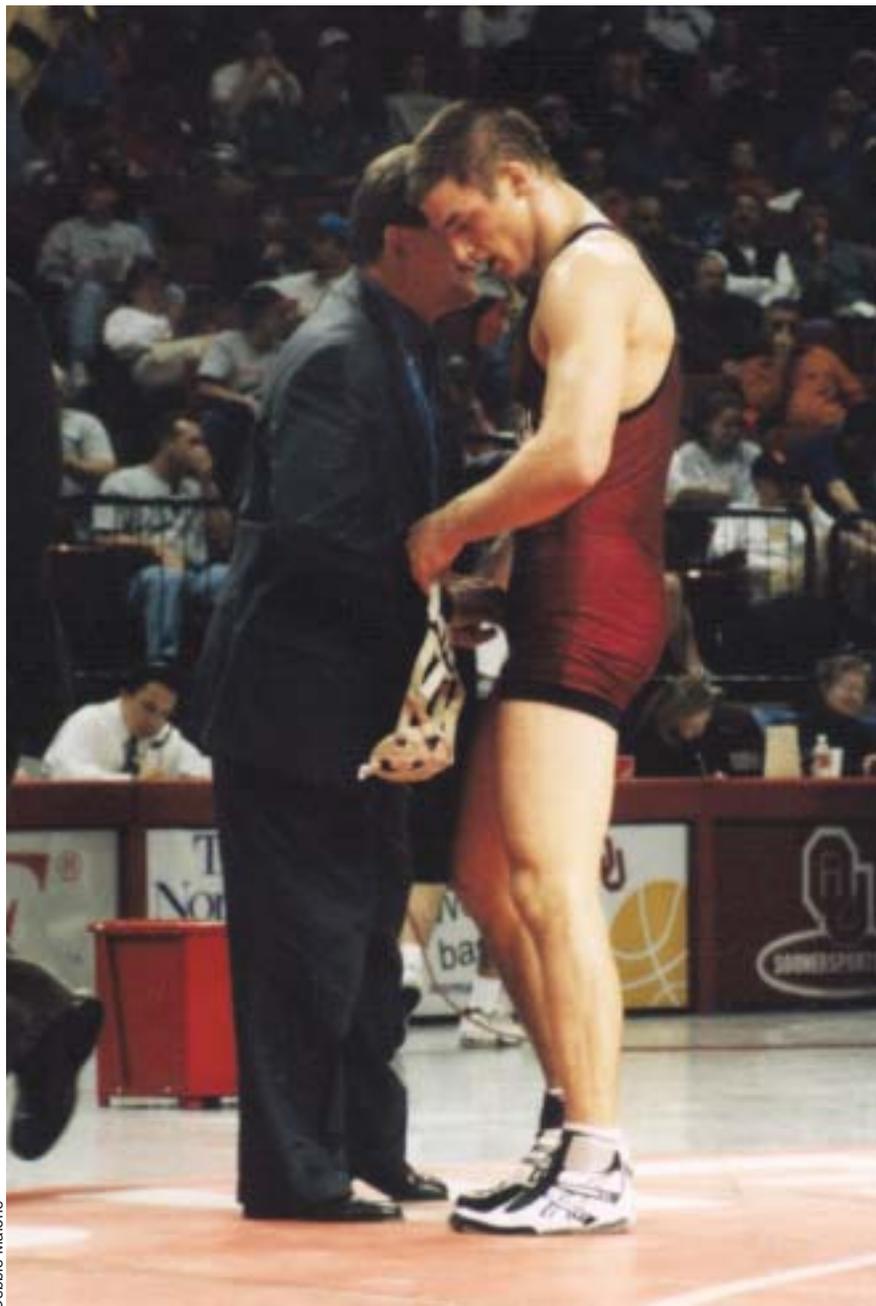
Two seasons after moving into its new \$1.4 million stadium complex, the Sooner softball team captured the 2000 national title. And barely six months later, Bob Stoops did the unthinkable in just his second season as head football coach when he led OU to a perfect 13-0 season and a national title.

The two championship runs set the tone for what became a collective history-making effort this past year.

