

BY SUSAN GROSSMAN

Sooner Stiletto



SoonerVision

A lively group of OU boosters is focused on getting women basketball players ready for life after the last ball bounces.

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hen it comes to sports uniforms, women's basketball got a raw deal. Really. Look around. Tennis: cute skirts. Volleyball: spandex short-shorts. Track: running shorts and tank tops. Gymnastics: sparkling leotards.

Contrast these body-flattering outfits to the enormous baggy shorts and sleeveless tops that look exactly like what the guys wear. Can these be any more unbecoming? Forget about functionality; on the basis of style alone, women's basketball uniforms hardly make the grade. As for the shoes – well, let's not even go there.

So, when a name was needed for a new kind of support group being formed for the University of Oklahoma women's basketball team, "stiletto" seemed like a shoe-in. The team may be clad in blousy crimson and cream, but its head coach, Sherri Coale, has a reputation as one of the most stylish women in college basketball, especially known for pacing the sidelines in runway-caliber footwear. No sensible shoes for her. Coale's game day ensemble pushes Nike and Reebok to the back of the closet in favor of Jimmy Choo and Manolo Blahnik.

The OU women's basketball program already was enjoying success when a dozen businesswomen gathered over breakfast in 2003. A team that played in front of a handful of people in the mid-'90s had rallied from near extinction to play for



Lisa Hall

Special guest Mary Lou Retton, left, joins First Lady Kim Henry and Becky Switzer and the Stilettoes at the Governor's Mansion.

a national championship in 2002 before thousands of cheering fans. The college sports world was paying attention, yet Coale wanted to create a different sort of buzz for her team.

Coale teaches her players to be team leaders and successful citizens, but she was looking for a way to connect them with community and businesswomen who would not only support the program but who also embody what it means to be successful outside the arena.

The Sooner Stilettoes emerged from that meeting. Credit for the name goes to assistant coach Stacy Hansmeyer, while former senior OU women's athletics administrator Stephanie Remppe collects kudos for getting the group off the ground. Real estate developer Judy Hatfield and management development consultant Marty Kavanaugh-Williams were handed the ball, and the duo literally ran with it.

Organizers sent out 500 letters to doctors, lawyers, accountants, politicians and other professional women, as well as community leaders in the Oklahoma City area. The response was almost immediate with nearly 100 women joining the first year. Now 200 members strong, with Hatfield and Kavanaugh-Williams still at the helm, the membership roster is a Who's Who of prominent Oklahoma women. Members include OU First Lady Molly Shi Boren, Oklahoma First Lady Kim Henry and Lt. Gov. Jari Askins, to name just a few. Claimed as honorary members are Olympic gymnast Mary Lou Retton and WNBA star Lisa Leslie.



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Attendees at the 2004 Sooner Stilettoes inaugural gathering at Boyd House included, from left, Patti Mellow, Denise Bode, Dr. Jennifer Nelson and Dr. Susan Chambers.

"The original idea was to develop a fan base that would mirror who the players would some day become," Coale says. "Their influence has been huge."

Foremost for Coale is the personal connections that the Stilettoes bring to the team. "It's one thing to look at a major on a sheet of paper and another to see what it is like in the real world. The Stilettoes bring next-level advice."

Sooner forward Ashley Paris learned that exact lesson when a chance introduction at a Stilettoes luncheon turned into a real-life opportunity. Paris, an advertising major, was an intern in the Oklahoma City office of advertising powerhouse Ackerman McQueen last summer, thanks to the efforts of a Stiletto member. Eight months after meeting real estate agent Lyn Andarakes, Paris took up her offer to call if there was anything Andarakes could do.

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Co-founders Marty Kavanaugh-Williams, left, and Judy Hatfield, second from right, welcome Lt. Gov. Jari Askins and Coach Sherri Coale to a 2007 Sooner Stiletto event.



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A Stiletto herself, OU's First Lady Molly Shi Boren, at right with Sherri Coale, annually hosts the support group at Boyd House.

"I needed an internship, and I gave her a call, and she remembered me," Paris recalls. "She really worked hard, too, and lined up eight or nine different places that I might be interested in. As an advertising major I wanted to do something in the field, and one of the places was Ackerman McQueen. It was the best experience of my working life. I really appreciate everything that Lyn and the Stiletto have done for me and my teammates. It's certainly a great network to have."

Busy women all, so the group's activities are designed to be entertaining, and well, sometimes girly. Fashion shows, tailgate parties, luaus and an annual gathering at the Governor's Mansion, courtesy of Henry, are on the calendar. Gatherings emphasize not only fun but friendships and connections. The common thread is the link between the Stiletto and women basketball players, utilizing the obvious parallels between success in sports and in the business world. Both are about achievements, setting and accomplishing goals. Moving forward takes drive, intensity and focus.

Says Coale, "These are women who are successful and driven. They pour zest into everything they do, passing on their energy and passion, and we feel it on the court. And as far as support, they turn out in droves to support us. The Stiletto not only follow us, they *really* follow us."

Two group events with players are held each year, one pre-season and the other postseason. The Stiletto and the OU Athletics Department also host an annual gathering for women student athletes from all sports called "Have Your Cake and Eat It Too!" Students are matched with metro professionals in their area of interest and spend a light-hearted evening of sharing, networking and learning about what it takes to succeed when playing time is over.

Rempe, who now is with the University of Washington, says perhaps above all, the Stiletto are not a fan-based booster group but a business and professional network.

"We have emphasized role-modeling, not mentoring for our student-athletes," she says. "While there are a variety of fun events held throughout the year, it is the networking aspect of the group that is important."

Adds Hatfield, "They see us in the audience on game day cheering them on and know we are businesswomen. One day they know they can be us."

Although the Stiletto concentrate on personal support of the players, a second group, the Fast Break Club, supports the team financially. The two groups join in contributing to the endowment of the Marita Hynes Scholarship, which honors the long-serving OU athletic administrator. In addition, all 15 of the team's scholarship positions are endowed.

Now, if the Sooner Stiletto could do something about those uniforms.

Susan Grossman is a Norman-based freelance writer.