



Dennis Griffin

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

■ #7 Justin Hall came all the way from North Pole, Alaska, to pursue his ice hockey career at the University of Oklahoma on a first-year, club-sport team that experienced surprising success and attracted quite a following.

# For Love



## **They are playing ice hockey at OU— and rugby and polo and a dozen other “club sports” that are self-funded, non-scholarship and rarely make the sports pages.**

Oklahoma football is an American icon, symbolizing for many a timeless tradition of championships, All-Americans and colorful characters that have helped define collegiate athletics. Generations of kids, from California to North Carolina to Texas, have grown up with the dream of someday playing for the Sooners.

The quiet township of North Pole, Alaska, is not a likely candidate for that list. There, football is a two-month-a-year sport, and the Sooners are little more than an occasional side note in the sports section of the Sunday paper.

Hockey is all the rage in Alaska. Kids there are fitted for skates before they learn to ride bikes. Their playgrounds often are frozen rivers and ponds reminiscent of ice skating rinks, where they emulate conquering heroes from the Olympics or the National Hockey League.

Justin Hall's father would flood the family's backyard a few days before the first big freeze, thus creating some home ice for neighborhood skaters. His elementary school was equipped with an ice rink, as were both the middle school and high school he attended.

Hockey and skating have always been an intrinsic part of Hall's life.

“I grew up playing the game and dreaming of

playing for the Maine Black Bears or somewhere collegiately in Minnesota. Those are the most natural places to go if you want to take it to the next level after high school,” says Hall, a 19-year-old freshman at the University of Oklahoma.

That's right; Hall plays left wing for the Sooners. Not left guard, not running back, not linebacker — left wing. He came to Norman last fall to play for OU's first-year American Collegiate Hockey Association program. Hockey is the latest addition to the University's growing list of “club sports,” and potentially the most successful, especially if the first season is a true indicator of things to come.

The Sooners posted a 22-5-1 record in their debut season while playing in front of wildly enthusiastic crowds of 1,200-plus fans at the Oklahoma City Blazers' Ice Centre, just north of Moore. While many of the school's other club sports—like sailing, cricket and bowling—serve as more of a recreational outlet, the OU hockey program has much bigger aspirations.

“The potential here is unlimited. The people behind the program have a great vision for where they want to go,” explains Hall, a 5-foot-10, 185-pound business major, who admits he

# **of the Game**

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Sean Steffen

is still getting used to the idea of playing hockey in Oklahoma.

“I had heard or read about Oklahoma football a few times, but I had no clue where Norman was before I decided to come here,” he admits. “I thought the first year would be a real struggle, but they did a great job in recruiting, and we were very competitive from the start. The program has pretty much met and exceeded my expectations.”

A trio of local ice hockey enthusiasts—Allen Gray, Kelly Rose and Craig McAlister—discussed the idea of bringing either junior or collegiate hockey to Oklahoma for almost five years before devising a plan of action, which began with a visit to the office of Larry Naifeh. As executive associate athletics director at OU, Naifeh was able to offer insight into the competitive world of the NCAA. But even more important was his lengthy association with OU’s rugby program, which arguably has been the most successful club sport in school history.

“After exploring all of our options and talking with Mr. Naifeh, we decided to go the route of initiating a club program for hockey,” says Gray, who works as the North American manager for Lufkin Industries when he is not immersed in his duties as general manager and assistant coach for OU hockey.

“We wanted to make a long-term com-

Not all the ice hockey athletes on OU’s rookie club-sport team hail from the northern climes. Forward Colt Kudron, #22 taking the puck down the ice for the Sooners, calls Oklahoma City home.

mitment to bringing a very competitive brand of hockey to the University, and we began on that road in 2003.”

Gray and McAlister, the team’s head coach, spent the summer of 2003 recruiting 25 non-scholarship players from all over the country. They also held an open preseason camp that allows members of the student body to try out for the team. By early September, OU hockey was off and skating.

The Sooners opened their inaugural season with a 6-4 home victory over Southwest Missouri State on September 26.

“The OU Athletics Department has been very helpful, as well as the admissions department, the academic department and various campus advisors,” says Gray. “We’ve been very fortunate in the way things came together and the manner in which we have been received.”

The Sooners’ 2003 schedule was made up mostly of club teams from various universities and colleges, including Iowa State and Arizona, both of whom play at the ACHA Division I level. Oklahoma will jump from Division II to Division I this fall, meaning the Sooners will play 15 D-I opponents, which translates into

higher quality hockey.

