



Robert Taylor

New Digs

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

The 2006 Sooner volleyball team prospered in historic McCasland Field House, a facility brought back to life through a major renovation project.

Hold off writing that epitaph. In fact, pack up the wrecking ball and shelve any demolition plans. There is life still in this old building, and history to be made.

Just ask the University of Oklahoma volleyball team and its fans, for they have experienced, first hand, the effects of a \$6 million renovation project that has transformed the 78-year-old T. Howard McCasland OU Field House into a first-class, multi-purpose sports venue.

Completed in late 2005, the initial phase of the ambitious plan focused on a full interior makeover that included the addition of the building's first-ever climate control system, along with a state-of-the-art scoreboard, and new lighting and sound systems. Also featured was the installation of new chair-back and retractable seating, and the complete refurbishment of the historic wood floor that dates back to the 1940s.

"We love our new home court. With the changes they've made, it's like night and day from what we had before," says Joanna Schmitt, senior captain for the OU volleyball team. "The place is so much nicer—great old building with a new look."

Schmitt and her teammates seized the opportunity to transform the new and improved McCasland Field House into a genuine house of horrors for opposing teams. The 2006 Sooners won nine of 10 home matches, losing only to eventual national champion Nebraska. Oklahoma finished the season with a 28-6 record and ranked No. 12 nationally, both high watermarks in the program's 32-year history.

To top things off, the Sooners advanced all the way to the NCAA Tournament's Sweet 16 for only the second time. Then senior Eliane Santos, the Big 12 Co-Defensive Player of the Year and the first OU player ever to earn All-America honors, was named national Blocker of the Year.

"It was a special season where it seemed like we made a lot of history as far as the Oklahoma volleyball program is concerned," says head coach Santiago Restrepo, voted 2006 National, Central Region and Big 12 Coach of the Year for leading OU to a runner-up finish in the conference. "The kind of success we experienced is critical for the continued development of the program, especially our recruiting. This team helped get OU volleyball back where it belongs, moving forward and ready to take the next step."

A sport that went virtually unnoticed for more than a decade—the Sooners recorded a forgettable 188-282 overall mark from 1991 to 2005—drew crowds of 500-600 enthusiastic followers in fall 2006. The program's winning ways were not lost on the student body, many of whom regularly filled the lower bowl bleachers, along with scores of other student-athletes—most notably, members of coach Sherri Coale's women's basketball team.

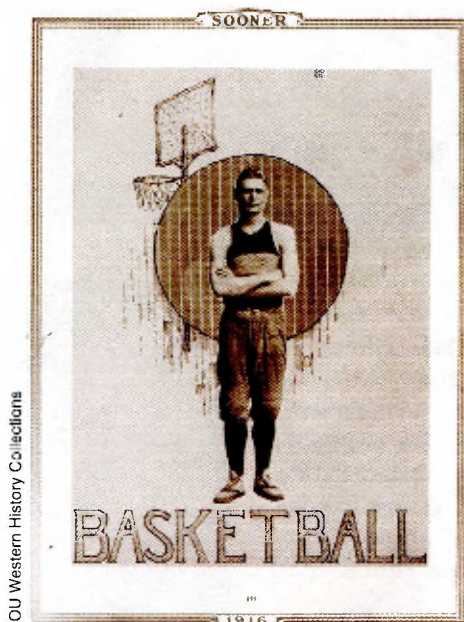
"It makes a huge difference when you look up in the stands and see so many people pulling for you. Our fans have been so great. They've created an atmosphere that definitely helps give us an edge," added Schmitt, a first-team All-Big 12 Conference selection and honorable mention All-American who became the first Sooner to record more than 1,000 career kills and digs.

Prior to its most recent renovation, the main structure of the Field House had gone decades without any substantial upgrades. An \$800,000 training facility for the wrestling program—named for the late OU coach and administrator Port Robertson—was added to the north side of the building in 1999, along with a new locker room for the volleyball team. But the rest of the competitive arena appeared antiquated, like a 1928 relic lost amidst 21st century progress.

"The Field House is one of the great buildings on our campus. There is such a classic feel to that whole structure, which we felt was really important to preserve," says Larry Naifeh, executive associate athletics director. "The renovations have really made it more viable and more attractive for everyone involved, especially our teams and our fans. It's always had a lot of history, but now it has returned to being a great multi-purpose facility."

One of the most laborious aspects of the extensive '05 renovation project involved rewiring the entire facility, which helped bring the building up to code and paved the way for a much-needed heating and air conditioning system.

"It's such a special place. I have so many great memories of the times I spent in there. I'm happy to see how they have decided to keep the Field House a key part of the campus," says Myrtle Drake, whose late husband, Bruce Drake, participated in the first game ever played in the Field House—a 45-19 victory over legendary coach Phog Allen's Kansas squad on January 13,



T. Howard McCasland, for whom the renovated Field House is named, was the 1916 basketball team's captain and star.

1928—and later coached the Sooners for 17 seasons.

“Bruce would be so proud to see the improvements they have made.”

Besides housing the men’s basketball team from 1928 to 1975, the Field House has long served as home to the volleyball team. Named for T. Howard McCasland, the venue also has hosted home matches for the OU wrestling squad during the 2006-07 season as well as meets for both the men’s and women’s gymnastics teams.

A two-sport star for the Sooners from 1914 to 1916—he also played end on the OU football team—McCasland was brilliant during his senior year with the OU basketball squad. The Duncan native scored 407 points, which stood as a single-season school record for more than 25 years.

McCasland went on to become a successful businessman in the oil industry, but remained heavily involved with his alma mater. In 1950, he established the McCasland Foundation, a charitable organization making the pacesetter gift for the initial Field House renovation project.

