



Huston Huffman's

A student-driven expansion and renovation brings the heavily used OU fitness center up to today's standards—and then some.



Student dreamers and doers at the University of Oklahoma have been known to achieve great things. The recently expanded and renovated Huston Huffman Physical Fitness Center is the latest manifestation of such dreams—and action.

In 1999 OU students were resolute in their desire to improve Huston Huffman Center to meet the needs of a new generation. Their work culminated in a grand opening ceremony for the revitalized facility in April 2004.

In the years since Huston Huffman Center opened in 1981, a heightened emphasis on health and changes in recreational preferences had produced increasingly heavy use of the facility. Complaints of overcrowding and absent or outdated features began to emerge in the '90s. Students organized to ensure their participation in a comprehensive planning process that prioritized needed improvements to the center and determined how such a project could be financed.

Once the students and their administrative advisers concluded their planning for the new Huston Huffman, designs were finalized and contracts let, the project took 16 months to complete. With parts of the center and many of its programs continuing under severe limitations, construction was a logistical nightmare, requiring patience and ingenuity throughout the process.

When finally back in full operation in

October 2003, the center boasted an additional 46,000 square feet and renovation of 64,000 square feet of existing space. Approximately \$287,000 worth of state-of-the-art fitness equipment had been installed and dozens of new programs and activities were being made available.

But as is often true of such long-range projects, most of the students responsible for the new Huston Huffman Center have moved on, leaving their successors to reap the rewards for their diligence and foresight.



It all started with an OU Student Congress resolution urging improvements to Huston Huffman Center. Among principal concerns were the need for more basketball courts, a larger and better-equipped weight room

and more space for special events and activities.

"I'm not sure we've ever had a facility with as much student input as this," says Susan Sasso, assistant vice president for student affairs. She recalls a student survey that indicated 89 percent of OU students used Huston Huffman facilities. More than three-fourths of those responding were willing to take on a student fee to fund the center expansion. "We started looking at the process," she says.

Sasso chaired the Huston Huffman Center Expansion Advisory Committee. A student task force was formed to look at physical fitness centers at five peer insti-

Extreme Makeover

BY RANDALL TURK

Photos by Robert Taylor



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tutions: Texas A&M University, the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Nebraska, Kansas State University and Oklahoma State University. The student investigators found the other schools had fitness centers that were larger and better equipped than their own.

“We took photos,” Sasso says. “We dreamed the dream. The idea for this came from the students. They wanted to make sure they made the decisions.”

The advisory committee met with student leaders, housing residents, Greeks and commuters and prepared an overview and feasibility study. “We spent months revising and looking at plans,” continues Sasso. “We made presentations to student, faculty and staff groups. We began putting numbers to the dream.”

In March 2000, OU students approved a \$12.50 per semester cultural and recreational fee to fund the \$9.3 million expansion. The student fees are being used to retire revenue bonds issued for construction.

The Oklahoma City architectural firm Frankfurt Short Bruza was hired and the design work went forward. The general contractor was Manhattan Construction Company, of Oklahoma City. On-campus project oversight was provided by OU’s Architectural and Engineering Services.



The successful expansion/renovation complements the program initiated by a previous generation of OU students whose ideas produced the original Huston Huffman Center. In 1966, students voted a \$15 per semester facilities fee to help pay for a health center (Goddard), a multi-purpose arena (Lloyd Noble Center), an activities building (a renovated Ellison Hall)—and a physical fitness center. By 1975, all but the fitness center had been completed. In that year, students voted to increase the facilities fee by another \$10 per semester to hasten completion of the plan.

A subsequent \$1.1 million special appropriation from the State Legislature then was matched by \$2 million from private donors, including a gift from family and friends of the late Oklahoma City oilman Huston Huffman. With the \$6.1 million construction package in hand, his colleagues on the OU Board of Regents named the center in Huffman’s honor.

When the center opened 23 years ago, “It was the height of the racquetball craze,” says Jackie Farley, OU’s director of recreational services. “We had 11 racquetball courts then, but the sport later fell from favor.” Five of those courts were eliminated to make way for a more centrally situated equipment



Clockwise from top left: (1) Life can be a blur when you are in a zone working out in the Paul Wilson Cardiovascular Room in Huston Huffman, earphones in place, digital FM radios tuned to five different muted TV bands on overhead screens. (2) The battery of weight and cardio machines includes some that can accommodate disabled students like Tim Eldridge, a HHC regular. (3) More high school-regulation size basketball courts were a high priority for HHC's student planners. (4) A novel feature in the renovated facility is the "spit and rinse" basin, a floor-saving device nestled between the water fountains.

checkout counter on the center's upper level. A squash court, including its original floor, was relocated. Also on the ground level are two new 5,000-square-foot rooms for aerobics, yoga, kickboxing and martial arts.

The original Huston Huffman Center had five basketball courts on the lower level, each measuring 74 by 45 feet. Four of those courts remain. An additional four new high school-regulation-size courts, each 84 by 50 feet, have removable goals that can be stored when other sports claim the courts. The gym floor bears color-coded markings for basketball, volleyball and a dozen badminton courts.