“Our biggest goal the first year was to get the campus involved to a certain degree in our program, and we far exceeded anything we had hoped for. The season was a huge, huge success. It has given us a foundation to continue to grow and build on,” says Gray. “Our kids get totally juiced when they come out of that locker room and see all of those fans there to watch. We’ve had some quality programs come in here and express how astounded they are by our fan base as a first-year program.”

Hall figured there would be a built-in fan base since Oklahoma City has experienced great success with its Central Hockey League franchise over the last few years. But he and his teammates were stunned by the number of fans, especially OU students, who took an interest almost from the start.

“I wasn’t sure what to expect as far as fans and how they would accept us, but they were amazing all season,” says Hall, who was the team’s third-leading goal scorer with 22. “I never dreamed of playing at a place like Oklahoma, but I think OU is ready for hockey.”

But just how ready?

Gray realizes patience will be his ally over the next few years, but he is not afraid to talk about the program's ultimate goal—to be added by the University as a varsity sport at some point down the road.

"As we grow over the next few years, that would be a wonderful, welcome direction for the program. Nothing would please us more, if and when the time comes, to turn this program over entirely to the OU Athletics Department," notes Gray. "I honestly believe the quality of hockey we produce is going to get better and better as we become more established. There are obviously going to be some hurdles, but playing at the NCAA D-I level is our long-term ambition."

Those are lofty aspirations for a club program still in its infancy.

And in reality, OU is simply not in a position to add a men's varsity sport, according to OU Athletics Director Joe Castiglione. He explains that under the rules of Title IX, adding hockey would create an imbalance in the number of opportunities for male and female athletes on campus.

"First of all, that group needs to be congratulated for the way they've developed that entire program. It's been very impressive," says Castiglione. "They've probably done as much as a club sport can do to get to the top very quickly. They found a great place to practice and play, and they've been very competitive."

"I don't want to rain on anybody's parade, but the University of Oklahoma is not looking to add hockey as a varsity sport in the foreseeable future. It just doesn't make a lot of sense for us, especially since there are no other Division-I hockey teams within a reasonable distance of our campus."

While Castiglione did not completely rule out the possible addition of varsity hockey, he did say a women's sport would more than likely have that opportunity first. Women's soccer was the last club sport OU annexed into its athletics department, and that happened in 1996.

So for now, OU's hockey program must be content to grow and mature, and further prove it can be a viable entity for future consideration.

## Club sports' growing popularity

The University of Oklahoma has more than 30 different recreational/hobby clubs, according to Kim Fairbanks from the office of Student Affairs; 16 are sports-related. Fairbanks, who serves as the on-campus liaison for all of the club sports, says overall participation has been on the upswing for the last several years.

"The club sports obviously offer a variety of opportunities. I know there are a lot of former high school athletes who don't participate at the intercollegiate level but still want to be involved in their sport in some way," explains Fairbanks.

OU's club sports include: Cycling Club, Ice Hockey Club, International Soccer Association, Oklahoma Crew, Men's Soccer Club, Outdoors Club, Ultimate Frisbee Club, Men's Rugby, Racquetball Club, Roller Hockey Club, Sooner Cricket Club, Women's Rugby Football Club, Sailing Club, Ski and

Snowboard Club, Polo and Riding Club, Motorsports Club.

### Rugby set the stage

If OU hockey is the coolest new thing on campus, it has the men's rugby team to thank. This fall, Sooner rugby will celebrate its 30th year of existence, making it one of the oldest and most established club sports on campus.

The overall success the rugby program has enjoyed over the past three decades no doubt has helped pave the way for other club sports.

Prior to the 1974-75 academic year, a group of prospective players, headed by

■ After decades of fast and furious action on a pitch near the Duck Pond at Brandt Park, the OU Rugby Club has moved to a brand new home west of Lloyd Noble Center near the new soccer and tennis centers.



law students Tim Wilson and John Woods and faculty member Alan Velie, ran a notice in the OU student newspaper hoping to stir enough interest to create a rugby team. By the end of that first semester, they had familiarized themselves with the rules and had established ties with a rugby club in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

"We were pretty much self-taught and self-coached, so that group in Albuquerque did a lot to help us get established," says Naifeh, who was among the club's original players. "Alan had played before, along with a few of the other guys, so that

gave us some background and a good starting point."

Velie, in fact, played as a student at Harvard University and then continued his rugby career while attending graduate school at Stanford. When he was hired by OU as an English professor, Velie's passion for the sport did not fade.

"I still wanted to play, and I knew rugby was spreading around the country at the time. So it was just a matter of time before someone in this area started a team," explains Velie, now 66. "I never imagined it would be the success it has been over the years."

