



A phenomenal freshman from California has taken the Big 12 by storm and stands poised to change the face of women's college basketball.

Courtney & Company

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH PHOTOS BY JERRY LAIZURE

continued

Imagine the surprise in the world of women's college basketball in November 2004 when the top prep player in the country decided the University of Oklahoma was the place best suited for her considerable talents. Conventional wisdom might have pointed to more traditional programs like Connecticut, Tennessee or Duke, but Courtney Paris let her intuition be her guide.

Oh, and there were all of those heart-to-heart talks with her twin sister and best friend, Ashley, who just happened to rank as the fifth-best prospect in the country that year. Together, they entertained offers from dozens of hopeful suitors, weighed their options and chose to become Sooners.

Some might call it a giant leap of faith, selecting a destination known more for its football prowess than any accomplishments involving women's hoops. Of course, those people have forgotten the 2001-02 Sooners' amazing run to the national championship finals—and they have never met Sherri Coale, Oklahoma's feisty veteran coach and the deciding factor in the Paris twins' final analysis.

"There are so many things involved when you are trying to decide where you are going to spend the next four years of your life—it's such a huge step. But we felt all along that Oklahoma had everything we were looking for," explains Courtney, the consensus national high school player of the year as a senior at Piedmont (California) High School.

"Basketball is obviously important, but being around great people and getting a quality education were also big. We felt OU offered the best of both worlds.

"The more we talked to Coach Coale, the more we fell in love with Oklahoma. She has such a passion for the game and for life. I felt a real connection to OU, and I honestly believe this is a place where you can win championships."

While the Paris twins finished off their high school careers by guiding Piedmont to its second straight state title, the 2004-05

Sooners went on to an uninspiring 17-13 season. Still, even with the addition of the California duo to a solid OU returning lineup this past fall, many experts figured Coale's program was still a couple of seasons away from making another major splash on the national scene.

Courtney Paris, however, had other ideas.

The 6-foot-4 power post wasted little time validating her dominating presence at the next level. Her transition from prep

phenom to Division-I star seemed effortless, as she instantly began living up to all of the preseason hype that had preceded her arrival in Norman. In her OU debut, Paris scored 24 points and grabbed 10 rebounds.

"She came in and changed the complexion of everything we do," says Coale, smiling at the thought of Courtney's impact on the Sooners from the moment she stepped onto the Lloyd Noble Center floor. "I have never seen anyone do the things she did as a freshman, and I kinda doubt I ever will again."

Paris' initial numbers from OU's season-

opening victory were only a sign of things to come. Over the next four-plus months, she recorded an NCAA-record 33 double-doubles and was the catalyst for the Sooners' rise from No. 25 in the preseason polls all the way to No. 8 by mid-March.

During that span, Paris averaged 21.9 points, 15 rebounds and 3.3 blocked shots per game, becoming the first female player in NCAA history to amass 700 points, 500 rebounds and 100 blocks in a single season.

"Courtney was able to face every challenge and not get caught

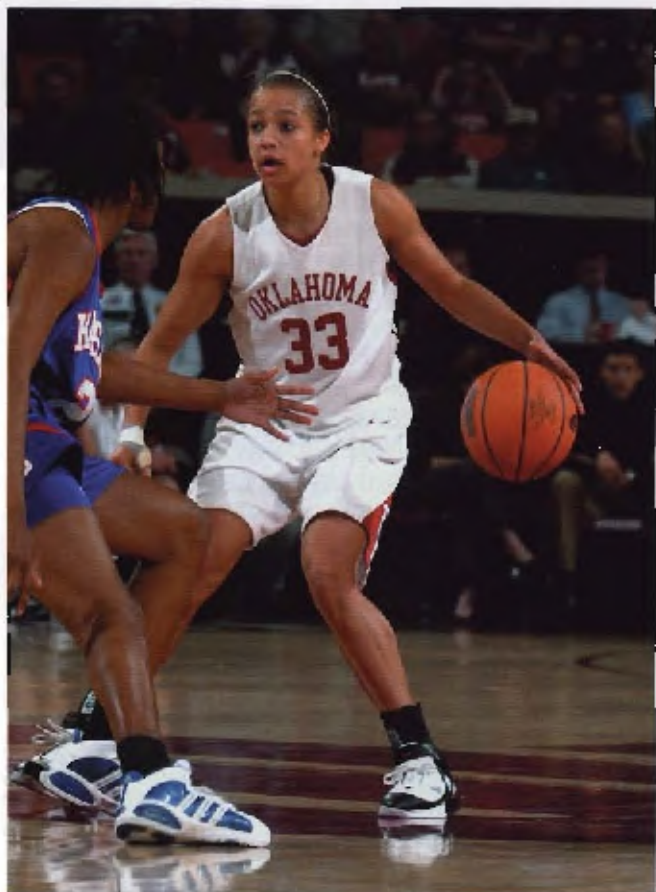


Yessss! Britney Brown (left), Ashley Paris and Chelsi Welch encircle an ecstatic Coach Sherri Coale as the 2005-06 Sooners notch another victory, 63-57 over Texas Tech, in their incredible run to the perfect Big 12 season.

on that emotional roller coaster that inevitably almost every other young player gets stuck on. She is so strong physically, but her mental toughness is what's so amazing," says Coale, whose team parlayed Paris' inside dominance with some outstanding perimeter play to produce one of the most well-balanced lineups in the country.

