



OU Athletics Media Relations

Jubilant members of OU's triumphant NCAA championship men's gymnastics team react after a come-from-behind victory on Stanford's home floor. Five-time National Coach of the Year Mark Williams and his son, Cooper, join in the celebration.

It's become a tradition. When the smoke clears at the NCAA Men's Gymnastics National Championship, Oklahoma Sooners will be standing on the victors' podium.

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

They Came They Conquered

Pressure and drama are nothing new to Jonathan Horton and the University of Oklahoma men's gymnastics team. If recent history tells us anything, Horton and the Sooners have built a reputation for thriving in those types of situations.

That is what winning five NCAA team titles over the last seven years—including three during Horton's four seasons—tends to do for a program.

Storybook endings have become almost commonplace. The overall results produced by Coach Mark Williams' program have been so good, even OU director of athletics Joe Castiglione has a hard time finding the right adjectives to describe its successes.

"What they have done, honestly, is beyond impressive—it's, well, amazing," says Castiglione in the aftermath of another clutch April performance that saw the Sooners capture the 2008 NCAA crown on No. 1-ranked Stanford's home floor.

Castiglione was in attendance in 2005 when the only thing standing between Ohio State and the national championship was Horton. All the highly touted freshman needed to do to give the Sooners the title was produce the best vault of his young career, which he did in dramatic fashion.

One season later, Horton turned in career-best scores in the all-around competition and on the parallel bars to help position OU for a second consecutive national title. In the pressure-packed final rotation, Sooners Russell Czeschin, Taqiy Abdullah-Simmons and Reed Pitts vaulted their way to career-best scores to seal the deal.

"The manner in which each of Coach Williams' teams has performed during this magical stretch, whether individually or as a whole, has been incredible," explains Castiglione. "To win five of the last seven national championships and to finish second the other two years is a remarkable accomplishment. There have been few programs in any Division-I sport that have experienced the high level of consistency our gymnasts have achieved."

Horton and his OU mates provided further proof of that consistency via another drama-filled finish inside Stanford's Maples Pavilion. Trailing by just under two points with only two competitors remaining on rings—their final rotation of the evening—the Sooners came up big.

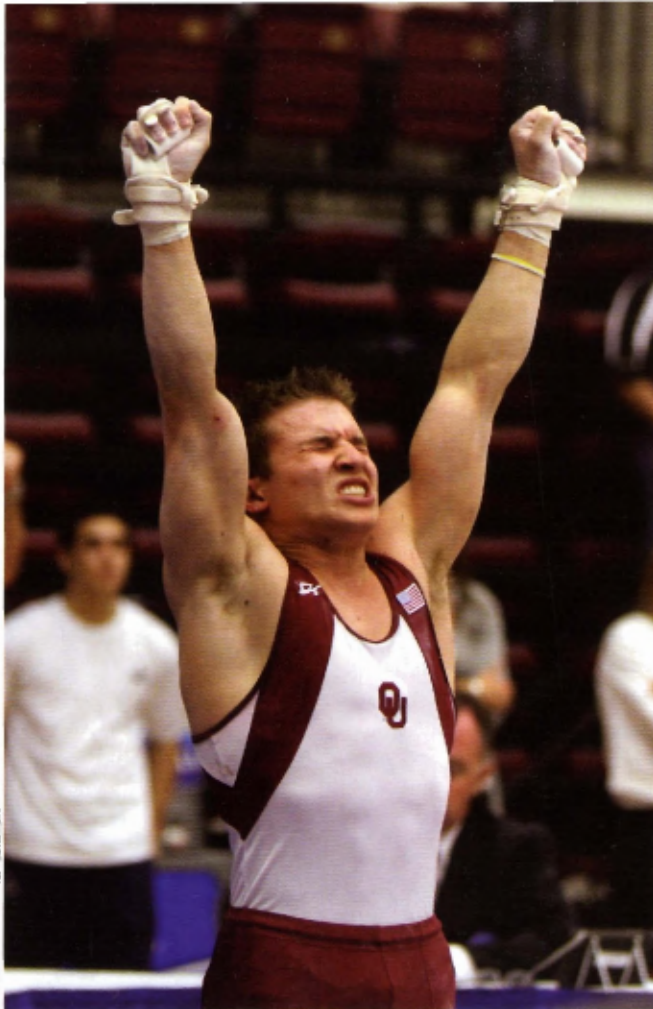
"That was such a great moment, for us to produce in that situation with Stanford's home crowd and the pressure and the nerves—you definitely could not have written a better ending," says Horton, who needed a score of 15.700 to secure the team title for the Sooners after Abdullah-Simmons scored a 15.400 to set the stage.

Horton, of course, did not disappoint.

The Houston senior's final collegiate effort was good enough to score a career-best 16.100 on rings, which gave second-ranked OU less than a half-a-point edge over the favored Cardinal in the final team standings (363.200 to 362.750).

"All we heard the whole season was how Stanford was going to dominate, so for our guys to go into their home and win the title was an incredible experience," explains Horton.

Horton, the most decorated gymnast in OU history, added three more All-America honors to his résumé, giving him a total of 18 for his career, five more than the legendary Sooner Bart



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To take the national title, OU needed a career-best effort from its most decorated gymnast, Jonathan Horton, in his last collegiate event—and that is exactly what Horton delivered.

Conner. He was second in the all-around and earned an individual title on the rings, which helped him earn the 2008 Nissen-Emery Award, presented annually to the nation's best male gymnast.

"Jon is such a competitor. No one else could have scored what he did under those circumstances. He lives for those types of situations," says Williams, whose program also won national titles in 2002 and 2003. "But the reason Jon was in the position was because we really came up with a strong team effort. Some of our unsung guys stepped up with efforts that really made a huge difference.

"In fact, every one of our guys contributed to the final team score. That alone makes the title that much more special."

Freshman Steven Legendre was the perfect example, as he scored career-highs in the vault, high bar and floor exercise in support of OU's cause. Proof that his effort during the team competition was no fluke, Legendre returned the next night to become the first freshman in program history to win two individual titles (vault and floor).

With Horton and Abdullah-Simmons departing the program, Legendre figures to be one of the Sooners ready to keep the tradition alive and well.



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