

# Faith, Fate *and* BASKETBALL

Ted Owens is Oklahoma through and through, but he found his greatest success in the storied Allen Fieldhouse at the University of Kansas.

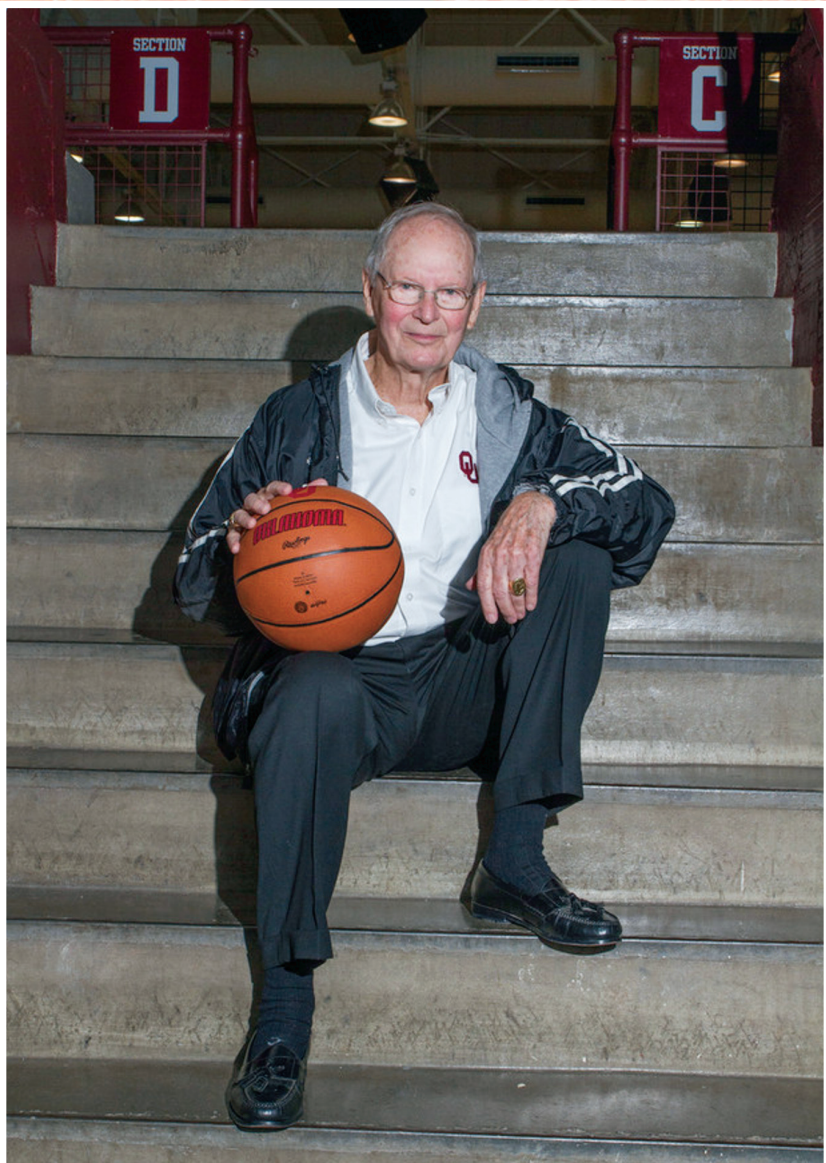
BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

Oklahoma State Highway 30 runs north from Hollis to the tiny rural community of Durham. In between are approximately 84 miles of concrete and asphalt flanked mostly by rolling pastures and farmland. To be sure, there are no yellow bricks or neon signs magically directing travelers down the road to success and good fortune.

Ted Owens knows that area like the back of his hand. He grew up just outside of Hollis during a time when the world beyond the city limits of his hometown seemed inaccessible, especially where the youngest son of a cotton farmer was concerned.

But that didn't stop Owens from dreaming about that world and eventually mapping out his own road to success, one that detoured off Highway 30, stretched northeastwardly to Norman, Oklahoma, and well beyond his wildest imagination.

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Bill Richards Photography

Ted Owens' coaching fame came at the University of Kansas, but his basketball skills and knowledge of the game began in OU's McCasland Field House.

“I had big dreams when I was a kid, but nothing as grand as how things actually turned out,” says Owens, who recently co-wrote a book about his life titled, *At The Hang-Up: Seeking Your Purpose, Running the Race, Finishing Strong*.

Adding book author to an already impressive résumé is just one of the ways the 84-year-old Owens is finishing strong in what he describes as the fourth quarter of his life.

