



Josh R. Gateley

Cultivating CHAMPIONS

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH



Men's head coach Mark Williams looked across the main floor of the Sam Viersen Gymnastics Center and saw something he had never previously witnessed in almost 20 years of coaching at the University of Oklahoma.

And he immediately knew the stakes had been raised.

"We had our team in working out and I kept watching what K.J. was doing with the women's team, and how hard they were working on everything across the room. To be honest, they were putting us to shame," says Williams, recalling a practice day not long after K.J. Kindler came to OU as women's head coach in the fall of 2006. "It was the first time I had ever seen the women's team here working as hard or harder than the men, and I knew immediately they had found the right person to lead that program."

The OU men were coming off their third national title in four seasons, so the veteran coach knew very well what a championship-caliber workout looked like. He believed Kindler also possessed the personality to recruit top-tier talent, and the drive and determination to push the OU women to a level of success they had never before experienced.

"K.J. came in and changed the culture of that program. She continuously has her team working and training to be the best, and the results are proof of that," says Williams. "There is an energy and a shared sense of pride between the teams that helps drive both programs to continue to perform at a very high level."

While Williams' Sooner men hold the most national titles of any OU team, the OU women have been making plenty of history of their own — developing into one of the elite programs in the country during Kindler's time at the helm. Over the past 13 seasons, her teams have won 11 Big 12 Conference titles, 10 NCAA regional crowns and qualified for NCAA Championships 13 consecutive times.

Of those 13 NCAA appearances, the Sooners have earned eight Super Six appearances, one Four on the Floor appearance (new format in 2019) and captured four NCAA championships — in 2014, 2016, 2017 and 2019 — the first four national titles in the program's history.

In March, Oklahoma set a new gymnastics attendance record when more than 10,000 fans filled Lloyd Noble Center to see Kindler's top-ranked Sooners defeat No. 2 UCLA in a dual with national title implications.

Six weeks later, OU recorded the second-highest team score in NCAA history (198.3375) en route to besting third-ranked LSU and that same UCLA squad to secure

Thirteen years of hard work and hope have paid off for OU women's gymnastics head coach K.J. Kindler. After winning their first NCAA championship in 2014, the Sooners have earned three more national titles — in 2016, 2017 and, most recently, in April.



Amy Pyle/OU Athletics

The OU women gymnasts celebrate their fourth NCAA title in April. All four titles have been earned under head coach K.J. Kindler.

its latest national title. Coincidentally, the Sooners also own the top spot in the record books with a team score of 198.3875 set in 2017.

The qualities that Williams recognized in Kindler shortly after her arrival to OU are not lost on anyone who has spent time around her and seen the passion and ambition she possesses for coaching. That includes OU athletics director Joe Castiglione, who watched Kindler take over a moderately successful Iowa State gymnastics program in 1999 and turn it into a national contender in six seasons.

After Kindler led the Cyclones to a Big 12 title and a Super Six appearance in the spring of 2006, Castiglione decided to see if the talented young coach could possibly be persuaded to leave ISU. It was a tall order considering Kindler had spent almost 18 years at the Des Moines-based school, both as a student-athlete and a coach.

“The first thing you notice about K.J. is her passion for excellence,” says Castiglione. “We knew she had deep roots there, but we also knew she was the type of person and coach who had the drive to take our women’s program to the next level. So, we told her what we were looking for and what our goals were — and fortunately for us, she said yes.

“At that point, we believed it was only a matter of time

before our women’s gymnastics program would be among the best in the country.”

A native of Lake Elmo, Minn., and the eldest of five siblings, Kathie Jo Kindler arrived at Iowa State in 1988 as a walk-on for the gymnastics program. During the next four seasons, she was a three-time MVP for the Cyclones, becoming the program’s first individual NCAA qualifier and finishing as runner-up in the 1992 Big Eight Championships.

Her ISU coach, Mike Sharples, could see that, even as a teenager, Kindler was different from most collegiate student-athletes.

“K.J. has several key ingredients that distinguish her from the crowd,” says Sharples. “Her focus and drive as a competitor were amazing. She was one of our best gymnasts while I was (at Iowa State), and I always believed she was going to be very successful at whatever she chose to do with her life.

“To see what she has done as a college coach, to see her devotion and the way she cares for her gymnasts and the success she has enjoyed, I could not be more proud of her.”

When Sharples opted to leave coaching after the 1992 season, ISU replaced him with Amy Pyle, who asked recent graduate Kindler to join her coaching staff despite her age and lack of coaching experience.

“I wasn’t really looking to get into coaching at that point, but it was a good opportunity and everything just kind of fell into place,” says Kindler, who spent the next eight seasons honing her coaching skills as an ISU assistant.

In 2000, the Cyclones won their first Big 12 title and earned the program’s first trip to the NCAA Championships, where they finished eighth overall. At the conclusion of that season, Pyle decided to retire and Kindler was named head coach a few weeks later.