OU's rugby team originally played only the club version of the sport. But that changed in the early 1980s when they established both a club team and a college team, both of which played their home games on the pitch near the Duck Pond in Brandt Park. They have since moved south to a new home near the Lloyd Noble Center and the OU Soccer Complex.

The Sooners, who have produced more than 20 All-Americans over the years, climbed to No. 14 in the national polls during the 2003-04 campaign. Although a loss in the second round of the playoffs ended their season at 20-2, fourth-year coach Jon Velie is excited about his team's progress.

"We obviously wish we could have finished on a better note, but it was still a very memorable season, especially celebrating our 30th year," says Velie, who happens to be Alan Velie's son. "We are very proud of our history here at OU—it's a very rich one. And we've made a continued commitment to win a national championship someday."

### Rowing to success

Another group that has its sights set on potential NCAA Division I status is the OU crew team. Other Big 12 schools like Kansas, Texas and Kansas State already have added rowing as a varsity sport to help satisfy Title IX quotas, and crew enthusiasts hope the OU Athletics Department might consider doing the same if its numbers get out of balance.

"Honestly, I think it's a pretty realistic possibility," says crew coach Eric Lang. "It just makes sense if they do decide to add another women's sport at OU. The weather here in Oklahoma is so favorable because there is a ton of true in-the-water time."

Both men's and women's crew teams were established at OU four years ago. Lang, a Kansas State grad, took the club under his wing in 2003 and has worked hard to develop a more competitive edge.

The OU club has received some assistance from the Oklahoma Association of Rowing and figures to benefit from a \$2.5 million venture being spearheaded by Oklahoma City and Chesapeake Energy, as well as private donations. Part of the extensive OKC "River Revitalization" project, the new facilities include a 14,000-



Nate Hewes

■ For four years men's and women's crew have competed under the OU banner. Completion of the River Revitalization project near Bricktown in Oklahoma City will give the teams access to greatly upgraded boating facilities.

square-foot boathouse and dock located on the North Canadian River near the Bricktown area.

“Oklahoma has always said it wants to be the Ivy League school of the Midwest, so what better way to do it than adding an Ivy League sport,” adds Lang.

### More water fun

Racing or recreational, the OU Sailing Club offers the best of both worlds at nearby Lake Thunderbird. As the weather continues to warm through the summer and into the fall, the club’s membership will grow from the current 25 to as many as 50 or more.

“We’ve had periods of growth and periods of stagnation, but we are trying to be more active in raising funds and maintaining our membership level,” says Justin Adams, the club commodore. “It’s great for college students. We have social sails, and we’ve got a learn-to-sail program one day a week that teaches the basics.”

The club, which has been in existence since the early 1990s, reorganized during the last six months. A partnership with the Lake Thunderbird Sailing Club has reduced the cost of storage for their eight sailboats, which helps keep membership fees affordable.

### Back in the saddle

There was a time, both pre- and post-World War II, when OU’s ROTC pro-



Courtesy Justin Adams

■ Club commodore Justin Adams, left, and Aaron Evans race across Lake Thunderbird as part of the OU Sailing Club, whose partnership with the lake’s sailing club is making membership fees more affordable for students.

gram practiced maneuvers on horseback with horse-drawn artillery. Candidates were required to ride daily, and their trusty steeds were stabled just south of what is now the Huston Huffman Center. Those same stables were used from 1923-41 when OU fielded an intercollegiate polo team.

Some 60 years later, the OU Polo and Riding Club consists of men’s and women’s teams that practice at Broad Acres Polo Club, located on Bob Moore Farms just off of Highway 9 southwest of Norman. The club was re-established in

1988 after a near-50-year hiatus and has experienced some competitive successes over the last decade.

“The club is doing very well right now,” said Penn Little, club president and member of the men’s team. “We enjoyed a lot of success this season with the men’s team, and the women’s team is working hard to build some success.”

### Competition and camaraderie

Success for the club sports is measured by many yardsticks, not always wins and losses. Significantly the program helps bridge the gap between intramurals and intercollegiate athletics for students, faculty and staff athletes who are not yet ready to hang ’em up. For them the clubs provide the opportunity to organize, coordinate and participate based on their competitive or recreational appetites.

Sports heroes abound at OU, but heart, courage and desire are not limited to the select few who represent their university on the NCAA’s grandest stages. Some of the most memorable performances are delivered by weekend warriors who play out their Sooner dreams just for the love of the game.

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Bill Hefron/The Norman Transcript

■ An OU Polo and Riding Club rider takes his pony onto the practice field at the Broad Acres Polo Club at Bob Moore Farms, southwest of Norman.