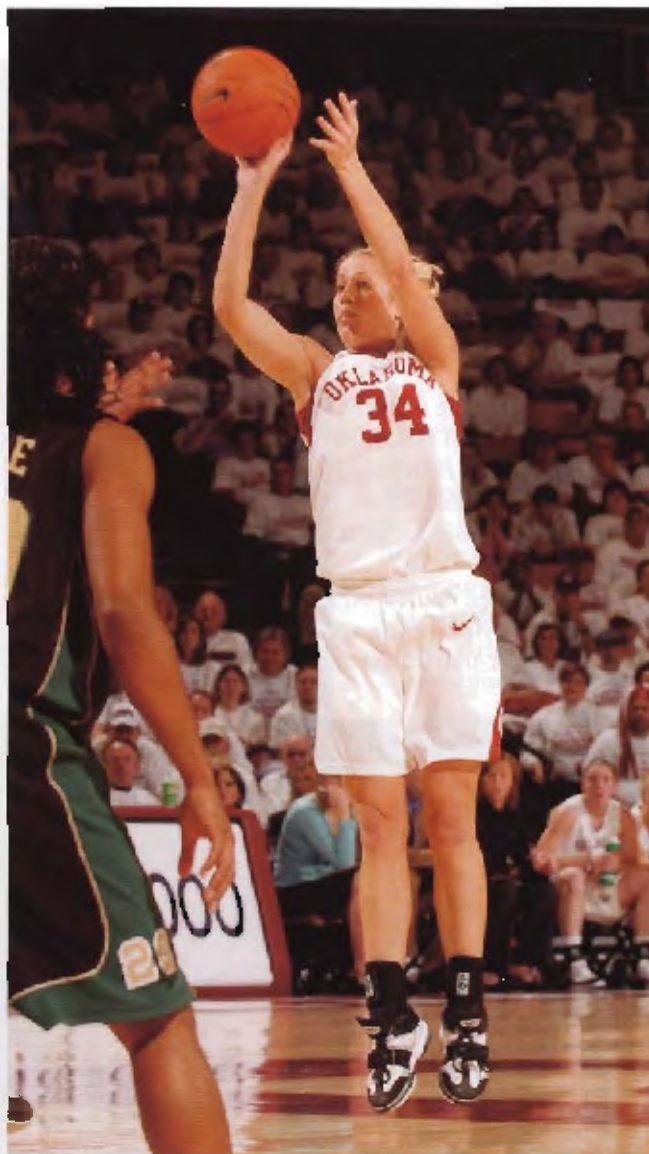
Players like Erin Higgins, Britney Brown, Chelsi Welch and Leah Rush proved to be the perfect complement to the incredible production Courtney Paris was providing in the paint. Meanwhile, backups Laura Andrews, Krista Sanchez, Kendra Moore, and the "little" Paris twin, 6-foot-3 Ashley, gave Coale's squad plenty of support off the bench.

"I believe we all played off of Courtney to some extent. She is one of those players who makes everyone around her that much better," offers Brown, a junior point guard who averaged a team-best 4.3 assists per game.



ABOVE: Courtney Paris may be the Sooners' superstar, but the job of running the team falls to savvy point guard Britney Brown, who emerged from a tight race for the position to claim the starting spot.

TOP RIGHT: Three-point specialist Erin Higgins hit 88 in 2005-06 to set the single season school record and make life increasingly difficult for defenses collapsing on Courtney Paris.



Sharp-shooting Higgins, another junior, is already the most prolific 3-point shooter in school history. Her 88 treys in 2005-06 set a new OU single-season record, and a fearless demeanor makes Higgins a key weapon when opposing defenses try to collapse around Courtney Paris.

"I think we struggled a little early trying to find our identity. Our chemistry was maybe a little off. But after the Christmas break, we kind of found what we were looking for, and it took off from there," offers Courtney.

The Sooners went into the holiday break with a 9-3 mark, thanks to the only consecutive losses (to Illinois and Michigan State) they would suffer all season. An 83-70 road win over No. 16 New Mexico got the team pointed back in the right direction and after a heartbreaking loss at 10th-ranked Ohio State on January 9, OU began an unprecedented ascent to Big 12 supremacy.

"I got into foul trouble about four minutes into that game at New Mexico. But I'm sitting there on the bench, and I look up and all of the sudden we are up by 20. The whole team just figured it out," says Courtney. "From that point on, we played

“Courtney is one of those players who only come along so often. Everything about Courtney—the way she is wound together—makes her remarkable.”

more together as a team; we played harder, and everyone just came into their own. It just kept growing and growing from that point.”

