



OU Athletics Media Relations

The House that Basketball Built

By JAY C. UPCHURCH



■ The new open-grid ceiling and sport lighting in the Lloyd Noble arena is more aesthetically pleasing, provides better acoustics and improves the basketball environment.



Major expansion and renovation of Lloyd Noble Center give both the men's and women's teams first-class facilities for every phase of their programs.

The message is loud and clear. It reverberates through the corridors, down the south tunnel and over the catwalk stretching high above the hardwood floor that serves as center stage for the facility best known as the home of the University of Oklahoma basketball programs.

Stop. Look. Listen to the message from every corner of the Lloyd Noble Center.

Kelvin Sampson calls it “commitment.” Sherri Coale describes it as “believing.” However defined, both coaches realize this particular message, shaped by the completion of a \$17.1 million expansion and renovation project, will forever alter the perception of their sport within the University community and beyond.

“I think we can all agree the greatest thing about the new facility is the fact it makes a statement. It says, ‘basketball is important,’” offers Sampson, in his ninth season at the helm of the OU men’s program. “Not to sound too corny, but dreams do come true, and this is the proof.”

Sampson recalls sitting in on a meeting when the idea for new practice facilities and overall renovations was hatched. That was almost seven years and three athletics directors ago, as Steve Owens pursued the project after Donnie Duncan departed in 1996, and Joe Castiglione pushed it through after taking the department’s reins in April 1998.

Great Expectations: the Campaign for Sooner Sports, initiated in 1997 and expanded to \$100 million in 2000, enabled Castiglione to transform the original idea into a reachable goal. Major donations by the Noble Foundation, Bob and Ann Coleman, Kerr-McGee Corporation, the Tip In Club and former OU Regent Dr. Donald Halverstadt made the project come to life.

“I’ve always believed actions speak louder than words, and certainly we’ve got to continue to demonstrate our commitment to our basketball programs,” says Castiglione. “Thanks to some generous donations and a lot of hard work, we set out to give our basketball programs state-of-the-art facilities like the best programs in the country have.

“When you have great coaches like we do, you want to give them every resource possible to work with. Our vision is always developing.”

Historically known as “a football school,” OU has, over the last 20 years, harbored one of the country’s elite men’s basketball programs. The Sooners have averaged over 23 victories a season during that span, producing a .726 winning percentage, including an amazing .885 mark at home. *continued*



■ OU Regent and women's basketball fan Mary Jane Noble, center, stepped forward in 1999 with the lead gift of \$8.17 million from the Noble Foundation of Ardmore toward the \$17.1 million expansion and renovation of Lloyd Noble Center. Surrounding their benefactor are 1999-2000 team members, from left back, Hollis Price, Stacey Dales, Renzi Stone, Eduardo Najera and Victor Avila; in front, Nolan Johnson, Caton Hill, LaNeishea Caufield and Shannon Selmon.

■ Sherri Coale has a desk in her spacious, comfortable office on the women's side of the Lloyd Noble addition, but she is more often found bent over her laptop computer amid the memorabilia from the vivacious coach's remarkable seven years of building OU's program from obscurity to national prominence.

On October 27, 1975, the 10,826-seat arena hosted its first event—Bob Hope's Road Show. A little less than a month later, the OU men played their first game at the new venue. The Lloyd Noble Center since has hosted more than 1,000 college basketball games; 500 concerts and shows, ranging from Lawrence Welk to Elvis Presley to Bruce Springsteen; and nearly all the University's large-scale, indoor special events.



Robert Taylor

Sampson has guided the Sooner men to eight straight NCAA Tournaments, a feat matched by only eight other programs nationally. Perennial powers such as Duke, Illinois, Connecticut, North Carolina and Michigan State are not on that list.

Add to the equation a women's program that Coale magically has transformed into a legitimate title contender, and it is plain to see why the University has paid particularly close attention to basketball and the Lloyd Noble Center in recent times.

"Basketball is really one of the underrated jewels in the athletic crown here at the University of Oklahoma. For whatever reason, it just doesn't get the visibility that football does," says Castiglione. "But if you look up the history and the people who helped create that history, the Sooners have enjoyed a tremendous amount of success over a long period of time."

