

The Sweet Taste of Success

orange leaf®





Former OU walk-on Reese Travis took lessons learned on the football field and applied them to his fast-growing chain, Orange Leaf Frozen Yogurt

On the night of January 3, 2001, Reese Travis stood on the field after the Orange Bowl game in Miami, Florida. Surrounded by dozens of teammates and coaches, Travis and the Sooner nation celebrated the University of Oklahoma's first national football title in 14 years.

As championship euphoria encircled Travis—a senior reserve offensive lineman who had gone from walk-on to letterman—reality crept into his consciousness. The stadium would empty, the lights would go off and life's uncertainty would soon present itself.

"When my [college] career was over, I asked myself: what am I going to hold onto and apply to my life?" Travis says.

As it turns out, plenty.

Travis long ago swapped his number 70 Sooners jersey for a suit and tie. However, the discipline, dedication and collaborative mentality that helped him contribute to Oklahoma's 2000 National Championship football team remains present as he guides Orange Leaf Frozen Yogurt, an Oklahoma City-based chain that is among the nation's fastest growing food-service enterprises.

"Just like that team at OU," Travis says, "we've committed ourselves at Orange Leaf to being the best."

In little more than four years at the helm of Orange Leaf, Travis has led the company from 15 stores to nearly 400 units covering 40 states and increasingly pushing into international locations.

continued

BY DANIEL P. SMITH

CEO Reese Travis stops by Orange Leaf's May Avenue store in Oklahoma City for his favorite combination of frozen yogurt and toppings and a visit with employee Felicia Holcomb.

Hugh Scott

THE POST-OU JOURNEY

After graduating from OU in 2001 with a degree in sociology, Travis secured an entry-level, commission-only sales position with DePuy Orthopedics in Tulsa, a division of global healthcare behemoth Johnson & Johnson. Within five years, Travis emerged a top salesman, capturing regional and national awards from DePuy. While the success was gratifying, Travis desired more. He hungered for management roles, entrepreneurial opportunities and dreamed of leading and growing an organization.

“I wanted to see where my ceiling was,” Travis says.

He left DePuy and joined an Oklahoma-based hedge fund. He dabbled in energy and agriculture, engaged but not energized, committed but not complete. In late 2008, Travis reached a personal and professional crossroads.

“It was OU-Texas football weekend,” he recalls.

Travis saw the nation’s economic fortunes turning and craved control of his own destiny. He assembled a group of talented, trusted partners and began exploring high-growth investment opportunities.

Soon after, Travis stumbled upon an Orange Leaf store in Edmond, Oklahoma, his first exposure to the frozen yogurt concept. Immediately, Travis was hooked on the product and recognized the upstart brand’s compelling attributes, namely a healthy, customizable product with broad demographic appeal.

Despite the restaurant industry’s notoriously unforgiving failure rate, Travis implored his partners to see the potential. He brought them to Orange Leaf’s competitors, directed his own taste tests and investigated the company’s marketplace opportunities.

“I was convinced,” Travis says, “and soon they were, too.”

In the summer of 2009, Travis and his colleagues signed on as Orange Leaf franchisees. His team opened their first Orange Leaf unit in fall 2009 in Norman. They followed with a second unit in Lawton and commitments to open three more.

Yet, even as the nation’s economy tumbled further, Travis’ confidence remained steady.

“People weren’t buying houses or cars or going on vacations, but grandparents were still taking their grandkids out, and guys were still taking girls on dates, so Orange Leaf was well positioned,” he says.



Robert Taylor

OU students Josh Kempf, left, and Courtney Smith are co-managers of the Orange Leaf store on West Lindsey in Norman, one of nearly 400 locations nationwide.

DOUBLING DOWN

A year in, Travis and his partners hit the proverbial fork in the road. While Orange Leaf’s founders were product and experience visionaries, the Travis team questioned their ability to build a national chain.

“We had two options: either continue down our path of opening more stores or buy out the founders,” he says.

Travis’ group elected to do the latter, purchasing Orange Leaf in April 2010 and moving the company’s corporate office from San Francisco to Oklahoma City. Travis became CEO and immediately set the ambitious goal of reaching 300 total stores in three years. Even for the big-dreaming Travis, it was a bold mission.

“From my days at OU, I saw how a great vision attracted talent and built a culture. That was something I tried to recreate at Orange Leaf.”



Hugh Scott

Reese Travis went from walk-on to letterman on OU's 2000 National Championship football team, and from there has gone on to become the CEO of Orange Leaf Frozen Yogurt, one of the nation's fastest growing food-service enterprises.

He dug in. He hired branding and public relations firms; aligned himself with determined franchisees sharing his entrepreneurial spirit; tightened systems around accounting, inventory and customer service; and championed Orange Leaf's prospects.

“From my days at OU, I saw how a great vision attracted talent and built a culture. That was something I tried to recreate at Orange Leaf,” Travis says.

Good results followed. At the end of 2010, Orange Leaf had nearly 40 units. By 2013, the company reached its goal of 300 shops.

Travis, meanwhile, has continued to hustle. He's beefed up store-level training, shepherded the development of new products and launched an Orange Leaf kiosk model that will allow the concept to enter arenas, convention centers and other nontraditional locations. By year's end, Orange Leaf will have nearly 400 units in operation, and Travis is currently readying international expansion plans in China, Canada, the Middle East and Mexico.

“We're just at the tip of the iceberg,” he says.

Travis' success in the entrepreneurial world doesn't surprise Josh Heupel, his former Sooner teammate and OU's current co-offensive coordinator.



Photo Provided

From courtside at a 2014 Oklahoma City Thunder game, Reese Travis and his oldest son, Barrett, far left, cheer on #6 Derek Fisher and the team's superstar #35 Kevin Durant, whose recent endorsement deal with Orange Leaf Frozen Yogurt makes him a part owner in Travis' company.

“Reese was a great teammate, always worked hard and came to practice with a great attitude,” says Heupel, who, unknowingly, played a part in shaping Travis' journey.

Back in 2000, as the Sooner football squad closed out its final night of preseason two-a-day practices, Heupel stood before his teammates and spoke of the desire to win. The future Heisman Trophy runner-up said he was willing to make the necessary sacrifices to ensure a winning season and challenged his teammates to do the same.

“There's not a person in Orange Leaf that doesn't know that story,” Travis says. “If we're going to be the best, we all have to do our part and that starts with me. I have to look at myself as the leader and assess if I'm doing what's necessary for us to achieve our goals.”

Travis' top goal?

“We want to be the number one frozen yogurt brand on the planet,” he says without hesitation.

Fortunately for Orange Leaf, Travis knows what it takes to win.

Daniel P. Smith is a freelance writer living in Chicago, Illinois.