

BRADFORD, GRIFFIN AND PARIS.

IT'S NEVER HAPPENED BEFORE—
THE TOP PLAYERS NATIONALLY
IN THREE MAJOR SPORTS
ON THE SAME CAMPUS
AT THE SAME TIME.

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH
PHOTOS BY JERRY LAIZURE



THE BIG THREE



Historic achievements are nothing new to the University of Oklahoma athletics department.

More than a century's worth of magical moments, brought to life by both stellar individual performances as well as those requiring harmonious team effort, have helped build a foundation steeped in tradition and national acclaim.

Still, Joe Castiglione needs a moment to canvass his thoughts and find the right words to put the Sooners' most recent success stories into proper perspective. After all, what Sam Bradford, Blake Griffin and Courtney Paris have accomplished during the 2008-09 academic year is unprecedented.

In December, Bradford won the Heisman Trophy, presented annually to the best player in college football. Four months later, Griffin brought home the Naismith Award, which goes to the best men's basketball player in the country.

It marks the first time ever that one school has had the current Heisman winner and Naismith winner roaming campus at the same time.

On top of that, Paris, a three-time Big 12 Player of the Year and former national player of the year award winner, became the first player selected four times to the Associated Press First Team All-America list.

Three uniquely talented individuals—three engaging success stories.

"Every once in a while, the stars align, and something amazing happens," says Castiglione, OU's well-respected director of athletics. "We are very blessed here at the University of Oklahoma to have such extraordinary student-athletes who commit themselves unconditionally to their respective teams and do what it takes to become true champions, in every sense of the word."

"We need to stop and recognize and appreciate what a unique situation this really is. Courtney has been the model of consistency during her time here, playing at such a high level. And for Sam Bradford and Blake Griffin to be the first to ever bring the Heisman and Naismith awards back to one school at the same time—it's truly a once-in-a-lifetime achievement."

What makes the Bradford-Griffin feat even more special is the fact the two Oklahoma natives practically grew up around the corner from each other and have been witness to each others'



OU quarterback Sam Bradford joined ESPN's GameDay crew, including Chris Fowler, left, and Lee Corso, moments after leading the Sooners to a 61-41 victory over Bedlam rival Oklahoma State this past season.

journey to the pinnacle of their respective sports.

Before their paths crossed again at OU, the duo spent time as friends and foes on various little league fields and as teammates on the same AAU basketball squad back in 2005. Bradford may be 16 months older than Griffin, but they share a connection that came to light before either of them began harboring dreams of athletic greatness.

"I just think it's really cool that two kids from Oklahoma City who chose to stay close to home and go to [OU] have had the success that we had this year," says Bradford, whose father Kent was an offensive lineman for the Sooners in 1977-78.

"Growing up with Blake and to see the things that he's done and having had the chance to play with him—and now to see him enjoy such great success, and to be a part of it with him, makes this whole deal even more special."

Prior to this year and the Bradford-Griffin national awards parlay, the only other school to ever produce a feat remotely similar was UCLA in 1967, when quarterback Gary Beban won the Heisman and Lew Alcindor (later known as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) was voted national player of the year by the U.S. Basketball Writers Association. The Naismith Award did not exist until two years later.



Blake Griffin joined Wayman Tisdale and Alvan Adams as the only OU players to top the 1,000-point plateau during their true sophomore seasons. Sam Bradford's spectacular leap for a touchdown attempt against OSU put him a notch above the rest and topped off his Heisman Trophy credentials. Courtney Paris was named Big 12 Player of the Year three times and was also voted conference defensive player of the year three different seasons.

During the 1970-71 school year, Notre Dame quarterback Joe Theismann was runner-up in the Heisman voting, while Fighting Irish hoops standout Austin Carr won the Naismith. That was the closest any program had come to holding both honors simultaneously until OU pulled it off.

"What a great reflection of our university and the athletic programs we have here. To have Blake and Sam win national player of the year honors says a lot about the type of student-athletes we have at Oklahoma," offers Paris, a few days after helping guide the Sooner women to their second ever Final Four appearance.

"I think it's a really cool deal."

And Paris should know a little something about cool.

On her way to becoming the first four-time AP First Team





ABOVE: The face of OU women's basketball, Courtney Paris is the only player in history to record 700 points, 500 rebounds and 100 blocked shots in a single season. Paris accomplished the feat twice in her career.

