

# With her family and coaching staff solidly behind her, OU's Patty Gasso finds pursuing softball success on the national scene that much sweeter.

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

Photos courtesy  
OU Athletics Media Relations



Oklahoma was on the brink of becoming a perennial national softball power. The roster was brimming with talent; the program had captured its third conference title in five seasons; and big things were expected from the Sooners heading into the 2000 season.

Meanwhile, Patty Gasso was on the brink of calling it quits.

Despite the positives taking place around her—almost all due to her devoted efforts as the team's head coach—Gasso felt overwhelmed. Off-the-field issues were taking their toll and making her job between the lines and in the dugout less and less enjoyable.

"It was becoming too much for me to handle," confesses Gasso, whose OU teams had produced a .721 winning percentage and five straight NCAA Regional appearances during her first five seasons at the helm.

"Money was tight, and my husband, Jim, had actually gone back to California because it was hard to find a job here at the time. So here I was raising our two children and trying to coach a Division-I softball program, which was very demanding of my time and energy."

The cold Oklahoma winters also left the Torrance, California, native longing for sunnier days, and maybe a job back on the West Coast. But Gasso decided to forge ahead into the 2000 season, knowing she was running low on personal resolve, but well aware of the fact her team had the makings of something truly special.

"It was hard on her," says Marita Hynes, former assistant athletics director and senior woman administrator at OU. "We realized Patty was having a difficult time being away from Jim. She was being pulled in so many different directions, and the job she had, especially recruiting, was not easy."

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## BUILDING A PERENNIAL POWER



OU's Patty Gasso, center, with Amber Flores, left, Evan Sallis, #13, and Chanae Jones, #3, has won more Big 12 softball games than any other coach in league history, including a third regular season title in 2009, earning her fourth Big 12 Coach of the Year honors.

But everything fell into place that spring. Gasso's team steamrolled through the Big 12 Conference, going on to win 66 games. The last four came at the Women's College World Series, earning the Sooners the national championship. It was a life-changing moment for Patty Gasso, her family and the OU softball program.

In the aftermath, OU rewarded Gasso with a contract extension that included a significant salary hike. Her husband was able to return to Norman to be with the family, and the softball program was elevated to elite status.

"It was like a huge weight was lifted off my shoulders. Winning the 2000 national title affected everything we did here, and really just made my life more manageable," explains Gasso. "I had been encouraged by the fruits of our labor before that point, but winning a national championship helped make us a legitimate national power. Instead of trying to convince great players to come play at Oklahoma, they were calling us. The

best players wanted to be part of what we were doing."

That wave of momentum was never more evident than during the ensuing four seasons when Gasso guided her Sooners to four more WCWS appearances. Although failing to capture another Series title during that span, OU continued to forge a lasting softball legacy. Almost a decade later, Gasso has more than earned the respect of the softball community and is recognized as one of the top coaches in the business.

"Patty has truly built this program into something we can all be proud of, not just because of the incredible record her teams have produced during her time here, or the Big 12 titles or national championship, but because of the way they've done it—with hard work, determination and character," says Joe Castiglione, OU's vice president for intercollegiate athletics programs and director of athletics.

During her 15 seasons at the helm, Gasso's program has produced five reg-

ular-season Big 12 titles and seven runner-up finishes. The Sooners have won more than 75 percent of their games and been a staple among the national Top 10 rankings. She has coached more than 30 All-Americans and countless All-Big 12 performers during her time at OU.

Gasso previously was successful during a four-year stint as head coach at Long Beach City College from 1991-94. No one could have imagined, however, the type of success she would bring to Oklahoma, almost from the day she arrived.

"Patty had some good teams at the junior college level, but no one really had any idea how successful she would be at the next level," says Hynes. "That became clear fairly quickly, as she proved she's not only a smart coach, but very caring. From the start, she put all of herself into her program—and look how it's paid off.

"She's done more at OU than anyone ever dreamed."

Gasso is quick to point out the Sooners' softball success has not been a





At left, Coach Gasso welcomes home #23 Lisa Carey during the run to the 2000 National Championship. Above she confers with Christina Enea during 2004.



one-woman show. According to her, it has taken monumental efforts from just about everyone involved.

"Obviously, one of the biggest keys has been the commitment our administration has made to me and our program. Without that, you cannot do what we've done," says Gasso, who earned Big 12 Coach of the Year honors for the fourth time this spring. "On top of that, I've been surrounded by great people, like Melyssa (Lombardi) and Tripp (MacKay) and Kaycee (Clark) on my coaching staff, to all of our players and wonderful fans—the only way I've been able to pull it off is with my assistants and all the wonderful people in my life.

"There have been times I felt like I shortchanged my family, but Jim and our sons understand my job is demanding, and they've been so wonderfully supportive. I could not have made it without them."

Her supporting cast has obviously played a major role in the program's accomplishments. But what other elements have factored into her success as a coach?

According to associate head coach Melyssa (Panzer) Lombardi, it is Gasso's ability to get the best from each student-athlete that sets her apart.

"She seems to know what makes individual players tick, and she has a way of getting them to perform at their absolute highest level," says Lombardi, who

played catcher for Gasso in 1995-96 and has spent the last 12 seasons as part of her staff. "I've learned so much playing for her and just being around her. I watch players come in here as girls and leave as women.

"She's been so many things to me, including a mother figure and a role model in my life."



Gasso has advanced her team to post-season play each of 14 years at OU and five of the last nine to the World Series.

Mindy Johnson was one of two players—along with teammate Cindy Ambrose—who were part of the official interview committee when OU was seeking a head coach after the 1994 season. Johnson remembers sensing something about Gasso early on that made her believe this young Californian was headed for greatness.

"Patty was so impressive. None of the other candidates could hold a candle to her," says Johnson. "She's a master motivator, and I knew from the beginning that she was going to do spectacular things at OU."

After 20 seasons in the coaching business, Gasso is going as strong as ever. She still has the drive and passion to coach; the players to keep her feeling young; and the belief that the OU program has some of its best days ahead of it.

"I believe if you work hard and put in the time, you will reap the rewards. As long as I feel I can make a difference, and as long as I have the love and enthusiasm for it, I'll coach," adds Gasso. "To me, it's all about making a difference in our players' lives—as players, students and as people. That's the most rewarding part.

"No doubt, the trophies and accolades are all nice, but seeing these young people grow and learn is what it's all about."

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