



Photo Illustration by George Dotson



Bob Stoops restored the shine to Sooner football, earning his place among OU coaching legends.

# On His Own Terms

OU's Winningest Coach  
Says Goodbye

**Bennie, Bud, Barry and Bob.**  
Four names synonymous with winning.

Four architects responsible for building and shaping one of the greatest college football programs in history.

Four legendary figures, who in many ways, represent the Mount Rushmore of Oklahoma football.

**Bennie Owen** was the innovative pioneer coach who introduced the Sooners to the world in 1905, raised funds and helped construct the university's first football stadium, and ultimately spent 22 seasons laying the foundation for all future generations.

**Bud Wilkinson** spent one post-World War II season as an OU assistant before taking over as head coach and launching what turned out to be a modern dynasty that has seen the Sooners win more football games than any other school since 1946.

Highlights from Wilkinson's 17 seasons at the OU helm include his teams reeling off an NCAA record 47 straight victories and capturing 13

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

consecutive conference titles. During that span, the Sooners also won their first three national championships.

**Barry Switzer** also began his OU career as an assistant coach, spending seven seasons honing his skills as a position coach and offensive coordinator before taking over the reins in 1973. During the next 16 seasons, the Sooners won a dozen Big Eight titles and three more national titles.

After a five-year stretch that saw the program struggle to a 23-33-1 record and fail to record a winning season, Bob Stoops was hired in late 1998 and charged with altering the Sooners' fortunes. Two years into his rebuilding project, Oklahoma beat top-ranked Florida State in the Orange Bowl to finish off a 13-0 season and claim its seventh national championship.

It was the prelude to a magical run (1999-2016) that saw the Sooners win a total of 190 games and 10 conference titles, and earn 18 straight bowl berths. Stoops reached the 100-victory mark faster than any coach in college football history and, in 2013, he passed Switzer (157) for the most career wins at OU.

Stoops' success helped Oklahoma become the only college football program to ever produce four head coaches — Bennie Owen 122-54-16, Bud Wilkinson 145-29-4, Barry Switzer 157-29-4 and Bob Stoops 190-48 — with at least 100 wins.

"I think that Oklahoma's record speaks for itself. No other school has enjoyed the same level of success that Oklahoma has, especially in the modern era," says Switzer. "And Bob has obviously been a big part of that success. To be at one place for 18 years and win more games than any other coach — that's a pretty special accomplishment at a program like Oklahoma."

At 56 years old, it looked as if Stoops might have a chance to someday surpass the win totals of other legendary coaches like Bo Schembechler (234), Woody Hayes (238), Lou Holtz (249) and Tom Osborne (255). Having led the Sooners to 14 seasons that produced 10 or more victories, Stoops seemed well on his way to eclipsing the 250-victory mark.

But with the 2017 season just around the corner, Stoops announced in June that he was retiring from coaching, effective immediately. While he had on more than one occasion hinted that he did not want to grow old in the coaching business, the suddenness of his decision caught everyone by surprise.

"I think we all knew that Bob was not going to coach forever, but you're never really prepared for that kind of news," says Mike Stoops, OU's defensive coordinator and Bob's younger brother by 15 months. "Bob was always going to go out on his own terms, and to do it now when you've accomplished so much and the program is in great shape — it makes perfect sense."

"Bob has never been about chasing records or any of that sort of thing. And he's obviously not about the money (Stoops was set to earn \$5.7 million in 2017 and \$30 million over the next five seasons). When it came down to it, he looked at what



Shane Bevel/Tulsa World

During 18 seasons, Stoops' teams produced 37 first-team All-Americans, 83 NFL draft picks, two Heisman Trophy winners — Jason White in 2003 and Sam Bradford, seen above, in 2008 — and at least two dozen other national award honorees.

he has done up 'til now and what he wants to do in the future, and decided it was time to take that next step."

While media outlets and fans speculated about the exact reasoning behind Stoops' decision to step away, including the possibility of health-related issues — the Stoops family has a history of heart disease, and his father suffered a fatal heart attack while coaching at age 54 — Stoops said health was not a prevailing factor during a June 7 press conference that allowed OU to honor its outgoing coach and also name Lincoln Riley the program's 22nd head coach.