The next defining moment came a few weeks later during a road trip to Waco, Texas, where Coale’s charges faced off with defending national champion Baylor. Paris turned in her usual 23-point, 11-rebound effort, but it took a pair of 3-pointers from Kendra Moore to lift the Sooners to a thrilling 73-70 triumph.

OU duplicated the feat on February 12 via an 81-77 home victory over Baylor, calling national attention to the fact the Sooners were 11-0 in conference play and possibly staring at an

unprecedented accomplishment in the Big 12—a perfect 16-0 record.

“To go undefeated in any league is very special. Once we saw that was a possibility, we embraced it as a goal,” says Coale, whose previous best league mark at OU was 15-1 during the 2000-01 season. “We had a rare opportunity to do something remarkable, and our players responded.”

They did so by reeling off five straight wins to end the regular season—the last a 60-59 road victory at Texas Tech. A few days later, the Sooners put an exclamation point after their Big 12 record by winning the conference tournament title game, beating Baylor for a third straight time. In that contest, Paris scored

24 points and hauled down 26 rebounds in a performance that reverberated across the college basketball landscape.

Paris and Oklahoma were no longer flying under anyone’s radar. The national media had caught on mid-January, and stories on the Paris sisters and their juggernaut team had become commonplace. By the NCAA tournament tip-off, the Sooners’ hot play had earned them a No. 2 seed and transformed Paris into a media darling.

“I never looked at it as if I was doing extraordinary things as an individual during the season. We did some great things as a team, and that’s what our focus was all along,” insists Courtney, who would eventually establish 55 new OU records, 10 conference records and four NCAA marks during an unforgettable rookie season.

“It was a great ride other than our last game—we definitely didn’t want it to end like that,” she says. “But that one game can’t take away from all of the other things we accomplished during the season.”

Forward Leah Rush, the team’s second leading scorer who also regularly drew the toughest defensive assignment, drives around Baylor’s All-American Sophia Young in the Big 12 championship game that the Sooners won 72-61.





Every win is an emotional one for Courtney Paris (right), but the 73-45 meeting with Nebraska was also Senior Night, the last home appearance for her mentor, senior center Beky Preston, who adopted the talented Paris twins even though their arrival at OU in fall 2005 drastically reduced her own playing time.

Wins over Pepperdine and Brigham Young earned the Paris-led Sooners their first Sweet 16 berth since the 2001-02 squad advanced all the way to the title game before losing to UConn. But just when it looked as if OU might be a legitimate national title contender, Stanford brought the streaking Sooners—winners of 19 straight—back to earth with a season-ending 88-74 loss.

OU's 31-5 record represents the second-most victories in school history.

"I think losing that last game made us a little bitter. And I believe that is a good thing. I know I have a little chip on my shoulder, and I can't wait to get back out there and take that next step as a team," says Courtney, who set an NCAA single-season record for rebounding with 539. "As we got deeper into the season, I honestly felt we had a chance to win a national championship. Although it ended on a disappointing note, I definitely feel the way this season went is going to set us up for next season and the season after that."

In the aftermath of March Madness, the awards and accolades continued to roll in for Paris, who became the first true freshman in NCAA annals to earn consensus All-America honors. She was also a finalist for both the Wooden Award and the Naismith Trophy, which go to the nation's best player.

"Courtney is one of those players—like a Wayman Tisdale—

who only come along so often. Everything about Courtney—the way she is wound together—makes her remarkable," says Coale, the Big 12 Conference Coach of the Year. "But we were obviously more than just a one-person team. Our success was also a result of how we came together as a team—how Leah Rush adjusted her role, how players like Britney [Brown] and Chelsi [Welch] and Erin Higgins stepped up. It was a team effort.

"We lose a couple of special seniors [Andrews and Beky Preston], but our athleticism and the potential of all of our pieces will be greater than it's ever been next season. I feel this season helped better prepare us for what to expect at various stages of the journey. I think we've set the stage for some high expectations, and we


are excited about the future of this program."

Oklahoma signed what many consider to be a top-five national recruiting class this past November. Among the talent Coale has slated to join her program is Amanda Thompson, a power forward from Chicago, and 6-3 Abi Olajuwon, daughter of former NBA great Hakeem Olajuwon.

Add those youngsters to a roster loaded with returning talent, including all five starters led by the Paris twins, and it's no wonder that some early preseason polls for 2006-07 have Oklahoma ranked among the top three.

"How can you not be excited about the team we have coming back and the new players we have coming in?" asks Courtney. "I can already sense an urgency about this group as we head into the off season and begin preparations for next fall.

"If you thought [2005-06] was an amazing year, wait until next season. Winning a national championship is the ultimate goal for every team, but only a few realistically have the chance to accomplish it. I believe Oklahoma will be one of those teams."

That should surprise no one. 

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.