Under the direction of Kindler and her assistant coach husband Lou Ball, Iowa State’s program continued to evolve into a national contender. She was named Big 12 Coach of the Year three different times (2004, ’05, ’06) and was tabbed National Head Coach of the Year after the 2005 season.

During that same period, Castiglione had begun searching for a replacement for head coach Steve Nunno, who left OU in May 2006 on the heels of guiding the Sooners to three straight appearances in the NCAA Championships. Nunno had taken over for longtime head coach Becky Switzer, who retired in 2002 after laying the foundation for a successful OU program during her 17 seasons as head coach.

“Our program had built a very solid tradition over the years, but we needed someone to help get us to that elite level where we were contending for championships. We felt K.J. was the right person to do that,” says Castiglione.

After fielding OU’s offer and evaluating all of her options, Kindler — who was seven months pregnant with her first child at the time — decided to bring her talents to Norman. But it was not an easy decision.

Besides her Iowa State pedigree, most of Kindler’s family still lives in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, just a three-hour drive from Des Moines. Moving farther away from home with a baby on the way was almost a deal breaker.

“It was certainly hard to leave Iowa State, for a number of reasons. But we felt like we had kind of reached a pinnacle of what we could do there,” says Kindler. “So, when Joe contacted us and showed an interest in Lou and me coming to Oklahoma, we knew that OU had all of the resources to do what we ulti-



Josh R. Gateley

“Coach Kindler brings such a natural energy to everything she does, especially to our workouts,” says five-time All-American Nicole Lehrmann.

mately wanted to do, which was win a national championship. “And most important, we felt that we would be given the support needed to help make that dream a reality.”

Along with Ball, Kindler brought in assistant coach Tom Haley and team trainer Jenn Richardson to fill out her OU staff, which has remained together during the past 13 seasons.

“K.J. is absolutely locked in on every single detail that needs to be addressed to make the program great,” says Castiglione. “Her coaching, along with her coaching staff, has just been

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fantastic. It’s really special that they have all been together since Day One.”

Kindler could not agree more.

“Our staff has been together longer than any other in the country — and that’s pretty amazing, especially in today’s environment of college athletics,” she says. “It’s a situation where we’ve become very close, our families are close, we all love Norman, and all of that has definitely helped with the chemistry of the entire program.

“Being together like this staff has helps give the athletes an amazing consistency that you might not see at other programs

or in many other college sports today.”

That drive for consistency began during the 2007 season when Kindler and company led the Sooners to 12 straight regular-season wins, including an upset victory over sixth-ranked Nebraska, a feat no OU team had accomplished since 1991. Oklahoma went on to finish second at the Big 12 Championships and eventually earned an eighth-place finish at the NCAA Championships, which at the time was the best performance in program history.

A year later, the Sooners capped another successful season with an eighth-place finish at nationals and followed that with a 10th-place NCAA finish in 2009.

When 2010 arrived, Kindler believed she finally had her program positioned to become a serious contender for a national title.

“We had experienced a good amount of success to that point, but in 2010, we could really see that the work we were putting in, the decisions we were making and the culture we were creating — all of those things were coming together,” says Kindler. “When we made the Super Six for the first time and finished second in the country that season, it was obviously a huge step for us. We had a great senior class that year. All of them were our recruits, and the message we got from that was, ‘what we are doing is working.’”

At the end of that season, during which seven Sooners earned All-America honors, Kindler was named National Head Coach of the Year, as well as Big 12 Coach of the Year.

OU senior Hollie Vise, an All-American on bars, beam and the floor exercise, was named the 2010 Big 12 Sportswoman of the Year.

The blueprint was set, and it was working.

After posting a third-place finish at the 2011 NCAA Championships and another runner-up finish two seasons later, the Sooners entered the 2014 campaign as one of the favorites to capture the national team title, a feat previously

accomplished by a total of five programs in the history of the sport.

Behind the leadership of All-Americans Haley Scaman, Maile’ana Kanewa and Taylor Spears, who became OU’s first individual national champion since Kelly Garrison-Funderburk in 1988, the Sooners made history by tying for the national championship with Florida.

“It was so surreal — just amazing to be a part of something so special,” says Scaman. “To be the first OU team to win a national title is something that all of us will always cherish. It was the first big step, the first notch in the program’s belt to-