"It was with sadness that I learned of the decision of Coach



The 2014 Sugar Bowl was sweet indeed for the OU Sooners, as Bob Stoops led the team to a 45-31 victory against the University of Alabama and overcame the largest spread in BCS history. The Crimson Tide had been predicted to win by 17 ½ points.

Bob Stoops to step down as head football coach at Oklahoma,” says OU President David Boren. “Coach Stoops has made a critically important and lasting contribution to the OU football program. He has led to its restoration as one of the top programs in the nation. His success has helped provide the momentum for major new facilities like the improvements and expansion of the football stadium.

“Because of his unquestioned personal integrity and high standards, he is one of the most admired college football coaches in America.”

Stoops spoke briefly about his decision that day, but did not provide many specific details other than stating that he was ready to begin the next phase of his life, which includes spending more time with his wife, Carol, and their family.

“I feel the timing is perfect to hand over the reins. The program is in tremendous shape,” said Stoops. “We have outstanding players and coaches and are poised to make another run at a Big 12 and national championship. We have new, state-of-the-art facilities and a great start on next year’s recruiting class. The time is now because Lincoln Riley will provide a seamless transition as the new head coach, capitalizing on an excellent staff that is already in place and providing familiarity and confidence for our players.

“Now is simply the ideal time for me and our program to make this transition.”

Only 33, Riley is currently the youngest FBS head coach. He spent the 2015 and 2016 seasons as offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach for the Sooners, calling plays for one of the most prolific offenses in the country.

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“Coach Stoops gave me a chance a few years ago that I’ll never forget,” said Riley during an emotional speech at the press conference. “His guidance has been incredible. To be the guy to take over for him is an incredible honor.”

While Riley has plenty to prove in his new role, he won’t have to look too far for expert advice if he ever needs it. Stoops remains close to the team since transitioning into a new position within the OU athletics department, where he will serve as a special assistant to Athletics Director Joe Castiglione.

But what about the coaching aspect? What will he miss the most?

"I'll miss the daily interaction with the players and the coaches — the camaraderie of the coaching staff and everyone involved in the program," says Stoops. "The best part of coaching for me has always been the relationships you have with your players. There is a mutual respect there, a trust that we share in building what ultimately becomes a friendship, and all of that is special.

"When you go through all of the things that we go through together, you become like family."

When Stoops arrived at Oklahoma after serving as defensive coordinator at Florida for three seasons, including 1996 when the Gators won a national title, he stepped into a job that had lost much of its luster thanks to three straight losing seasons and into a program that had squandered its standing as a national perennial power.

But Stoops, who as a kid growing up in Ohio had watched Switzer's Sooners dominate college football, believed the Oklahoma program was a sleeping giant, and he jumped at the opportunity when Castiglione offered him the job in December 1998.

That next fall, Stoops brought in Mike Leach as his offensive coordinator and the Sooners scored more points in the first five games of the 1999 season than they had during the entire previous campaign. In fact, OU averaged 36 points a contest and went on to finish 7-5, marking the program's first winning season since 1993.

That is how the Bob Stoops era began.

More success followed, including the ensuing season when the Sooners won the 2000 national championship. Barely two years on the job in Norman and Stoops had turned the program completely around, and in the process, become one of the hottest coaching names in the business.

"Nobody had a crystal ball to foresee the future, but you could see things were going to be different from Coach Stoops' first team meeting," says Trent Smith, an all-conference tight end who lettered four seasons at OU (1999-2002). "We knew we had good talent already in place, and it became very obvious very quickly that everything was going to be different.

"Coach Stoops' arrival immediately altered the environment. He was a professional. He knew what he wanted and he knew how to define success. He was eyes wide open as far as expectations were concerned and he embraced it."



Stephen Holman/Tulsa World

Believing that referees missed calling a foul on the University of Missouri Tigers, Stoops stands his ground during the 2007 Big 12 Championship in San Antonio's Alamodome.