The 272-page memoir, published by Ascend Books, features an authentic collection of stories ranging from simple life lessons to a compelling narrative that explores Owens’ successes and failures both on a personal and professional level.

At the very heart of the book are basketball and his deep-seated passion for the game, a passion that began at a young age and helped earn Owens a college scholarship to the University of Oklahoma and later the head coaching job at the University of Kansas.

“I look at my life, and to have experienced all of the people and places and the opportunities that I’ve had—I feel absolutely blessed,” says Owens, who won more basketball games (206) in



Teddy Owens came to OU on a football scholarship, but Sooner basketball coach Bruce Drake soon found him shooting baskets in the Field House, and by his senior year, Owens was his star. A year later, Drake launched Owens on a coaching career that would make Jayhawk history.

home more than made up for any lack of material things and provided a foundation that has lasted a lifetime.

“One of the main reasons I wanted to write the book was to pass along to my children the stories of my childhood and life in those days,” says Owens. “There was so much they really didn’t

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KU’s legendary Phog Allen Fieldhouse than any other coach in its history. “It’s been a remarkable journey. And it started all right here in Oklahoma—first in Hollis and then at OU.”

He grew up on the heels of the Great Depression, the youngest son of Homer and Nancy Owens. Along with his two brothers, Owens helped work the family farm when he wasn’t attending school and playing sports. While his parents struggled to make ends meet, the abiding love and affection that filled their

know, not only about me, but my dad and mother and their parents, and the sacrifices that they made to help make all of our lives better.”

Owens’ history included playing football, basketball and baseball at Hollis High School. He excelled in each sport and upon graduating in 1947, hoped to lend his two-handed set shot to a college program somewhere. But scholarship offers were hard to come by, so Owens altered his game plan slightly



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After a stop at Cameron College, where he coached basketball, football and baseball, Owens landed at Kansas in 1962, when sideburns were in fashion, as an assistant to Coach Dick Harp.

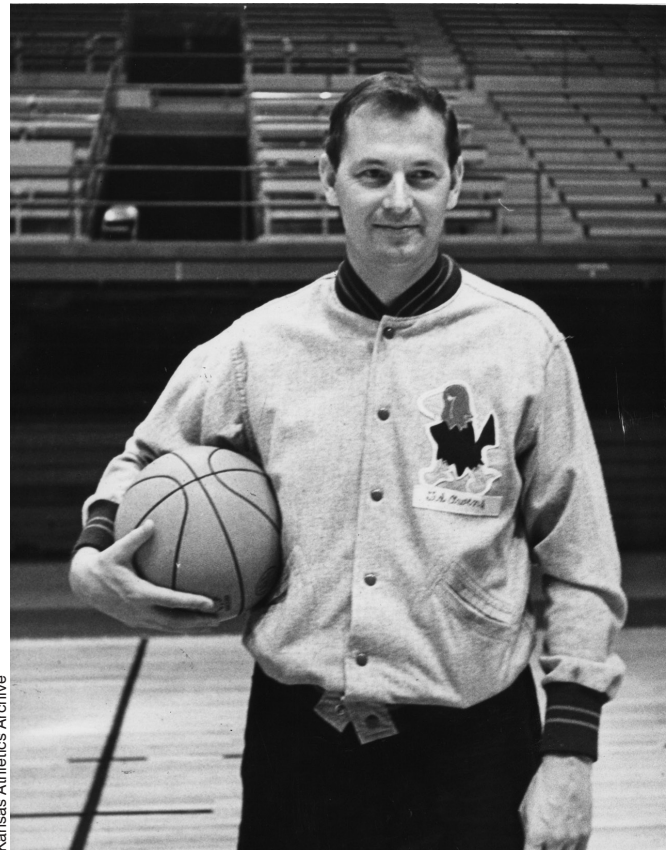
with the help of his prep coach, Joe Billy Metcalf.

“One day, Bud Wilkinson’s assistant coach at OU, Bill Jennings, came to talk to Coach Metcalf about getting my teammates, Leon Heath and J.W. Cole, to go play football for the Sooners. Well, by the time they were done negotiating, I was part of a package deal that sent all three of us to OU on football scholarships,” says Owens.

It wasn’t exactly what Owens had in mind, but it afforded him an opportunity that few small town kids ever get. He was also aware that Wilkinson’s program was on the verge of breaking through onto the national stage, so maybe football wasn’t such a bad second choice. Besides, there was always the chance that longtime OU basketball coach Bruce Drake might have an opening on his roster at some point.