Weight-training space has more than doubled to occupy two rooms totaling 10,000 square feet. A "selectorized" weight room has machines equipped with easily adjustable weight stacks. The

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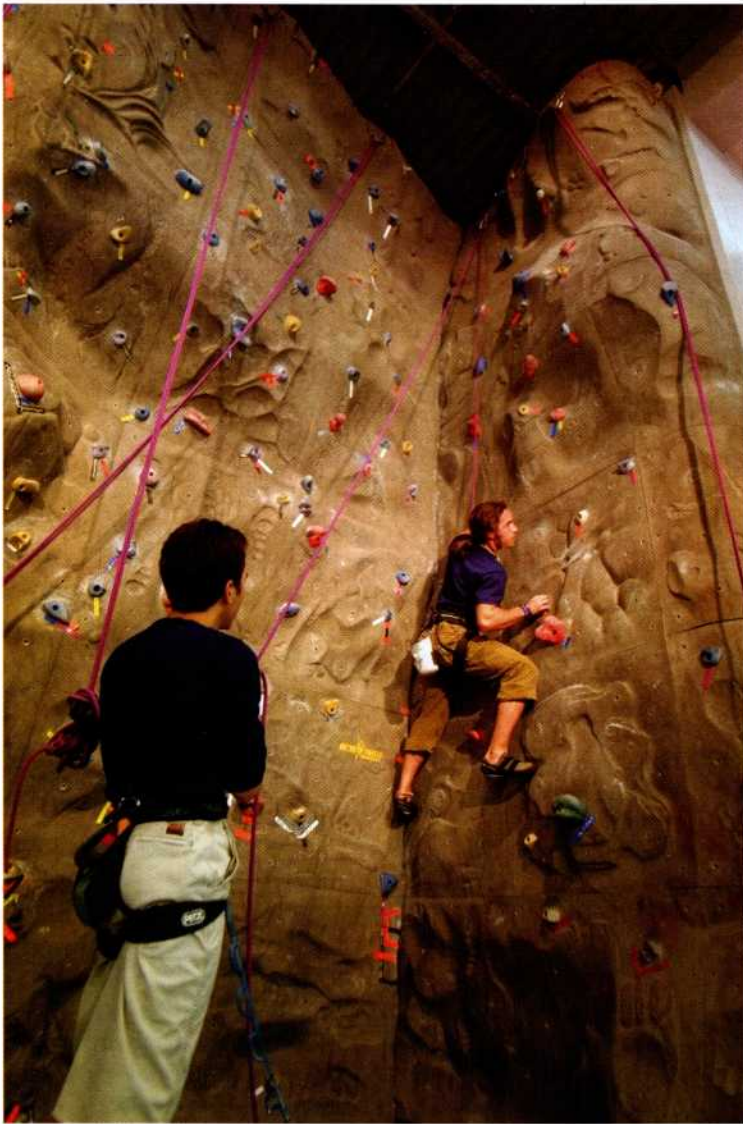
adjacent free-weight room offers more traditional equipment. "Smith Machines," with attached weights, replace the former squat cages and their attendant risk of injury.

There is a new cardiovascular room with stationary bikes, stair-steppers and treadmills. Users can bring their own digital radios and earphones to plug into "broadcast vision," five FM radio bands tuned to muted TV programs played on as many overhead screens. The room is named for Paul Wilson, OU's recreation director of 30 years, who retired before the expansion project was completed.

Another new feature is the popular climbing wall, which Farley claims is the safest activity in the center. Anyone cleared to traverse the wall must first pass a basic skills test. Although each climber is strapped into a safety harness, he or she still must be accompanied by a partner.

An upper-level jogging track overlooking and encircling the gym floor is now 1/6th mile long, the former 1/8th-mile track having been widened from two to three full lanes. Adjacent to the track on the upper-level landing, an area known as "the bridge" is equipped with a battery of cardiovascular and weight machines, some designed to accommodate the disabled. Four restrooms, also handicap-accessible, were added beneath the bridge.

For years students had expressed annoyance with the center's long entrance ramp and the presence of only one turnstile, resulting in inconvenience and delay. The ramp has been removed, several turnstiles added, and the lobby expanded to include a comfortable lounge area with several large-screen TVs.



Clockwise from above: (1) Jonathan Barnoskie, right, scales the popular climbing wall in Huston Huffman, while his climbing partner mans the safety rope. (2) This view from the upper level at HHC shows the expanded running track at left, the climbing wall in the background and the selectorized weight machines below. (3) What kind of cool place would HHC be without a juice bar, located just inside the entrance, where OU Food Service employee Susan Hams is whipping up a smoothie.



A nearby elevator was installed to accommodate the disabled. A juice bar just inside the entrance, staffed by OU Food Service, is proving popular with students, as is a range of long-sought special programs.

“This fall we have 42 classes in step aerobics, yoga, spin cycling and kickboxing,” Farley reports. Another student wish is being granted this fall with the addition of certified personal trainers offering individual advice for achieving fitness goals. She expects such personal assistance to further bolster attendance, which has increased steadily since last October’s reopening. “Last fall we averaged 64,000 card swipes a month at the turnstiles. Being busy is a great problem to have.”



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