During his 18 seasons as head coach, Stoops earned Big 12 Coach of the Year honors six times and was national coach of the year twice. On top of winning 10 conference titles, the Sooners would play for three other national titles — 2003, 2004 and 2008 — and they also earned a spot in the 2015 College Football Playoff.

Continued success meant job offers from the NFL and other high-profile college programs, but Stoops never wavered in his commitment to OU.

"I never looked at Oklahoma as a stepping-stone job," says Stoops. "I felt as long as we continued to win and did things in a positive way that I would be here. Plus, we had the great leadership from President Boren and Joe Castiglione that helped continue to push our program forward. We always worked so well together, and that played a big role. We also had great fan support, which was a huge positive.

"Ultimately, Oklahoma is as good a job as any in the country. So when you start adding all of those things together, why would you leave?"

The Sooners owned an .807 regular-season winning percentage (121-29) under Stoops, which dwarfed the next two best records in the conference (Texas .693 and Kansas State .560). Even more impressive was OU's overall home mark of 101-9, which equates to an NCAA best .918 winning percentage. Each of those 110 home games were sellouts.



Hand-picked by Bob Stoops as heir to the Sooner throne, Lincoln Riley follows an OU tradition of first-time head coaches with an innate gift for the game of football, including Bud Wilkinson, Chuck Fairbanks and Barry Switzer.

The numbers are impressive across the board. Stoops' teams forged an 11-7 mark against Red River rival Texas and won 14 of 18 games against Bedlam rival Oklahoma State. Against AP Top 25 opponents over the last 18 seasons, OU posted a 60-30 mark (.667).

But don't ask Stoops to analyze his success by any statistics.

"I've never been big on all of the numbers or records. I'm not going to say those things are not important, but that was never what motivated me. That's just not my style," says Stoops. "The consistency of the program is what mattered to me the most. At the end of the day, I was just there longer than anyone else."

If not numbers, what exactly was it that motivated Bob Stoops?

"It definitely wasn't failure. Bob was never afraid to fail," says Mike Stoops, who coached 10 seasons with his brother at OU. "I think maybe more than anything it was being at a program like Oklahoma with all of its rich history. Whether it was Bud Wilkinson or Barry Switzer, and seeing the tradition they helped build — I think Bob wanted to help bring OU back to that level of success and its rightful place in college football. That was important to him."

As Stoops was further entrenching himself in Sooner football lore and securing his legacy as the winningest coach in OU history, he also managed to be a positive force away

from the game and in the community.

The Bob Stoops Champions Foundation has partnered with organizations like the March of Dimes and Make-A-Wish Foundation to raise more than \$2 million to help benefit children who are ill or at risk.

Stoops is also a regular visitor at the OU Children's Hospital, where building relationships with young patients and their families has become an important aspect of his life.

"I feel it's necessary. It lets them know they're important," Stoops said to *The Oklahoman* of his trips to the hospital. "If I'm able to give a little peace and give a little joy — I've been lucky to have a lot of great relationships with my time up there."

Positive relationships seem to be at the heart of everything that Stoops does. His former players will line up to attest to that fact, including current OU quarterback and 2016 Heisman Trophy finalist Baker Mayfield.

"I am extremely grateful that I had the opportunity to play for Coach Stoops," says Mayfield. "To come here and be a part of what he has built at OU, I feel very fortunate. Obviously, his record as Oklahoma's all-time winningest head coach speaks for itself, and to be a part of that was very special for me and all of my teammates."

Over the years, Owen, Wilkinson and Switzer have each been inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame based on their respective successes while coaching at OU. It stands to reason that Stoops will be enshrined alongside his Sooner predecessors at some point in the not-too-distant future.

But besides making hospital visits and hall of fame speeches, what else might he be doing five years from now?

"I'll still be here in Oklahoma, but I'm not exactly sure what I'll be doing," says Stoops. "I won't be coaching, that's for certain. If I intended to coach again, I would have just stayed at OU and kept doing what I enjoyed doing here for so long.

"Whatever the future holds, I'm looking forward to it." 

*Jay C. Upchurch is editor in chief of Sooner Spectator.*