

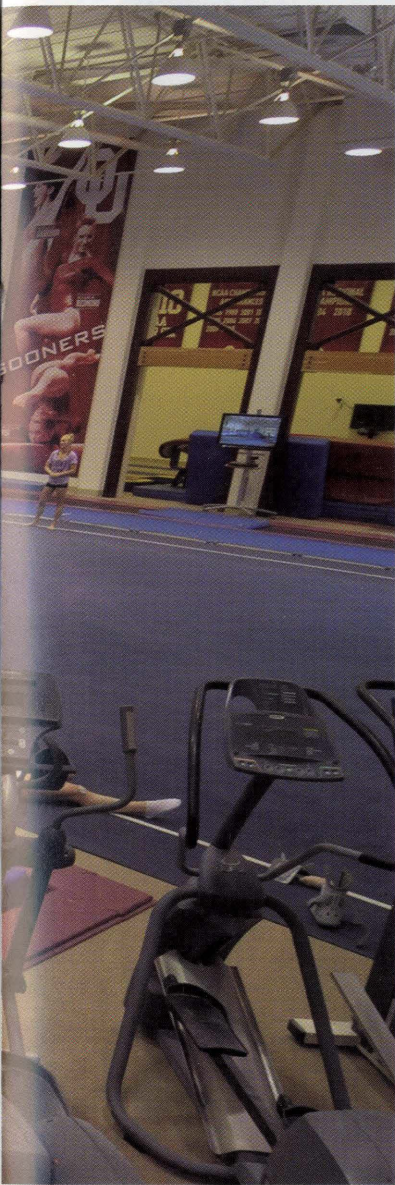
Quick Facts



Robert Taylor

The Sam Viersen Gymnastics Center reopened its doors in the spring of 2010, unveiling a new 7,000-square-foot addition and a complete overhaul of

A Home Worthy



the existing facility.

The Sam Viersen Gymnastics Center has undergone an upgrade that places the facility on a par with the OU men's and women's teams that rank among the best in the country.

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By JAY C. UPCHURCH

nce considered a prime candidate for the athletics department's chopping block, the University of Oklahoma gymnastics program is currently flourishing at an all-time high with both the men's and women's teams firmly entrenched as perennial national title contenders.

Fifth-year coach K.J. Kindler has guided the OU women to consecutive NCAA Super Six appearances that include a runner-up finish at the 2010 NCAA Championships, while coach Mark Williams' Sooner men have captured an eye-popping five national titles since 2002.

At a time when collegiate gymnastics, especially on the men's side, continue to battle attrition within its ranks, the Sooners are trending in a decidedly different direction. Helping create that positive energy is a state-of-the-art practice and training facility that underwent a \$4-million makeover this past year.

Considered a first-class facility when originally constructed for \$3 million in 1982, the Sam Viersen Gymnastics Center served OU's tradition-rich gymnastics programs well for almost three decades. But with so many schools upgrading their on-campus training sites, it was time for some changes.

"We had a pretty good gym before, but the renovations have transformed this place into an elite facility with very few equals," says senior Steven Legendre, winner of the 2011 Nissen-Emery Award given annually to the top collegiate male gymnast. "There is nothing we could want for in this facility. They went above and beyond what we could have hoped for. We have everything we need—all the tools and a safe environment—to become the best gymnasts we can be.

"At this point, it's up to us to make sure that happens."

Although Legendre and his Sooner teammates had to settle for second place at the recent 2011

of the Elite



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ABOVE: This sculpture by Jack Nortz welcomes visitors to the Sam Viersen Center. RIGHT: Brie Olson receives treatment in the new sports medicine training room that features state-of-the-art equipment, including hot and cold tubs, in an effort to keep OU's student-athletes in peak condition.

NCAA Championships in Columbus, Ohio, work already has begun toward next season's success story, one that hopefully will result in the program's ninth national title.

Until then, OU gymnasts plan to take full advantage of their new digs.

Funded exclusively by private donations, the extensive overhaul of the Viersen Center was completed in December 2009. The project added 7,000 square feet to the existing 13,500 square foot structure—located on the corner of Asp and West Imhoff Road just north of the Lloyd Noble Center—and included a complete renovation of the main practice area, the locker rooms, coaching offices and training rooms. The addition of a beautiful sunlit awards recognition room in the main foyer introduces visitors to OU's rich history in gymnastics.

A new team room is equipped with state-of-the-art video technology that gives coaches and team members immediate access to review performances and practice routines. Named in honor of former OU women's coach Becky Switzer, the room also provides student-athletes with computer workstations and a study area.

With so much to see inside, the exterior would almost seem like an afterthought. But that is far from the truth. Standing near the front entrance is a new sculpture by artist Jack Nortz, titled "Equilibrium." Unveiled in April, the bronze piece depicts the ultimate combination of grace, balance and athleticism that are essential to gymnastics.