LEFT: Blake Griffin averaged 22.7 points, 14.4 rebounds and 2.3 assists on his way to earning consensus national player of the year honors in 2008-09.

All-American, the 6-foot-4 California native continuously shook off the pressures of countless double- and triple-team defensive tactics. In the process, she not only rewrote OU's record book, but authored several new chapters in the Big 12 Conference and NCAA record books.

Paris was voted the AP Player of the Year as a sophomore, when she averaged 23.5 points and 15.9 rebounds a game. She earned Big 12 Player of the Year honors three times and was also voted conference defensive player of the year three different seasons. On top of that, Paris became the first player ever to score 700 points, pull down 500 rebounds and block 100 shots in a single season, a feat she accomplished twice.

When Paris and her twin sister, Ashley, joined coach Sherri Coale's program prior to the 2005-06 season, already high expectations soared through the roof of the Lloyd Noble Center. During their four-year stay, OU forged a 113-24 mark that included three regular-season Big 12 titles, two conference tourna-

ment crowns, a pair of Sweet 16 appearances and one trip to the Final Four.

"You wish you could do more. You get so close, and I wanted to help this program win a national championship," says Paris. "It's always so hard to lose your last game and to know it's over. Still, I know we had a great year, and it was so much fun, and I had a good time, and I was around great people—so it was worth it."

Although the goal of a national title eluded their collective grasp, the Paris sisters left an indelible mark on the program, especially Courtney and her 112 consecutive double-doubles (a national record that may never be equaled), engaging personality and infectious smile. She was the face of the OU program for four years, and her career résumé speaks for itself.

"I pride myself on my consistency. My goal has always been to make an impact and help my team anyway I can. Hopefully, being a four-time All-American is a reflection of that," she adds.

“ Every once in a while, the stars align, and something amazing happens. ”



In a magical year that may never come again, Bradford, Griffin and Paris, the Big Three of OU sports, accomplished the nearly impossible, proving to the Sooner faithful, that "There's only one Oklahoma."

While Paris completed her eligibility and is on schedule to graduate in May, Griffin announced in early April that he will forgo his final two years of college in order to take his game to the NBA. Reflecting on his time at OU, the 6-10 forward points to Courtney Paris as an inspiration.

"She has that intimidating presence on the court, but to me, the most impressive thing about Courtney is how consistent she's been. During her four years here, that streak of double-doubles and just the way she's played every time she's on the court—that says a lot about her as a player," says Griffin, who joined legendary Sooners Wayman Tisdale and Alvan Adams as the only Sooners to top the 1,000-point barrier during their true sophomore season.

Along with being the consensus national player of the year, the 20-year-old Griffin is projected to be the top pick in the June NBA draft.

"I love to watch Blake play. He works harder than anyone else, and you see the results every time he steps onto the floor. That's why he'll be successful at the next level, too," says Bradford, who has thrown for 86 touchdowns and almost 8,000 yards in his

two seasons as a starter.

Bradford also had the opportunity to turn pro back in January, but instead opted to return for at least one more season as OU's quarterback. His decision to stay, along with those of several other key players, like tight end Jermaine Gresham and defensive lineman Gerald McCoy, helps make the Sooners national title contenders again in 2009.

Of course, Bradford will be among the favorites again vying for the Heisman Trophy. Only one player—Ohio State's Archie Griffin in 1974-75—has ever won two Heismans.

"It's been fun watching Sam develop his game and become such a great player. Winning the Heisman is so hard to do," says Griffin. "I'll definitely be watching him to see how he does this coming year. I think he's got a chance to do some great things again. They're going to be really good again as a team."

Whether Bradford can match or even exceed the level of greatness he has achieved in his two seasons at quarterback is yet to be determined. But there is no denying he is on track to become the greatest signal caller in OU history.

Paris has already staked her claim to that title in the women's basketball program. And while Griffin's departure will keep his career stats from reaching record-breaking proportions, he accomplished more in two seasons at OU than most four-year players.

"We're talking about three young people of extraordinary character, who epitomize what a good teammate should be, both on and off the field or courts," says Castiglione. "Beyond that, beyond their dedication, humility and pride, their talents are considerable. The University of Oklahoma is fortunate to have student-athletes the caliber of Courtney Paris, Blake Griffin and Sam Bradford.

"All three are a great source of pride for our university." 🏆

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