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As a Georgia native, OU junior forward Joe Vuolo knows that a southern climate doesn't preclude OU from becoming an ice powerhouse. "They take their hockey seriously here," he says.

THE PASSION OF COACHES, PLAYERS AND FANS HAVE TAKEN A 2003 FLEDGLING HOCKEY CLUB AND TURNED IT INTO A NATIONAL CONTENDER.

SOONERS ON ICE

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

When Peter Arvanitis hears someone describe University of Oklahoma hockey as a "club sport," it is all he can do to refrain from explaining exactly why that term does not necessarily apply to his program.

While the description of a college club sport — in other words, any sport offered at a university or college that competes against other schools but is not regulated by the NCAA or NAIA — may seem to fit where OU hockey is concerned, this group of Sooners is not so easily defined.

"This program is as close to an NCAA Division-I experience as possible," says Arvanitis, the team's head coach and general manager. "Everything we do — from recruiting players 365 days a year to training and preparing our student-athletes, to scheduling and playing top-caliber opponents — we do just like a varsity sport would do.

"Even though we are not affiliated with the athletics department, we take great pride in wearing the OU logo and one of our main goals is to always represent the University of Oklahoma in the most positive way possible."

During Arvanitis' six seasons at the helm, the Sooners have

certainly lived up to that goal, especially from a success standpoint, posting a .637 winning percentage while establishing themselves as a perennial top-10 team and title contender.

In 2013, Oklahoma climbed all the way to the No. 2 ranking in the country before eventually suffering an overtime loss in the American Collegiate Hockey Association's Division-I semifinals.

Earlier this season, the Sooners defeated then-No. 1-ranked Lindenwood (Mo.), and are once again considered to be among the top ACHA programs in the country.

Arvanitis and veteran assistant coach Austin Miller have basically taken a once-fledgling club program that began in 2003 and turned it into a national power. Over the last five-plus seasons, OU has won more than 135 games, and in the process, reconnected with legions of local hockey fans who previously followed minor league teams like the Oklahoma City Blazers and Stars.

"We were very fortunate in that the people who initially started the program did a great job establishing a solid foundation and making sure everything was done the right way. That helped make our job a little easier," says Arvanitis. "It also



Lee Davenport

OU hockey head coach and general manager Peter Arvanitis has spent six seasons transforming a club program into a team currently ranked 12th in the nation with a 12-5-3 record.

helps that Oklahoma is very hockey savvy. The fans around here know the game — they understand it. And they have embraced and helped support our program.”

Local hockey enthusiasts Allen Gray, Kelly Rose and Craig McAlister were the driving force behind the OU program when it hit the ice 13 years ago. While all three of those men have since moved on to other ventures, the importance of their

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contributions is obviously not lost on Arvanitis or his players.

“During the recruiting process, one of the first things (Coach Arvanitis) sold me on was the tradition at OU even though it’s a fairly young program,” says junior forward Joe Vuolo from Alpharetta, Ga. “They take their hockey seriously here and that’s one of the reasons they’ve had so much success.”

The fact that the Sooners practice and play their games in the Blazers Ice Centre — a 1,200-seat venue with excellent amenities that include training facilities, a medical room and spacious locker rooms — has always been a plus for the program. Although Arvanitis is the first to admit that an on-campus ice rink facility would be the ultimate goal, their current home has proven beneficial where recruiting quality players is concerned.

“OU has been voted the best locker room in the ACHA the last three years. We have great amenities for the program and that makes a big difference when you are trying to bring in quality prospects,” says Arvanitis, whose 31-man roster includes players from New Jersey, Michigan, Rhode Island, California and Canada.

The biggest recruiting advantage that Arvanitis has, besides the promise of a solid hockey experience, is the fact he can offer the opportunity at a major research university. It is a combination that plays well with even the most skeptical of recruits.

“I never even considered OU as a possibility when I was looking at colleges. But one of my coaches was from Oklahoma City and he knew Coach Arvanitis, and the more I learned about OU, the more I liked it,” says Tyler Lazarek, a junior from Saguas, Calif.

“I wanted to go to a big school, get a quality education and still be able to play competitive hockey at a high level. That is exactly what OU offered me.”

Halfway through his second year in Norman, the 6-foot-3, 215-pound defenseman is in no way disappointed with his decision to move halfway across the country to become a Sooner.

“I love everything about OU. Great school with an unbelievable locker room of guys and a great coaching staff,” says Lazarek. “The difference for me has been the school experience. I love the big school environment. Also, the tradition they have here and just being able to put on that OU

logo and represent the university really means a lot to me.”

Competitive hockey and a top-notch education are the common threads among the team’s current student-athletes.

“Just like student-athletes in any college sport, the odds are against most of these guys ever playing at the professional level. That’s why when you hear them talk about the future, they are focused on getting their respective degrees so they have something to fall back on when they are done playing,” says Arvanitis.

Paolo De Sousa, who grew up just outside of Montreal in the Canadian suburb of Laval, has found a home away from home at OU.