That enduring success and the air of escalating expectations within both programs made the ambitious renovation and expansion project a viable necessity.

Known as "the house that Alvan Adams built," Lloyd Noble Center originally opened its doors after superstar Adams had departed for a career in professional basketball. But it was the All-American's overwhelming popularity during his stay in Norman from 1972-75 that helped generate mass interest in a new arena.

To that point, the Sooners had played their home games in the cramped confines of the OU Field House, a relic of the 1920s. Located in the middle of campus, the Field House not only lacked amenities but also had virtually no parking.

A campaign was launched to construct a multipurpose arena on the south campus just off SH9. In 1972 the Noble Foundation of Ardmore donated \$1 million of the \$6 million price tag for the facility, which was named for its founder, Lloyd Noble, a 15-year member of the University's Board of Regents.



■ The balcony outside OU Head Coach Kelvin Sampson's office overlooks the men's practice court, recently named for the late OU Coach Bruce Drake. The identical men's and women's practice facilities are available to players at any hour.

Facility general manager Henry Lloyd, who has been on the LNC staff for 27 years, believes the recently completed renovation project could not have come at a better time.

"In terms of any major renovations, the Lloyd Noble Center had undergone virtually none since it was originally built. It definitely needed some work, some upgrading," says Lloyd. "Now, it's better than it's ever been. It's better for everyone involved, especially the teams, the players and coaches. But a lot of the improvements have come behind-the-scenes—electronically with computerized lighting and building automation—things the public doesn't see but that make their visit more enjoyable."

The Noble Foundation again played a major role in LNC's revitalization, contributing \$8.17 million toward the \$17.1 million needed for the 70,000 square feet of renovations, which included mirror-image facilities for the men's and women's teams—individual practice courts, locker rooms, meeting rooms, film rooms, equipment storage, a state-of-the-art sports medicine facility, a weight room and offices for the coaching staffs. The Women's Basketball Center is named for OU Regents chair Mary Jane Noble, the Men's Basketball Center for Bob and Ann Coleman.

Inside the arena itself, seating was added and reconfigured to make the facility more fan friendly. A new open-grid ceiling made for better overall acoustics and a more visually pleasing arena, while new sport lighting helped create an improved basketball environment.

The main phases of the project were completed by October 2001, just in time for the basketball teams to begin preparation for what became one of the most successful seasons ever recorded by one school. The Sooner men and women combined to win 63 games and two Big 12 Tournament titles. And for only the third time in NCAA history, two programs from the same school advanced to their respective Final Fours in the same season.

"There is an appreciation from our players, a tremendous gratitude," says Sampson. "You can see an extra bounce in their step. This facility makes a big difference. It's an attitude now, and you could see the results almost immediately. Just look at last season with our men's and women's teams.

"The two most important things we needed were the practice courts. Everything else was just icing on the cake." Fittingly, the men's practice court is named for the legendary Bruce Drake, OU's coach from 1939-55.

The two practice facilities, extending side-by-side from the south end of the Lloyd Noble Center, eliminated conflicting practice times between the two programs and created expanded opportunities for individual players who can work in court time basically any hour of the day or night.

continued



■ The renovation and expansion of Lloyd Noble Center, as well as past crowd support and Athletic Department tournament expertise, has made the facility a desirable site for post-season NCAA basketball play.



■ The Sooners' Hollis Price, left, visits LNC's new state-of-the-art sports medicine facility where men's basketball trainer Alex Brown applies ultrasound to the superstar guard's aching knee.

"Player development. This facility is worth its weight in gold for a number of reasons, including recruiting, but even more so because of the use our players get out of it on a daily basis. This is as good as it gets," says Coale.

"A lot of places say they believe in their basketball programs, but what have they really done to prove it? This facility is a statement of the level of support, the genuine, sincere support we have from this institution."

While the cornerstone of the project was the improvement of the overall facilities for the two basketball programs, making the entire venue state-of-the-art was top priority, according to Castiglione.