"The new facility is amazing in so many ways, not the least



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of which is the fact it has given us and the men's program the flexibility to work out on basically every event every day," says Kindler, the 2010 National Coach of the Year. "Before, the two teams had to share a lot of the equipment, and we would have to schedule our practices so we wouldn't run into conflicts with the men's practices. The new setup creates a much more practice-efficient environment."

The expansion of the main practice facility was highlighted by the addition of eight new pits or cushioned landing areas that are critical for training on several of the specialties, including the high bar, vault and uneven parallel bars. Both teams now have their own floor routine practice space, and four vaults have replaced the former single vault, notorious for its short runway.

"All of those things make a huge difference in the day-to-day training routines for both teams," says Williams, whose Sooners

“Oklahoma gymnastics has a great tradition, and what they have done with this new facility is only going to help add to that in the future.”

Former Sooner letter winner Robert Miller also helped pique Viersen’s interest in OU gymnastics when he became the Okmulgee oilman’s personal pilot in the early 1980s.

Although Viersen passed away in 1994, the Sam Viersen Family Foundation played a role in the recent renovation process by making a significant donation.

“Back in the ’80s, they said this was the facility that Bart Conner built, and deservedly so,” says Williams. “Looking at

the fact OU has won six national titles since that time and the women’s program has also done so well—we created an environment where the facility needed to be upgraded in order to keep up with the competition around the country.”

The renovated Viersen Center was the final piece of the master facilities plan that was part of the Great Expectations Capital Campaign launched in 2000, according to athletics director Joe Castiglione.

“We have a vision to provide state-of-the-art facilities for all of the sports we sponsor,” says Castiglione. “The renaissance has been amazing, but we could not have accomplished it without the incredible generosity of our donors, our University Board of Regents, our president, David L. Boren, and members of the University administration. Everyone works together to make great things happen.”

Evidence of that support network never has been more prominent than during the past decade when the Great Expectations Campaign was rolling from one end of campus to the other. Even though the Viersen Center was last on the list of facility upgrades, the coaches and student-athletes involved in gymnastics were more than willing to demonstrate a little patience in the process.

continued



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Christian Hurd practices vaults on one of the four vault runways in the facility. The Viersen Center features numerous foam pits at each station that make it possible for the gymnasts to learn new skills with a lower risk of injury

captured national titles in 2002, 2003, 2005, 2006 and 2008. “The upside is tremendous. I believe it’s the best facility of its kind in the nation, especially at the collegiate level, definitely worthy of our history here at Oklahoma.”

Included in that history is a total of eight national titles and 18 conference titles, 35 individual NCAA titles, seven Nissen-Emery Award winners and well over 200 All-Americans. And that’s just the men’s side of the ledger.

The women’s program has experienced its share of success over the years as well—including nine conference crowns, 10 NCAA Championship appearances and more than 40 All-Americans.

“Oklahoma gymnastics has a great tradition, and what they have done with this new facility is only going to help add to that in the future,” says Megan Ferguson, a junior All-American from Olathe, Kansas. “What the facility does, in my opinion, is give our coaches a better opportunity to help us expand, grow and learn new skills, and not just be limited to perfecting what we already have.”

Opportunity has been the operative word since the facility’s namesake, Sam Viersen, donated more than \$1 million to help make the training center a reality in 1982. Bart Conner’s illustrious OU career—which included 15 All-American honors and two All-Around NCAA titles—served as inspiration for Viersen’s generosity.

“Men’s college gymnastics has been on an endangered species list for a while, and that’s a little scary for all of us. But OU has been nothing but supportive where our sport is concerned,” says Legendre. “The fact OU went out and put this much effort, time and money into our new facility definitely shows how much strength we have behind this team and the gymnastics programs. It’s pretty special.”

The most exciting aspect of the new facility may only be realized with future generations of Sooner gymnasts. Both coaching staffs believe the new Viersen Center will be a major asset in recruiting elite talent.

