

A Very Good Year

By Jay C. Upchurch

For Bob Stoops, finding the silver lining in the 2002 football season is not that difficult. There were disappointments, for sure. But while Oklahoma was derailed on its quest for an eighth national championship, the Sooners managed to check off more than a few of the goals on their preseason wish-list, including a Big 12 Conference title.

If that accomplishment seems at all anticlimactic, consider that Stoops' Oklahoma squad became only the second team to earn two conference crowns since the Big 12's 1996 inception. And prior to Stoops' arrival as head coach in 1999, the Sooners had not sat upon a league throne for more than a decade.

But if earning Big 12 hardware is not enough, look no further than the Sooners' season-capping Rose Bowl victory. Outstanding. Or the 11 other wins OU produced en route to its historic, first-ever trip to Pasadena. How about triumphs over ranked powers Alabama, Texas, Iowa State, Texas Tech and Colorado, twice?



Records fell as the Sooner machine, driven by a group of determined seniors, added two more coveted trophies to their storied collection

Granting that a national championship is the supreme measuring stick, the Sooners came up a little short, along with every other Division-I football program besides Ohio State. But “what ifs” are for fans living vicariously through their Saturday afternoon heroes, often with unrealistically high hopes.

For Stoops, responding in his familiar John Wayne-esque delivery—always deliberate, ever the realist—the unrelenting expectations of his job are what he and his entire program have come to demand from themselves. He never backs away, constantly cutting to the bottom line in analyzing his team.

“Expectations should be high, there’s nothing wrong with that,” says Stoops, who has a 43-9 record during his first four seasons in Norman—the best start by any NCAA D-I coach in the last century.

“No one’s expectations are higher than ours. And we’re going to, year in and year out, do everything possible to be the best



Lisa Hall

Capturing the 2003 Rose Bowl trophy provided a senior moment for four Sooners who have played pivotal roles in a passel of Sooner victories. From left are defensive back Andre Woolfolk, tight end Trent Smith, tailback Quentin Griffin and MVP quarterback Nate Hybl.

we can be. We always have and will continue to go into every game totally invested and doing our best to win. That's the only way we know."

Stoops acknowledges the program's collective discontent with a pair of "unexpected" losses during the 2002 season. Ironically, the setbacks against Texas A&M and Oklahoma State, which cost the Sooners a shot at the Bowl Championship Series title game, came from defensive meltdowns, completely out of character for a Stoops-coached team. Without hesitation, Stoops accepts the lion's share of responsibility.

"Sure, it's disappointing. We were outcoached, as well as outplayed on the field. It's tough to win when those things happen," Stoops explains. "It hurts losing. We don't lose much around here and don't like it when we do.

"But this team showed a lot of character the way it bounced back to win the Big 12 championship game a week after the Bedlam loss, and then going on to win the Rose Bowl. Those are the things I'll remember most about this team."

Two seasons removed from winning national title No. 7, the 2002 Sooners delivered another autumn full of great plays, great

games and great memories.

"It wasn't the perfect way to end my career here. I honestly thought we were destined to win another national title," says senior tight end Trent Smith. "But even though it didn't work out like we hoped, there were still a lot of good things that came out of it. Winning the Big 12 title for the second time in three seasons was great and going to the Rose Bowl and winning there made it special."

The resounding 34-14 triumph over Pac-10 power Washington State in the 89th Rose Bowl reconfirmed the 2002 Sooners as one of the top-5 teams in the country. The victory was No. 12 on the season, second only to the 13 wins in 2000.

Over the last three seasons, the Sooners have finished first, sixth and fifth in the Associated Press poll. Previously Oklahoma had not finished a season listed in the final rankings since 1992 and had not been a top-5 team since 1987.

Of all the special moments from 2002—and there were many—the final performance by quarterback Nate Hybl had to be the most compelling. The senior signal caller, who temporarily lost his starting job prior to the season opener and then



Senior quarterback Nate Hybl leads the Sooners to their second Big 12 championship in the last three years with a convincing 29-7 triumph over Colorado. OU had beaten Colorado 27-11 in their regular season meeting in Norman.

lated 36-4 record won two conference titles and three bowl games.

Besides the underrated Hybl, who owned a sparkling 19-3 record in two seasons as a starter, players like Griffin, Smith, Antwone Savage, Curtis Fagan and Andre Woolfolk were the most visible representatives for the team's most veteran class.

Griffin was simply amazing on his way to 1,884 rushing yards in his final season. The diminutive tailback reeled off 10 consecutive 100-plus-yard

found himself dodging captious barbs more often than hard-rushing defensive ends, dispelled his critics by earning Rose Bowl Most Valuable Player honors with a 240-yard, two-touch-down passing effort against the seventh-ranked Cougars.

Hybl's closing statement was the perfect complement to outstanding performances from running back Quentin Griffin and the entire Oklahoma defense, which pitched three shutout quarters and held the Cougars nearly 200 yards below their offensive average. The same type of dominating execution had earned the Sooners the No. 1 national ranking at various points during the fall.

"Maybe the season was bittersweet in some ways, but there were way more sweet times than bad times," explains junior linebacker Pasha Jackson, one of nine defensive starters set to return next season. "It was an excellent season, overall. There are a lot of teams out there that would love to experience what the Sooners experienced this season. And the best thing is we're only going to keep getting better."