In a 1997 upgrade, the facility acquired some 380 seats and a multi-million dollar video scoreboard—the first of its kind in the Big 12 Conference. Several large, beautiful display cases also were constructed around the upper concourse highlighting the careers of Adams, All-American Wayman Tisdale and both the men's and women's teams, past and present.

With the latest renovations, Lloyd Noble Center has been elevated into the company of college basketball's top venues.

"It's better than most facilities in the country, and there are a significant number of schools that are now chasing us, including every school in the Big 12," says Larry Naifeh, executive associate athletics director and capital improvement projects coordinator. "I think everyone has been really excited with the changes and the way the facility has evolved."

One of the major concerns involved with the renovation process was whether or not the facility could be altered from its original multi-purpose format into a more basketball-friendly atmosphere. A major portion of a retaining wall that encircled the floor and limited courtside seating was removed, bringing fans closer to the action in almost every direction. Capacity went from 11,206 to just over 12,000.

The results have been tangible.

"I could notice a big difference in our big games last season," says Sampson, whose teams have attracted the 11 largest LNC crowds during his nine seasons. "Fans should be involved, not made secondary. Knocking down that wall was like knocking down an attitude. I just think it's given our fans a chance to be more involved in the action."

"I definitely think it has helped our home court advantage."

From January 2001 to March 4, 2003, the OU men did not lose a single home game. The 37-game home winning streak was the longest in the nation and one of the longest in school history. On the flip side, the Sooner women won 23 straight at home from January 2001 to December 2002.



■ Sideline senior basketball player Caton Hill rehabilitates her torn ACL, suffered minutes into the women's first home game. Lloyd Noble's co-ed weight room is a satellite facility to the Seigfried Family Strength and Conditioning Center at the stadium.



“The overall atmosphere is better. The crowd is more involved in the game in every direction and that makes a big difference,” offers Kate Scott, a senior guard from Overland Park, Kansas. “The whole place is just amazing. There are a lot of nice facilities that we’ve been to as a team. But overall, this is the best I’ve seen.”

The new coaches’ offices, larger and more conducive to high performance in a stress-filled environment, overlook the respective practice courts. The effect creates a completely different world than Sampson was used to during his first seven seasons at OU.

“It was like being in a dungeon at times,” says Sampson, laughing as he describes the old coaches’ offices that were much smaller and without outside windows. “But that’s what we had, and you do the best with what you have. I wasn’t complaining. For me, it’s always been about making our program better, creating a better environment for our kids.

“That’s what this new facility does and more. I think any recruit who walks in here will immediately say to themselves, ‘Yes, basketball is very important at the University of Oklahoma.’”

Many of the teams’ special events will be held in the Kerr-McGee Courtside Lounge, located just above the main office area, which offers banquet seating for 300 guests. Men’s and women’s restrooms were added on the facility’s middle level, along with an additional concession stand, giving the LNC 12 public restrooms and 13 permanent concession stands. In addition, more than 1,267 much-needed parking spaces were added to the surrounding 3,500-car LNC lot, which also serves the numerous new athletic venues that have grown up around the arena and provides student commuter parking during the day.

The final phase of the renovation project will not be completed until later this year. The much-anticipated Legacy Court, which will document the history of OU men’s and women’s basketball, is being developed in the entry lobby near the coaches’ offices and the south end of the Lloyd Noble Center.

“It’s a tribute to players and coaches, and there will be memorabilia from various eras, a combination of pictures, graphics, trophies and other various pieces of history,” explains Castiglione. “There will also be a major focus on the Final Four teams, but mostly it’s about recognizing the people who have helped create and nurture Sooner basketball.

“There are very few schools out there that can claim the basketball tradition we have at Oklahoma. The Legacy Court will be home to that tradition that is so special here. It will be something that develops more and more as the years go by.”

■ In both the men’s and women’s sides of the new LNC team facilities are first-class dressing rooms where each player has his or her own uniform and equipment cubicle.

“The whole place is just amazing. There are a lot of nice facilities that we’ve been to as a team. But overall, this is the best I’ve seen.”



■ The retaining wall, visible at lower right, once a barrier between spectators and the action all around the LNC floor, has been removed on both the east and west sides, and retractable seats bring the fans down to court-side.