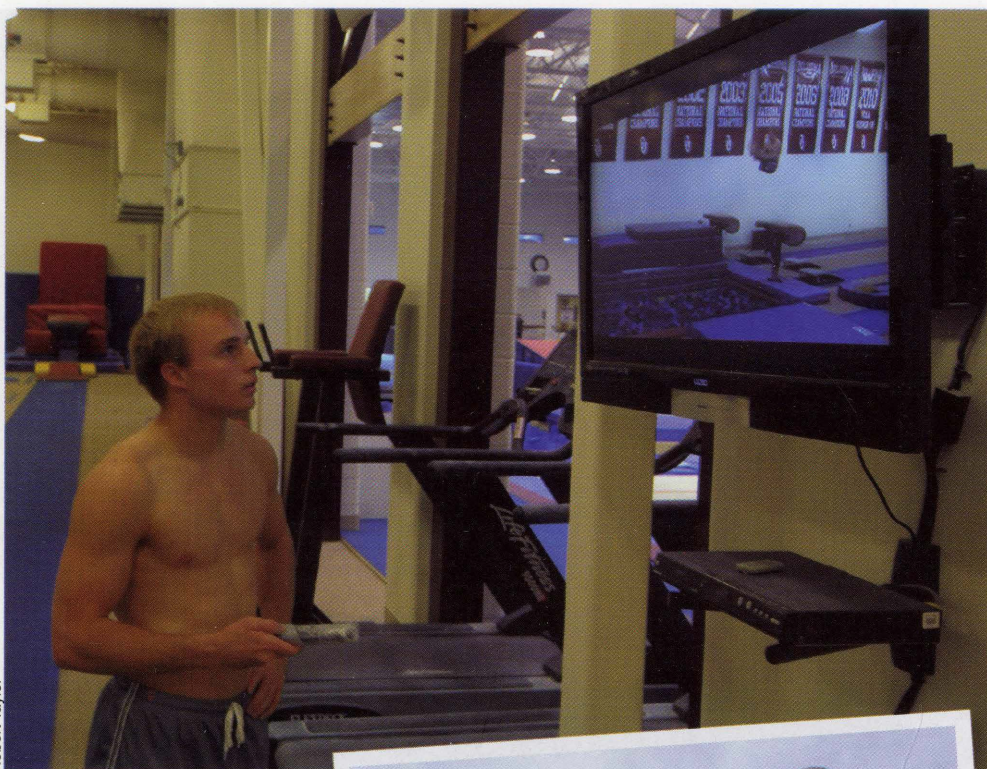
“The whole place has a lot more of a ‘wow’ factor now, and we’ve already seen it pay dividends,” says Williams. “Two years ago, we brought recruits in and showed them the construction and told them about the plans. But we didn’t end up signing anyone that year during the early signing period.

“This year, having it finished and having the recruits be able to see it—we signed a great recruiting class. I honestly believe we changed some minds based on what they saw in this facility. We can always sell our program, but a lot of young, impressionable recruits are very visual. To see this place is like a dream come true for a gymnast.”

The significance of the new facility is certainly not lost on some of the legendary figures who have helped build OU’s tradition over the years, including Conner.

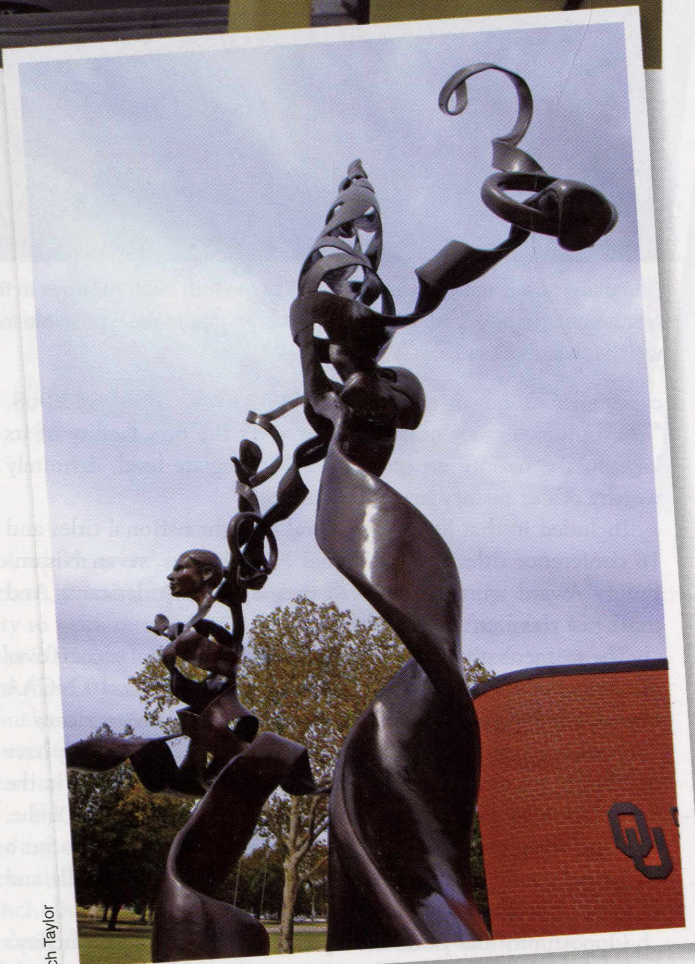
“More than anything, it’s a real vote of confidence for the sport of gymnastics at the University of Oklahoma,” says Conner, a three-time Olympian and gold medalist at the 1984 Summer Games in Los Angeles. “To see how far it’s come, especially with the championships and the new facility, it’s a real source of pride. And with the commitment the University has made, I think the best is yet to come.”

Jay C. Upchurch is editor in chief of Sooner Spectator and writes freelance OU sports articles for Sooner Magazine.



Robert Taylor

The Viersen Center provides student-athletes with the ability to review video footage of routines instantaneously with video stations for every event.



Rich Taylor

This sculpture by Jack Nortz, which represents the spiraling physical grace of OU gymnasts, welcomes visitors to the Viersen Center.