As luck would have it, that roster spot became available before Owens ever checked out his football gear.

“I talk a lot in the book about how life is often about timing and the people you meet and know. I had barely arrived on campus when I experienced that first hand,” says Owens, whose modest scholarship included books and tuition and a



Kansas Athletics Archive

Disappointed that he did not get the head coaching job at OU, his alma mater, Owens stayed at Kansas. A few months later, he succeeded Harp as coach of one of the nation’s premiere programs.

job as a fireman on OU’s South Base.

“I was in the OU Field House one afternoon shooting baskets when OU assistant coach Shockey Needy approached me. I honestly thought he was going to ask me to leave the gym, but instead, he introduced himself and started up a conversation about basketball. They had seen me play in the state tournament with Hollis and really liked me. Of course, I was a big OU fan and knew all about how Gerald Tucker and Allie Paine and the Sooners had just gone to the Final Four and almost won a national title for Coach Drake.”

By the time the two were done chatting, Needy was on his way to ask Wilkinson if Owens could play basketball instead of football.

“I hated to leave Coach Wilkinson’s program, but my first love was basketball. So ultimately, I was happy to make the change,” says Owens. “The timing was incredible. If I had not been in the gym that day, who knows how things might have turned out?”

Owens spent the next four years working his way up through the ranks with the Sooners. He lettered as a sophomore, played

more as a junior and then made a name for himself as a full-time starter in his final season, when he averaged 10.8 points a game.

During that time, Owens absorbed every ounce of instruction that Drake shared with the team, from strategy to philosophy to work ethic. Off the court, the Drakes—Bruce and his wife Myrtle, or “Mama Drake” as she was affectionately known—were like a second family to many of the players.

“Coach Drake was such a joy to play for. He had such a great basketball mind. He was a major influence on me in the way I not only played, but thought about the game,” says Owens. “I could not have had a better mentor on my path to becoming a coach.”

Good timing was again on Owens’ side when he graduated in 1952, as the assistant coaching job opened up for one season, and Drake asked his star pupil to fill it.

“That gave me my start in coaching, and I knew it was what I wanted to do with my life,” says Owens, who served as an Army field artillery officer in Korea for a year before returning to OU to earn his master’s degree in 1954.

From there, his focus turned to coaching, and he spent the next four years at Cameron College in Lawton. Besides working as the head basketball coach, Owens was also assistant football coach in the fall and head baseball coach in the spring.

Owens had moved on to become an assistant for Coach Dick Harp at Kansas in 1962 when the OU job came open. While he was considered the top candidate to succeed Doyle Parrack—who had replaced Coach Drake upon his retirement in 1955—the position instead went to Bob Stevens.

“It was a huge disappointment not to get the OU job. I would have loved to coach at my alma mater, but for whatever reason, it didn’t happen,” says Owens. “That decision never changed the way I felt about OU. Having an education from there and that whole connection helped open more doors than I could have ever hoped for.”

A few months after learning he was not part of OU’s future plans, the 34-year-old Owens was hired to replace Harp as head coach at Kansas, long considered one of the top basketball programs in the country. Over the next 19 seasons, he led the Jayhawks to six Big Eight titles, two Final Four appearances



Photo Provided

Owens and his Kansas team were in a celebratory mood after winning his first conference championship in 1966, “one of the finest moments in my coaching career.” Others would follow, along with 206 total victories, more than any other University of Kansas coach.

and 348 victories.

“I got to know Coach Owens when I was the coach at (Oral Roberts), and we’ve obviously gotten to know each other very well since I came to Kansas,” says current KU coach Bill Self. “He is 100 percent genuine and has been nothing but supportive in what we are trying to do at a place that he sincerely loves and holds very dear to his heart.”

Owens was always well respected in coaching circles and owned a reputation for being a players’ coach, much like his mentor Bruce Drake forged years earlier.

“To us, his players, Coach Owens was more than a great basketball coach. He is a great man—humble and sincere,” says Jo Jo White, a two-time All-American at KU under Owens. “He was an excellent communicator and knew how to motivate and inspire his teams. There was a mutual respect there, and you just loved playing for the man.”

There is a natural tug-o-war between Kansas and Oklahoma for his heart, but Owens is adamant when he says he has an equal amount of love for both schools.

“I got to play for the program I grew up loving, and it prepared me for the future, which included the opportunity to coach at a school like Kansas,” says Owens. “For a kid from Southwest Oklahoma, it doesn’t get much better than that.”

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