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OU BASKETBALL'S

"Mama Drake"

A SELF-PROFESSED BASKETBALL JUNKIE,
THIS 96-YEAR-OLD SOONER THRIVES
ON A KNOWLEDGE OF THE GAME AND THE
PLAYERS THAT IS SECOND TO NONE.

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH



"By, did you see the way our Sooners got on the boards tonight! That's how you beat a team like Texas," offers Myrtle Drake, pointing down to the still-buzzing Lloyd Noble Center court in the aftermath of Oklahoma's thrilling 64-60 victory over the 11th-ranked Longhorns.

"It's certainly a thrill to beat Texas, but hopefully we can do the same thing when Oklahoma State comes in here. There's nothing more fun than beating OSU."

And with that, Mrs. Drake and her daughter, Donna Pendarvis, make their way to the arena exit. Another game in the books for the Sooners, another night of seat-squirming excitement and heartfelt cheering in Mrs. Drake's amazing journey.

"Life itself is an adventure, but being the wife of a basketball coach is an incredible adventure," she says.

That is how she described her relationship with late husband Bruce Drake 50 years ago, during the height of his tenure as OU's basketball coach, and it is the way she describes her life today.

At 96, she is too young to be considered the Mother of Oklahoma Basketball. The Sooners played their first game in 1907, almost two full years before Myrtle Tosh Drake was born. Even so, that does not stop several generations of former OU players from referring to her as "Mama Drake."

continued



Photo Provided

Myrtle and Bruce Drake, flanked by daughters Deonne, left, and Donna, right, celebrate the coach's 1973 induction into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame.

For much of the last eight decades, she has been a fixture at Sooner games. From the time Bruce Drake played his first contest there in 1928, to the time he retired as the Sooners' head coach after the 1954-55 season, Mrs. Drake wore a path to the OU Field House. She was her husband's biggest fan, the program's most loyal supporter and a second mother to basically every player who donned a Sooner jersey.

"She's absolutely the best, just an incredible lady," explains Ted Owens, who played for Coach Drake from 1949 to 1951 and who later coached 20 seasons at the University of Kansas. "She has always been such a sweet, caring lady. I believe anyone who played during that era would describe it as a family environment, a home away from home."

The Drakes continued to be regulars at home games over the next 20 years, even after the Sooner straddled the cozy confines of the old Field House for a new home inside the Lloyd Noble Center in 1975. Until his death in 1983, Bruce and Myrtle Drake sat side-by-side, watching, absorbing and cheering—rarely missing a game.

In some ways, basketball was like a bond that helped their marriage last 50 years. It was something they always shared, along with a deep, abiding love.

Basketball took them around the world to places like Greece, where Coach Drake gave detailed clinics on the game. They attended the Final Four every year, sitting with a who's who of coaching legends that often included John Wooden and Henry Iba, and they were regulars at the Big Eight Tournament in Kansas City.

"Mother always had such admiration and respect for Daddy. His career was her career," says Donna Pendarvis, the younger of the Drake's two daughters. "He included her in every aspect of his career and life, and she helped provide a foundation of support and love that was immeasurable. They were a great couple."

In the years since her husband's passing, Myrtle Drake has continued her unwavering support of Oklahoma basketball. She is a self-professed "basketball junkie" who studies and loves the game as much now as she did when her husband was coaching.

When she is not watching basketball

or working on one of her personal projects, Mrs. Drake is adamant about staying in touch with many of the players and friends who have touched her life over the years. And there obviously have been many.

"That's one of the most rewarding aspects about our life together—the people we met and all of the young men who played for Bruce, so many wonderful relationships," says Mrs. Drake. "I probably enjoy most the association I have with all of the players. They were very often in our home, and they were like our extended family. In my mind, those relationships are forever."

Mrs. Drake's loyalty and support have not gone unnoticed by current OU men's coach Kelvin Sampson. He recognizes the bridge she provides to the history of Sooner basketball, and he was a driving force in naming the new Lloyd Noble Center men's practice facility for Bruce Drake.

