

# Welcome Home, Little Joe

A Sooner legend on the playing field, Joe Washington has moved into the front office to strengthen the network of support for current OU athletes.

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH



## Ghosts.

Joe Washington has seen them. He knows in no uncertain terms they exist, and that is the reason he first embraced them more than 30 years ago.

And that is the reason he still embraces them.

His initial ghostly encounter occurred during his freshman year at the University of Oklahoma when Washington first strolled down the hallway leading into the football program's locker room. There on the walls were dozens of pictures of former Sooner players and coaches — portraits of legendary figures whose accomplishments long have provided the foundation upon which Oklahoma football is built.

Each time he passed through the hallowed corridor, Washington could swear he heard voices beckoning him to greatness. And once in a great while, one of the ghosts would magically appear.

"As I became a part of the program and grew to know Oklahoma football, I gained a tremendous amount of respect for all of those faces and names on those walls," says Washington. "They seemed like ghosts to me, but occasionally one of them would walk through those doors. Seeing guys like Steve Owens or Clendon Thomas hanging out in the locker room was like watching a haunted house come to life.

"It was pretty amazing."

Washington admits he often was inspired by his larger-than-life predecessors, and he eventually went on to earn All-America honors two times during his OU career. The running back affectionately known as "Little Joe" must have looked like a ghost to opposing defenders as he twice finished among the top five in the

LEFT: Mention Joe Washington's name, and eventually someone will refer to the silver shoes he painted himself to symbolize his dazzling running style. OPPOSITE: Washington stands beside the Barry Switzer Center exhibit recounting the 1975 National Championship season—containing a pair of Joe's shiny footwear.

Photo by Lauren Barnes

# 1975 SEA

## SWITZER'S SOONERS RECOVER TO WIN SECOND STRAIGHT TITLE

After sailing through its first eight games, Oklahoma suffered a surprising home loss to Texas in week No. 9. With only two regular season games left to play, the Sooners fell to the top of the rankings. Then Oklahoma lost a 27-10 setback at Missouri. After a home win at Colorado, Oklahoma's Big 8 title race at the end of the regular season was over. The Sooners finished the season with a 14-1 record, winning the national championship. The Sooners' victory was the first since 1956.



Heisman Trophy balloting and helped lead the Sooners to back-to-back national championships in 1974 and 1975.

"It was something that was instilled in me early on — to hopefully have my picture up on that wall some day, to be one of those ghosts," says Washington, second on OU's all-time rushing list with 4,071 yards. "I was fortunate enough that it came true for me, and I know all the kids who come through the [Barry] Switzer Center these days want the same thing."

Over the years, Washington has not had the opportunity to return to his alma mater as much as he would have liked. A

smoke through a keyhole" has taken a job with the University. In May, Washington was named special assistant to the athletics director and executive director of the Varsity O Association.

"It's been like coming home in a lot of ways," says the 53-year-old Washington. "OU has always been a special place for me. I never believed I'd be as adamant about being a proud Sooner alumnus as I am, but believe me, having this opportunity is a big, big deal for me."

OU had been exploring the possibility of including the "O" Club under the umbrella of its Athletics Department for some time. A nationwide search was conducted for the right man to head the restructured entity. Washington was the obvious choice.

"We wanted to find someone who is uniquely qualified to head this project, and Joe is the perfect fit," says Joe Castiglione, vice president for athletics programs and director of athletics. "He is a person who knows what we are all about here at Oklahoma, and his insight and perspective will be key to this project's success."

**"All of our former athletes are an essential part of who we are, and we want them to know they are important to us."**

The University of Oklahoma's "O" Club was originated in 1925 as the OU Letterman's Club, with the sole purpose of serving the various needs of former and current student-athletes. Over the years, the club has grown and evolved and now provides significant scholarship funding to athletes who have completed their NCAA eligibility but are still pursuing their degrees.

With longtime "O" Club director Don Jimerson announcing his retirement last spring, Castiglione felt the time was right to make some significant changes in the club's vision and future goals.

"One of the main things we want to do is strengthen the network of Sooners out there who can be utilized by our graduating senior athletes when there are possible job opportunities available," explains Castiglione. "All of our former athletes are an essential

part of who we are, and we want them to know they are important to us.

"We believe Joe is going to provide invaluable leadership as we work to increase opportunities and overall support for our student-athletes and various athletic programs."

Switzer, who keeps close ties to the University, also feels



At times, Joe Washington seemed literally to fly down the field, elusive as quick silver. Most famously, with OU trailing by seven late in a 1975 road game at Missouri, he snatched victory from defeat with an improbable 71-yard touchdown run, followed by a two-point conversion plunge, sending the defending national champion Sooners on to a second consecutive title.

noteworthy career in the National Football League, followed by even more success in the business world, have kept the Port Arthur, Texas, native busy.

However, sightings of Washington all across campus have become common in recent months. The man whose running style legendary coach Barry Switzer once described as "like

# 1974 NATIONAL CHAMPIONS

Washington is the right man for the job.

"To be able to fund this deal properly, you need quality personnel, and you absolutely must have a high profile leader who has the respect of every former student-athlete," offers Switzer, who recruited Washington and coached him over the course of his entire OU career.

"There is no one who has ever played any sport at Oklahoma who doesn't know who Joe Washington is. And anyone who knows him respects him."

Washington's first stint in Norman was not spent merely thrilling fans stuffed inside Oklahoma Memorial Stadium. He also earned a degree in public relations from OU and put that degree to use once his pro football career ended in 1986.

His company, known as Washington Financial Consultants, has experienced its share of success over the last two decades. Washington has stayed close to the game by doing post-game analysis for the NFL, and now he will have a chance to reacquaint himself with the Sooners and be a key part of a familiar team.

"This is a great opportunity to be a part of the Oklahoma program and to come back home in a lot of ways. I'm looking forward to the challenges ahead," says Washington. "One of those challenges is trying to make sure all of our athletes graduate and have opportunities in front of them. We are going to take some of the things Don Jimerson and those guys have worked so hard on for many years and



OU Athletics Media Relations

When Athletics Director Joe Castiglione went looking for someone to restructure the Varsity O Association, Joe Washington, whose OU career spanned some of the program's most illustrious years, was the obvious choice.

hopefully push [them] to another level.

"Our ability to enhance and grow the Varsity O Association is going to be important. We want every former letterman who has come through OU to be a part of this organization."

While living near Baltimore the last 20-plus years, Washington became deeply involved in the community. He has campaigned actively against drug abuse and has been a spokesperson for the Maryland Special Olympics.

Yet Little Joe, who was elected into the College Football Hall of Fame in 2006, never strayed too far from his Sooner roots. From halfway across the country, he helped raise more than \$800,000 that directly benefited the Athletics Department at OU.

Now he is back on campus and excited about the possibilities.

"I've really enjoyed being around Coach [Bob] Stoops and seeing what he's done with the football program. He's been willing to embrace the old tradition and welcome people like Coach Switzer and a lot of the former players," adds Washington. "It says a lot about Coach Stoops, the way he has embraced the old ghosts. He understands their role in the program's success, and some day he'll want to be remembered in the same way."



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Joe Washington, a two-time All-America running back and third round pick in the 1974 Heisman balloting, capped his NFL playing days with a successful business career in Washington, D.C., and a stint in broadcasting before accepting OU's invitation to come home.

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