While the future indeed does look bright for Oklahoma football, Stoops points to the outgoing senior class and its impact on the program for the last four years. In many ways, these seniors supplied the foundation upon which Stoops and his staff have rebuilt the Sooner program. Over the last three seasons, their accumu-

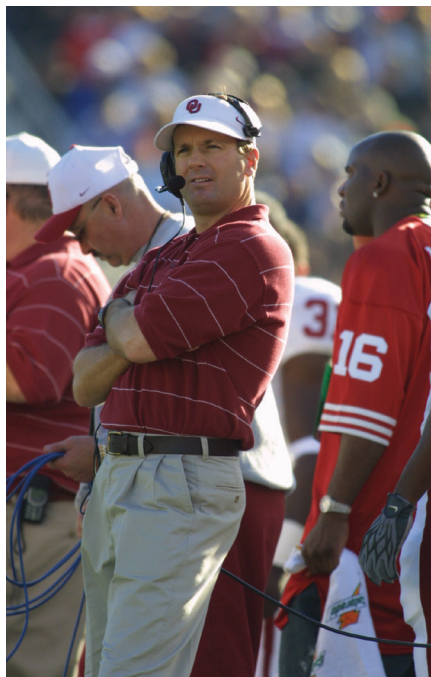
rushing games down the stretch and finished only 11 yards shy of former OU Heisman Trophy winner Billy Sims' single-season rushing record. Griffin wound up fourth on the Sooners' all-time rushing list, while catching more passes (169) than any other player in school history.

"Nate and Quentin really made the offense go. Quentin had a phenomenal year running the football. You can look at the balance he gave us on that side of the ball and that says plenty," explains Stoops.

"That entire senior class has been a big part of our success here the last four years. Guys like Brad Davis and Mike Skinner, linemen who you don't hear a lot about, have played big roles. They've all been great leaders."

Stoops points to Griffin, Smith, Savage and Fagan, who finished as the top four on OU's career receptions list, and defensive back Andre Woolfolk, a projected NFL first-round draft pick.

While Smith did not duplicate the big numbers he produced as a junior—a school-record 61 catches for 564 yards—the Clinton product still led the 2002 Sooners with 46 catches and finished second to Griffin on the career receptions list with 166. He also hauled in 16 career touchdowns, two better than the previous mark held by College Football Hall of Fame inductee and former All-America tight end Keith Jackson.



Lisa Hall

Coach Bob Stoops saw little to criticize as his troops dominated Washington State 34-14 in the 2003 Rose Bowl. At right is All-America alumnus Roy Williams, now with the Dallas Cowboys.

Savage, meanwhile, surpassed Eddie Hinton's career mark for receiving yards with 2,009, ranking him 11th in conference history. The list of records, high-water marks and other exploits is lengthy for the 2002 seniors, as it is for the entire OU squad.

Thanks to the balanced ground-air attack, the latest edition of Sooners scored an OU single-season best 541 points, ranking them as the No. 5 offensive scoring team in the country. The most eye-opening component in the equation is that the starting offensive line, at various times, consisted of one senior, three sophomores and a redshirt freshman. The biggest question mark on a team marked for big things became a strength by the time Oklahoma's march was concluded.

"We felt like we could be a really effective offense if our offensive line matured and performed at a fairly high level. Even with some injuries, like losing Brad Davis, they did an excellent job all season," says offensive coordinator Chuck Long. "That was a big part of what was missing (in 2001 when) we just didn't block well enough to have any (offensive) consistency on that side of the ball."

Even with voids left by the departure of All-America safety Roy Williams and linebacker Rocky Calmus, the 2002 defense was predicted to be even more dominant than its predecessor. And at times, the Sooners were just that, limiting Big 12 powers



Wins over Baylor and 11th-ranked Texas Tech followed, as the Sooners put an end to Red Raider quarterback Kliff Kingsbury's Heisman Trophy dreams, much as they did for other hopefuls—Texas' Chris Simms, Iowa State's Seneca Wallace and Colorado's Chris Brown.

Having clinched the Big 12 South and earned a spot in the conference championship game, Oklahoma set its sights on revenge against Bedlam rival Oklahoma State. The Cowboys had scrambled OU's postseason plans a year earlier with a 16-13 win in Norman; it was payback time.

But as in the loss to Texas A&M, the OU defense struggled to stop the host's aerial assault. The Sooners were burned for four touchdown passes, as any hopes for a shot at the national title went up in smoke.

"We knew we were playing horrible. That was shocking, not the score—the fact we were playing so badly," offers Lehman, a first-team All-Big 12 linebacker. "As for the rest of the season, we had no choice but to put the loss behind us and make the

most of the opportunity we still had."

Oklahoma did exactly that in its final two games, capturing the Big 12 title and the Rose Bowl crown. Not a perfect year, but those season-capping triumphs provided a very satisfying ending to a memorable chapter in the annals of Sooner football.

"The best thing is we're only going to keep getting better."

Texas, Iowa State and Colorado to 31 offensive points in three resounding victories.

Returning starters Brandon Everage, Teddy Lehman, Tommie Harris and Derrick Strait were joined by newcomers Lance Mitchell, Pasha Jackson and Eric Bassey to form a defensive unit that ranked seventh in the country during an impressive 8-0 start. Early glitches in wins over Alabama (37-27) and Missouri (31-24) seemed to be remedied by the time the Sooners traveled to College Station to battle underdog Texas A&M.

"I don't believe in any excuse-making. We understood coming into (Kyle Field) was no easy chore," explains Stoops. "We knew we'd have to play well to win, and the bottom line is we didn't do that."

In stunning fashion, Aggie freshman quarterback Reggie McNeal threw four touchdown passes against OU's previously invincible secondary en route to a 30-26 upset. In 43 previous games when ranked No. 1 and playing an unranked opponent, the Sooners had gone undefeated.

Quarterback Nate Hybl handing off to Quentin Griffin was a familiar sight in the victorious Big 12 championship game, producing 188 yards rushing on 29 carries for the diminutive All-Conference tailback, who also caught four passes for another 28 yards.



Jerry Laizure