During his 10-plus seasons at the OU helm, Sampson has forged a special friendship with the woman he describes as "one of the most gracious, inspirational people I've ever met."

"Her knowledge of the game and, more importantly, her knowledge of the history of Oklahoma basketball, is amazing," Sampson continues. "She sends me stories on her husband or just notes of encouragement from time to time. Mrs. Drake always knows the right things to say."

"Coach Drake left an important legacy behind, and Myrtle is the First Lady of that legacy. She represents an era that helped make possible many of the things we are doing here today."

Born in Chickasha two years after Oklahoma statehood, Myrtle Tosh split time living with her mother and grandmother after her parents divorced. She grew up in Mangum and later Oklahoma City, where she attended Central High School and eventually began dating Tom Churchill, one of the state's most prominent prep athletes.

Churchill graduated in 1926 and landed at OU on a basketball scholarship. While there, he became close friends with Drake, another Central High grad, who had stayed out of school a year before opting to play for the Sooners.

"I remember exactly how I met Bruce. I was dating Tom at the time, and I had

come to Norman for a state high school track meet," explains Mrs. Drake. "They were staying at the ATO house, and I dropped by to see Tom. When he came out to the car, Bruce came with him."

Drake made such a good impression that when the two ended up in the same English class the following semester, dating seemed like the natural next step.

"Tom and I had broken up, and Bruce called to ask me on a date. I said 'yes,' and we knew fairly soon after we started going out that we were right for each other," recalls Mrs. Drake, who earned a degree in home economics.

The couple was wed during the spring break of Mrs. Drake's final semester at OU in 1933. Three years earlier, after completing a successful collegiate athletic career that saw him earn All-America honors in basketball and also letter in both football and track, Bruce Drake took a job as assistant to long-time OU basketball coach Hugh McDermott.

Prior to the 1938-39 season, McDermott resigned his hoops post to become full-time chairman of OU's Physical Education Department, thus opening the door for Drake to begin a 17-year run at the helm. His Sooners appeared in three NCAA Tournaments, advancing twice to the Final Four, including the 1946-47 season when they lost to Holy Cross in the championship game.

"I watched Bruce play games in the Field House, and I watched him coach a lot of games there. Oh my, I love that place," says Mrs. Drake, reflecting on her time as the wife of one of college basketball's original innovators. "One of the reasons I'm so appreciative of Kelvin Sampson and his program is because he recognizes the history of OU basketball, and he embraces it. That means so very much to me and all of the people who came before him."

Mrs. Drake continues to serve as ambassador for OU basketball, sending cards and notes to many of the former players who spent time in her living room and kitchen at 1224 Trout Street, located just two blocks east of the Field House. She keeps them apprised of current events and always offers her generous hospitality when any of them return to Norman.

"When I was coaching at Kansas,

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over the last 80 years. She has cheered and cried and danced in the aisles, and she has enjoyed every moment of it.

"Mother lives by what she believes in, starting first with God. She is a very spiritual lady," says Donna Pendarvis, whose older sister, Deonne, lives in California. "She's also very independent and detail-oriented. She's always working on some new project. Her days are very well planned. But nothing makes her happier than watching the Sooners."

It is what she lives for.

And beating Oklahoma State, as the Sooners did two nights after their January



Robert Taylor

At the dedication of the Bruce Drake Men's Practice Court, Myrtle Drake receives mementos from Coach Kelvin Sampson, center, and Athletics Director Joe Castiglione.

Mama Drake used to send me inspirational notes that always put a smile on my face," Ted Owens remembers. "The note might not say anything about basketball until the last line, and it was always the same: 'Teddy, you have to work more on free throws.'

"Don't think I didn't take her advice."

Through good times and not so good times, Myrtle Drake has seen Oklahoma basketball at every stage of its evolution

22 win over Texas—well, that is really what it is all about.

"I can't think of a better way to spend two hours," she adds. "Unless of course, we're beating them up in Stillwater. That makes it even more special."

Jay C. Upchurch covers the OU sports scene for *Sooner Magazine*. He also is editor of *Sooners Illustrated* and sports columnist for the *Oklahoma Gazette*.