

# Boren and Castiglione take **OU Athletics** to new heights

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

**W**hen George Lynn Cross shared his recollections about the crafting of a championship-caliber football program in his 1977 book, *Presidents Can't Punt*, he provided unique insight into how a university president can profoundly influence campus success well beyond academia.

Cross served as University of Oklahoma president for 24 years and was in the middle of the football program's renaissance through the late 1940s, the glory years of the '50s, and until his retirement in 1968. He was responsible for hiring legendary football coach Bud Wilkinson and was still deeply involved almost two decades later when OU brought aboard coaches Chuck Fairbanks and Barry Switzer, who went on to earn legendary status with the Sooners.

The same year Cross left his presidency and resumed his teaching role in OU's botany department, a student named David Lyle Boren was graduating from the OU College of Law.

Boren went on to a successful career in politics and in 1994 was named OU's 13th president. In attendance on his inauguration day was Boren's friend and mentor, 89-year-old President Emeritus George Lynn Cross.

A half century after the two men's paths first crossed, a copy of *Presidents Can't Punt* can be found on a table that sits adjacent to the desk of President David L. Boren, whose own impact on the university's football program and athletics department has been no less profound.

While known for his fervent commitment to education — as evidenced by the creation of more than 30 academic programs during his 24 years as president — Boren recognized early on the important role athletics has historically played in the overall success of the university.

When Boren hired Athletics Director Joe Castiglione in 1998, he set in motion another resurgence of sorts — one that has led to the greatest period of OU athletic achievement in school history. During the past two decades, the Sooners have captured a total

of 17 national championships, 78 conference titles and countless national awards and All-America honors.

"Under the leadership of President Boren and Joe Castiglione, Oklahoma has again become one of the top athletic departments in the country, both financially and facility-wise," says former head football coach Bob Stoops, who was hired by Castiglione prior to the 1999 season and went on to win 10 conference titles and one national championship before retiring in 2017.

"President Boren has helped create a very positive environment that has benefitted all of our teams and athletes, which has been evident in the across-the-board success we've had here."

During his presidency, Boren has overseen major fundraising campaigns that have helped finance more than \$2 billion in OU construction and renovation projects. The Reach for Excellence campaign, a five-year plan launched in 1995, surpassed the \$500 million mark in contributions and ranked in the top five completed fundraising campaigns at public universities in U.S. history.

One of the biggest beneficiaries has been the OU Athletics Department.

In 2016, the initial phase of a \$160 million renovation project was completed on the football facilities, including reconfigured bowl seating on the south end of Gaylord Family-Oklahoma Memorial Stadium, major improvements to fan amenities, locker rooms, weight and training areas and the installation of a new 50- by-170-foot video board inside the stadium.

And that's just one of the most recent projects. In the past two decades, the impressive list of other newly constructed or renovated athletic facilities represents one of the most prolific eras of campus development in OU history.



The transformed south end of Gaylord Family-Oklahoma Memorial Stadium was part of a \$160 million renovation project that started in 2016. Athletic facilities are among \$2 billion in OU construction and renovation projects during Boren's 23-year presidency.

**That list includes:**

- Everest Indoor Training Center
- Expansion and renovation of the Lloyd Noble Center
- Renovation of McCasland Field House
- Marita Hynes Field – OU Softball Complex
- Gregg Wadley Indoor Tennis Pavilion
- Headington Family Tennis Center
- Renovation of Sam Vierson Gymnastics Center
- OU Rowing Training Center
- Major improvements to Jimmie Austin Golf Club
- Renovation of John Jacobs Track & Field Complex
- Renovation of L. Dale Mitchell Park
- John Crain Field at the OU Soccer Complex
- Headington Hall student residential facility

“President Boren’s influence on our department’s success has been enormous,” says Castiglione. “It starts with the vision he had for the role of intercollegiate athletics as part of the institutional mission, and our efforts to build the kind of program that reflects positively overall on the institution, our community, our state — and also creates a source of pride for our student-athletes, alumni, families and friends.”

Boren’s advocacy of OU athletics never wavered during his time at the helm. In fact, it grew stronger as his tenure ran into and beyond its second decade.

Nowhere was it more evident than in his long-term working relationship with Castiglione and Stoops. During their 18 years together, they forged a powerful triumvirate that helped OU reclaim its status as a national power in football and take its place alongside the most successful athletic programs in the country.

“Like any good relationship, we worked at it,” says Castiglione. “It started with openness among each other, a sense of trust and knowledge that we all had the same goals in mind, and a willingness to work together to make those goals a reality.”

“It was a true honor, privilege and joy to work together so closely with President Boren and Coach Stoops for such a long period of time. I believe it worked so well because each of us loved the University of Oklahoma and each of us wanted what was best for the university.”

During the past decade, Boren frequently took a hands-on approach while playing a key role in helping keep the Big 12 Conference alive and well through a tumultuous period of radical conference realignment. He was adamant in his support of Castiglione, never afraid to speak his mind or make his influence felt when it came to OU’s well being.



Steve Woltmann

The OU men's gymnastics team celebrates its fourth consecutive national championship on April 21, becoming only the third team in NCAA history to rack up four titles. OU athletic teams have captured 17 national and 78 conference titles during President Boren's tenure.

"Early on, we were able to take on some very serious and almost debilitating issues, address them head-on and devise a plan to restructure the program so that it would be successful going forward," says Castiglione.

"We shared a vision and had constant faith in each other and the people we had around us. We stayed focused on our mission, working hard to accomplish what we set out to do. Seeing where we are now and where we feel it is going, an enormous amount of credit goes to President Boren and to Molly Boren as well, because she was also very supportive and involved in carrying forth the importance of what we were trying to do and how it was properly integrated throughout the campus."

There was a time early in his presidency when OU athletics, as a whole, struggled for respectability. The football program suffered through a stretch of five straight non-winning seasons (1994-98) and the athletics department was running in the red financially.

But in the face of those hard times, like Cross, Boren knew he couldn't punt.

Instead, he rolled up his sleeves, strapped his helmet on a little tighter and forged ahead, looking for a game plan that would keep OU moving in the right direction.

The hiring of Castiglione in 1998 proved to be one of the best decisions of his presidency. A few months later, Castiglione hired Stoops — and the march toward excellence was off and running.

While Stoops has since turned the football reins over to talented



President Boren and OU Athletic Director Joe Castiglione built a two-decade partnership that helped OU take its place among the most successful athletic programs in the country. In March, Castiglione received the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics Under Armour AD of the Year Award for the Football Bowl Subdivision.

young protégé Lincoln Riley and Boren will soon transfer his title to incoming president James L. Gallogly, that quest for excellence is stronger now than ever.

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