

# VISITING THE BARRY SWITZER CENTER



**Dramatically displayed for all to see:  
the trophies, records, photos, videos and memorabilia.  
Everything you ever wanted to know  
about Sooner football history and tradition.**



The goal was to create something timeless, classic and traditional, something that would bring to life the rich history of Sooner football. And while it may have taken two attempts to get it right, the “new” Barry Switzer Center is a true representation of that distinguished legacy.

The \$1 million renovation project, completed in September 2004, was made possible by contributions from Oklahoma City businessmen Aubrey K. McClendon and Carl B. Anderson III, long-time supporters of the University of Oklahoma. The transformation focused mainly on the 6,000-square-foot Legends Lobby, initially dedicated in April 1999 to showcase the University of Oklahoma football program’s heritage.

According to OU director of athletics Joe Castiglione, the original design did not meet the University’s standards of excellence. And while plans for changes were in the works for some time, the execution of said changes was dependent on raising the funds needed to assemble a worthier tribute.

“The first time around, there was only so much money left in the budget. And to be honest, we were never happy with the design,” says Castiglione. “While it was better than nothing, it wasn’t anywhere near a level that we believed properly celebrated the history and the people who forged that history.”

Castiglione explains that problems with the original design firm and the contractor had been addressed at the initial time of completion. But the issue was never resolved, thanks to what he termed “legal wrangling and lawsuits.” So instead of waiting for a resolution that was nowhere in sight, the project was given priority status in 2003.

“We basically started over from scratch—new funding, new design company, new everything,” says Castiglione. “The footprint is basically the same, but we gutted the space and came back with an entirely different design and approach.”

Inspired, in part, by sections of the College Football Hall of Fame, located in South Bend, Indiana, the new design better illustrates the program’s amazing history, which spans the last 111 years. Each of the Switzer Center’s three floors have taken on a dramatic new look that Castiglione believes captures the essence of what OU football is all about.

The Legends Lobby portion of the center was closed immediately following the Sooners’ annual spring game in April 2004, and the renovation

**BY JAY C. UPCHURCH**

Photos by Robert Taylor

LEFT: The original Ted Watts’ mural, which covers the west wall of the Barry Switzer Center’s first-floor entry, was updated in 2002 and again in 2005 to include recent Sooner triumphs. INSET: The silver shoes that two-time All-American running back “Little Joe” Washington wore on his way to becoming OU’s all-time leading rusher reside in the Switzer Center, along with trophies like this one from the 1976 Orange Bowl victory that gave the Sooners the 1975 national championship.



ABOVE: The 6,000-square-foot Legends Lobby features dozens of display cases filled with priceless memorabilia documenting Oklahoma's illustrious football history.

BELOW: Artifacts displayed include 1920s letterman sweaters, a 1918 program and the football Viene Hendricks carried in scoring the first touchdown ever on Owen Field, 1924.



process lasted almost five months. More than 1,300 fans showed up on opening weekend in late September of that year to get a firsthand look at the new shrine. Since then, thousands more Sooner faithful have explored the exemplary tribute to Sooners, past and present.

The facility's honoree could not be more impressed with the center.

"It's beautiful. You can see the careful thought that went into the place, and it's something we're all proud of now," says former OU coach Barry Switzer. "It's first class all the way. It may have my name on it, but it's built around all of the players and coaches who

have meant so much to Oklahoma football over the years."

The most substantial changes are reflected in the second and third levels of the center, where the design firm of Gallagher and Associates and the project contractor, 1220 exhibits of Nashville, Tennessee, portray OU's most memorable gridiron accomplishments through showcases full of priceless memorabilia, hundreds of photographs and graphics, as well as 13 interactive audio and streaming visual display monitors.

The state-of-the-art project carefully connects each era of Sooner heroes, weaving a tapestry of great moments that begins with legendary coach Bennie Owen and makes its way through the championship years of Bud Wilkinson, Barry Switzer and Bob Stoops.

"There aren't many places that can claim the tradition and history that the University of Oklahoma has," says Stoops, OU's head coach for the past six seasons. "That is one of the reasons why the Switzer Center is so important—because it captures and displays all of the great accomplishments of so many of OU's teams and players. It is a place where fans can go to relive those memories, not only now but for years to come."

The center's first-floor entry still is adorned with the beautiful work of noted sports artist Ted Watts, whose colorful mural on the west wall, updated to include recent triumphs, measures 8 feet high by 33 feet wide. Added to the area was a large flat-screen monitor featuring a continuous video feed that welcomes visitors and sets the mood for the ensuing tour.

The program's seven national championships are the focal point of the second floor, along with a timeline retracing the magical moments that have defined OU football. A display of championship trophies adorns the featured kiosk, while artifacts and other pieces of history are wonderful additions to the walls and five other showcases.

"We developed Legends Lobby to capture not only the accomplishments of the football program over the last 100 years, but also to connect with the entire campus and the community,"



Every wall in the Legends Lobby is adorned with classic photographs, pages of record-breaking statistics and historical accounts of the Sooners' greatest exploits.



The 2000 national championship display case, featuring no less than 10 trophies from that miracle season, is one of the most prominent displays in the Switzer Center.



The third level of the Switzer Center spotlights the Heisman Court, honoring the accomplishments of Billy Vessels (1952), Steve Owens (1969), Billy Sims (1978) and Jason White (2003), OU's four winners of the Heisman Trophy, college football's most prestigious individual achievement award.

says Craig Dunn, vice president for 1220's museum services department. "The space provides a comfortable and enjoyable exhibit experience for everyone and presents the rich heritage and priceless memories that the fans expect."

Topping off the ultimate fan experience is a third-floor shrine focused on OU's four Heisman Trophy winners—Billy Vessels,

Steve Owens, Billy Sims and Jason White—as well as all of the other great Sooners who have earned national awards. Various wall displays pay tribute to All-America selections, College Football Hall of Fame inductees and the players who have gone on to play in the National Football League.

"There have been so many extraordinary accomplishments that needed to be displayed, preserved or celebrated in some way. This new design is a better representation of our vision," adds Castiglione. "This is a magical place where people can come to reminisce or perhaps more fully understand what Oklahoma's tradition is all about.

"I think the real significance of this facility is that it ties everything together. It's a really clear picture of where we are that comes with an instant explanation of how we got there."

The Switzer Center is open to the public every Thursday and Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and 12 to 5 p.m. on Sundays following all OU home football games.

*Jay C. Upchurch is a regular contributor to Sooner Magazine. He also is editor-in-chief of a new independent publication devoted to OU sports, Sooner Spectator, and sports columnist for the Oklahoma Gazette.*