“When you see other sports at your school like softball and football winning national championships, I think it serves to inspire and motivate all of the athletes representing the Sooners. That was pretty evident in so many of the individual and team performances this year,” says Mark Williams, OU men’s gymnastics coach.

Port Robertson, who served stints as OU wrestling coach and Athletics Department academic advisor for parts of four decades, provided a more historical perspective.

“No doubt about it, the entire Athlet-



Debbie Malone

OPPOSITE: Kelli Braitsch, left, Kaycee Clark, Lindsey Abbott and Katie Overton, part of Coach Patty Gasso’s 2002 softball Sooners, celebrate their ticket to a third straight Women’s College World Series and another top 10 finish.

RIGHT: OU Head Coach Jack Spates offers encouragement to 2002 National runner-up Josh Lambrecht, on their way to the NCAA Wrestling Tournament where the Sooners finished third.

ics Department experienced a banner year. In terms of success in so many different sports, that's about as good as I can remember," says the 87-year-old Robertson, who has maintained a watchful eye on the Sooners since his retirement in 1973. "I've been particularly pleased with what the current regime is doing and how they've worked hard to build on the tradition and success that has always been a part of this University."

The football team kicked off the Sooners' most recent run of prosperity by following up on its 2000 national championship run with an 11-2 season that was highlighted by a Cotton Bowl victory over Arkansas and a No. 6 national ranking.

Next came basketball, and OU managed to accomplish what only two other schools in NCAA history had done—send both its men's and women's teams to their respective Final Fours in the same season. Under the direction of Kelvin Sampson and Sherri Coale, the Sooner men and women combined to go 63-9, win a pair of Big 12 Tournament titles and establish Oklahoma as basketball royalty.

The same week hoops history was being made, the men's gymnastics team was upending defending champion Ohio State to win its first national title since 1991. And a few weeks earlier, the Sooners capped a successful wrestling season by finishing third at the NCAA Championships.

Also turning in top-10 performances were the women's golf team, which wound up sixth at the NCAA Championships, and the softball team, which made its third straight appearance at the Women's College World Series.

The biggest question heading into 2002-03: Can the Sooners repeat that kind of success?

"Yes. I think so. You can't be satisfied. You have to keep pushing, keep striving to be at the top level," adds Hynes. "We may not have the exact same kind of year next year—where we have a national champion gymnastics team, two final four basketball teams, a bowl-winning football team and so forth. But then again, we may have something similar, even where there are other sports that step up and enjoy that kind of success."

Stick around. The encore may provide even bigger memories. 

ON BACK ON TOP

The men's gymnastics team steps up to reclaim the NCAA national title.

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

The University of Oklahoma men's gymnastics program historically has been a source of pride for the school's Athletics Department, now more than ever after capturing its fourth NCAA national championship crown this past April.

A year after being edged out by Ohio State on the Buckeyes' home turf, the Sooners reversed their fortunes against the defending champs by producing a title-clinching performance within the friendly confines of Lloyd Noble Center. In doing so, Coach Mark Williams' top-ranked squad provided the exclamation point to a memorable year of outstanding athletic achievement at OU.

"We were more prepared this time," says Williams, at the conclusion of his third season at the helm. "Having the home-court advantage and knowing how close we were to winning last year, I think this team wouldn't allow its quest to be national champions slip away.

"When we needed them to step up the most—the last three events—I saw a mental toughness in this group I didn't see last year. They had to dig down to come up with something special, and that's what they did."

All-American performances from Daniel Furney, Quinn Rowell and Everette Bierker helped propel Oklahoma to victory, as they were near-perfect on the decisive high bar rotation. In all, 11 Sooners contributed points to the national title effort, and six individuals earned a total of nine All-American honors.

The Sooners' national title—their first since 1991—came on the heels of respective Final Four appearances by the men's and women's basketball teams and a Cotton Bowl triumph by the sixth-ranked OU football squad, and preceded a third straight trip to the Women's College World Series by the softball program.

It seemed almost every sport in OU's athletic stable was achieving at a high level, and the men's gymnastics crew was leading the way. It all added up to a No. 17 ranking in the final Sears Cup standings, topping the school's previous best (No. 18) from a year ago.

"It's fun to be a part of that. Once softball raised the bar with its national championship (in 2000), I think it made all of us want to reach that level even more,"