“To have an opportunity to come to a prestigious school like this to get my degree, and to be able to play hockey on

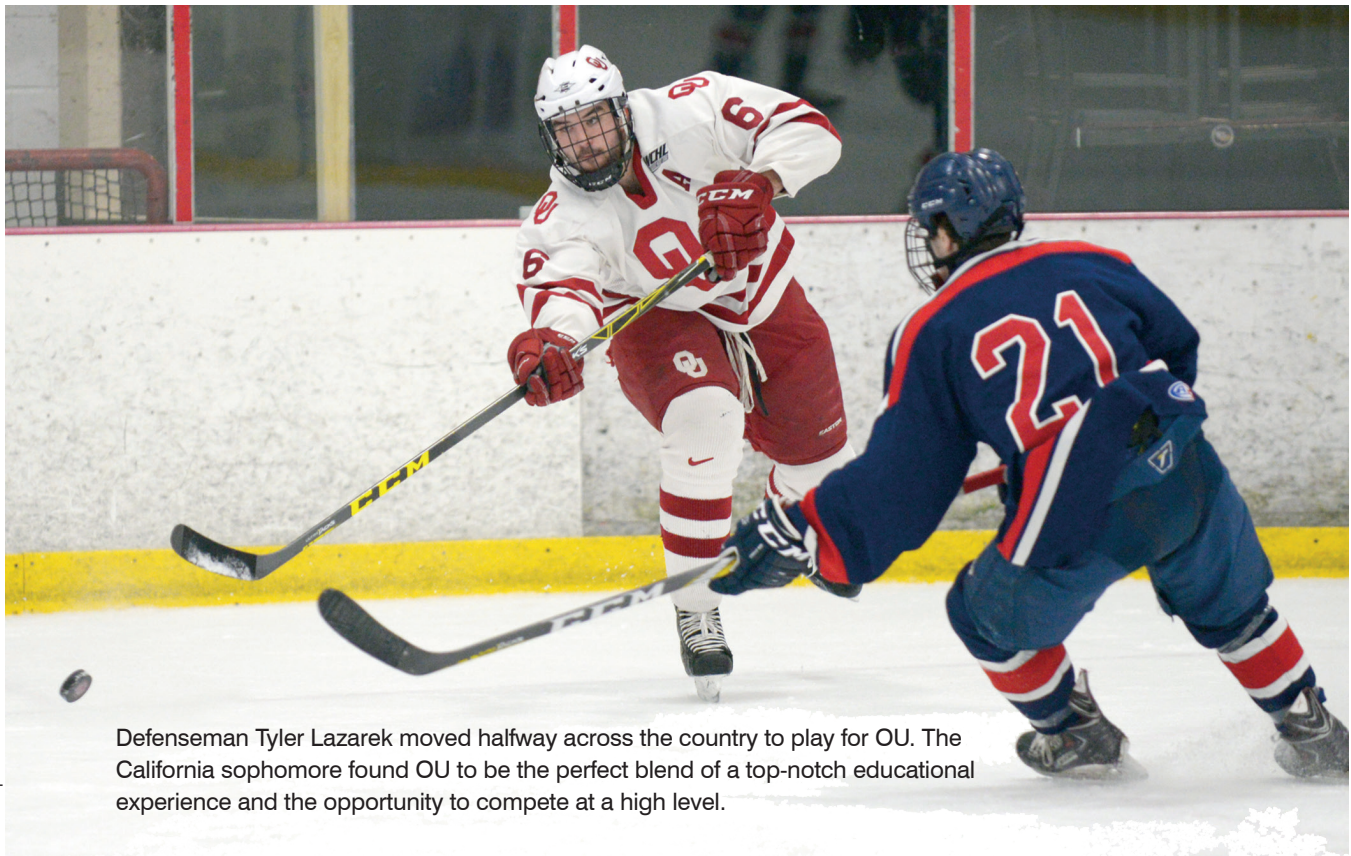


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Defenseman Tyler Lazarek moved halfway across the country to play for OU. The California sophomore found OU to be the perfect blend of a top-notch educational experience and the opportunity to compete at a high level.

top of that — I could not ask for a better situation,” says De Sousa. “We are incredibly close as a team, both on and off the ice. And Coach Arvanitis relates so well to all the players. We are pretty much one big happy family.”

Unlike varsity sports that offer scholarships and are funded through the athletics department, OU hockey remains viable through alumni donations, fundraisers and player fees. The program’s annual budget ranges from \$175,000 to \$225,000, and accounts for things like travel expenses, uniforms, equipment and ice time at the Blazers Centre.

“Sports like OU hockey are successful because the student-athletes are passionate,” says Larry Naifeh, executive associate athletics director at OU. “They enjoy the competition, the amateur nature of the sport and they embrace the need to help fundraise for travel and other expenses — all of which is at the heart and soul of building a successful club sport.”

There’s that term again.

Maybe Arvanitis can let it slide when it is put in such an endearing way?



OU goalie Cacy Wilfer fends off a shot by the Robert Morris University Colonials, who traveled all the way from Pennsylvania to compete against the Sooners.

“Technically, we are a club sport because that’s how the university recognizes us,” says the Montreal native. “But in no way do we treat this program like a regular club sport. We do everything we can to give our players the closest thing to a Division-I experience as possible.”

Club sport or not, the thing that ultimately matters most is the creation of positive futures for every young man who is part of the OU hockey program.

“I think most of the players who come to OU base their decision on the school and the educational possibilities,” says Lazarek. “The hockey is great, too, but almost all of us are here

to get a good degree, first and foremost.”

That is a fact Arvanitis believes helps make the Sooner hockey team such a success.

“OU hockey is a great experience for so many kids who come here,” says Arvanitis. “They work extremely hard both in the classroom and on the ice, and I believe it shows in the success we have enjoyed the last few seasons.”

Jay C. Upchurch is editor of Sooner Spectator.