“Our administration has made a commitment to helping make the Field House one of the best volleyball venues in the Big 12 Conference. Donations from generous groups like the McCasland Foundation help make that possible,” offers Restrepo. “The improvements have helped make it a great, great place to play.”

Restrepo took over the program prior to the 2004 season, hired on the heels of six consecutive losing campaigns during which the Sooners managed a woeful .246 winning percentage. Despite watching his first two OU teams struggle to marks of 12-17 and 7-22, respectively, the Bogota, Columbia, native was quietly making progress.

“It was embarrassing at times. We had fans from other schools ask us if we were the ‘B’ team. We got our butts kicked a lot, and we lost some tight matches that would just tear the heart right out of your chest. Answers seemed pretty hard to find,” says Schmitt of her first three seasons as a Sooner.

“Coach Restrepo brought a lot of positives with him to this

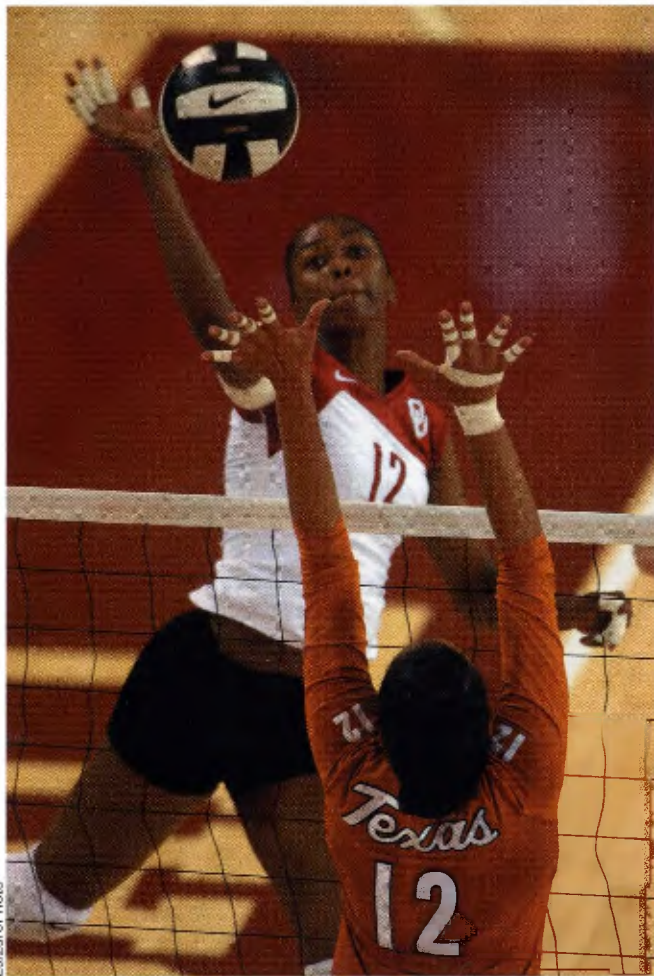
Third-year coach Santiago Restrepo transformed a Sooner women’s volleyball team with no tradition of success into a nationally ranked conference runner-up—thus earning the Bogota, Colombia, native 2006 National, Central Region and Big 12 Coach of the Year honors.



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ABOVE: Senior Eliane Santos, here against #8 Texas, was the first ever OU All-American, as well as Big 12 Co-Defensive Player of the Year and national Blocker of the Year.
 BELOW: The 2006 Sooners celebrate their 3-2 victory over Texas.

program, including a higher standard for training, incredible determination and a great passion for this sport. His attitude is infectious," adds Schmitt. "He definitely knew where he wanted to go with this program when he arrived, and even though it took a while to get it fully established, you could kinda see it coming."

Evidently preseason pollsters were still blind to the possibility when they tabbed the '06 Sooners for a 10th-place finish in the Big 12, a fact that provided added incentive for a veteran team led by Schmitt and Santos.

After opening with a loss to Arkansas, Oklahoma turned more than a few heads by winning 17 of its next 19 matches. Included in that impressive stretch were victories over eighth-ranked Texas and No. 12 Missouri. By mid-November, the Sooners had recorded more conference wins than they had during the previous three seasons combined.

"There are several players on this team who have seen the worst of times. But I think that helped turn us into a bunch of fighters. We were determined to make this season different," says Schmitt. "What we experienced this season was very gratifying. It's been a lot of fun, especially seeing all of the fans who came to watch us at the Field House."

The renovations may be responsible for pumping life back into McCasland Field House, but the OU volleyball squad was the lifeblood coursing through the venerable venue's veins this fall. Spring excitement remained high with the successes of the defending national champion men's gymnastics team and the nationally ranked wrestlers and women gymnasts.

More renovations are on the way. According to Naifeh, the next phase of the Field House project will take place over the next three to five years and will include the addition of restrooms and concessions, and the renovation of several auxiliary locker rooms to better equip the venue as a possible host for multi-team events or tournaments. The entire roof will be replaced at some point, as well as all of the facilities' windows, which will help provide better insulation and a more comfortable overall atmosphere.

Finally, there will be further upgrades to the existing wrestling facility, including the expansion of the actual practice area from 4,500 square feet to more than 8,000 square feet.

"It's been fun to watch the transformation of the Field House over the last few years. Everything they have done has been beneficial to all of the programs that practice or participate in there," says OU wrestling coach Jack Spates. "When I came to OU, the Field House was probably one of the worst facilities around. With many of the renovations already completed and plans for a state-of-the-art wrestling facility, it's a place we can all be very proud of."

Norman freelance writer Jay C. Upchurch is editor of Sooner Spectator. His OU sports articles appear regularly in Sooner Magazine.

