

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,"

says Williams. "Then football won a national championship, and it seems like everyone is doing what it takes to compete for championships. Of course, it makes it much easier knowing our Athletics Department is doing everything it can to make all of our sports the best they can be."

Ironically, it was not all that long ago the very existence of the men's gymnastics program was somewhat in question. With Title IX thundering across the collegiate landscape, bringing proportionality in athletics with it, Williams had expressed concern about job security and the future of his gymnasts prior to his taking the head coaching position in 2000. He did not want to take over the reins from long-time coach Greg Buwick only to have the program end up on the cutting room floor, a victim of Title IX.

Despite past success that includes winning other national titles in 1977 and 1978, and the fact Williams had been with the Sooners as an assistant since 1988, a cloud of uncertainty lingered over the program, albeit one with a potential silver lining.

"I have concerns about the future of men's collegiate gymnastics because of the number of programs that have been eliminated over the last few years. I was definitely concerned about OU's plans for our program," admits Williams.

Throughout the interview process, Athletics Director Joe Castiglione assured Williams the program was in no danger.

"Joe has been straight forward about the fact there are no plans to trim any sports at Oklahoma. That's all I needed to hear," adds Williams, the 2002 NCAA Coach of the Year. "Winning another national title is what I envisioned when I took over. Now, the trick is to find a way to sustain it. That's a challenge we look forward to." 🏆

BELOW: The men's gymnastics team, coached by Mark Williams, at far right, topped off Sooner athletics' stellar 2001-02 season by capturing a fourth national championship before a hometown crowd at the NCAA tournament in Lloyd Noble Center. Associate Athletics Director Marita Hynes and Athletics Director Joe Castiglione grabbed an OU banner and joined the jubilant gymnasts for the photographic record of the event.



Jerry Laizure