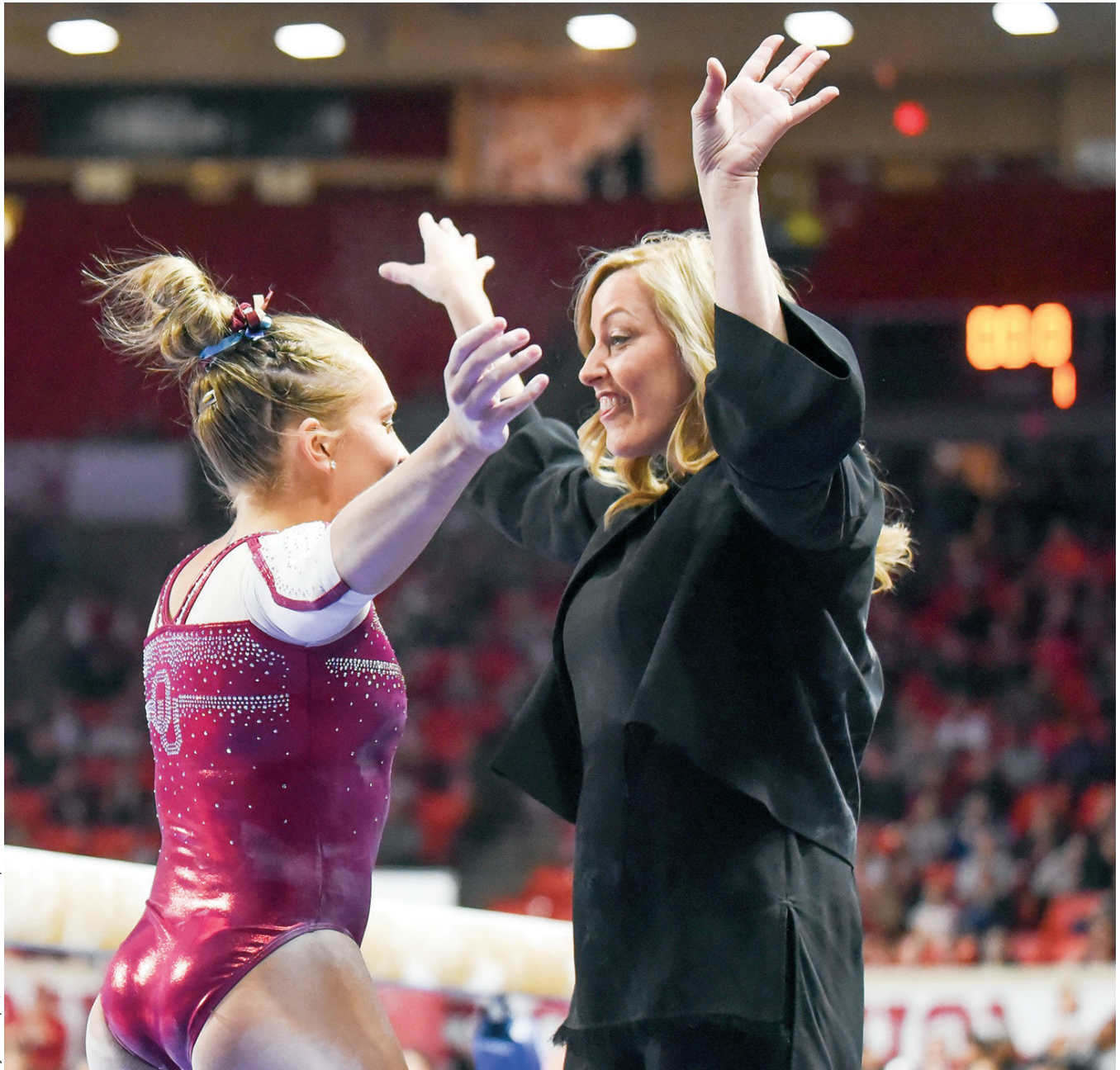
Josh R. Gateley

Coach K.J. Kindler and sophomore Evy Schoepfer talk prior to Oklahoma’s rotation on the beam during its battle with No. 2-ranked UCLA in March.

ward creating the incredible success they’ve experienced since that season.”

Since 2014, Kindler has guided the Sooners to three more national championships – in 2016, 2017 and 2019 – as well as a third-place finish in 2015 and the runner-up spot in 2018. During that span, Oklahoma has spent more time ranked No. 1 than any other program in the country.

“I really can’t even put into words how special it was to win one national championship, much less three, with these teammates and coaches,” says senior Nicole Lehrmann, a five-time All-American who helped OU win national titles in 2016, ’17 and ’19.



Kyle Phillips / The Norman Transcript

OU's Olivia Trautman, left, rushes to women's gymnastics coach K.J. Kindler after competing on the balance beam during the Sooners' March 15 meet against Alabama at the Lloyd Noble Center.

“To go through the grind of the offseason and then the entire season, and to see all of that hard work pay off – that is such an amazing feeling.”

Lehrmann points to the coaching style of Kindler and her staff as the key to OU's most recent successes.

“Coach Kindler brings such a natural energy to everything she does, especially to our workouts. And she has a way of teaching you to never settle. Even if you are ranked No. 1, you can always improve, always get better,” says Lehrmann. “She has a way of instilling a yearning for perfection in each of her gymnasts. She's a very inspirational person.”

Garrison-Funderburk, who helped put OU women's gym-

nastics on the national map back in the 1980s, has been thrilled to see all the positives Kindler has brought to the program.

“I'm pretty hard to impress when it comes to gymnastics, and honestly, I've been absolutely amazed at what Coach Kindler has done at OU,” says Garrison-Funderburk, who won four individual NCAA titles at OU and earned a spot on the 1988 U.S. Olympic Team during her gymnastics career. “She's raised the bar in everything she's done — expectations, preparation, performance — it's all off the charts. And the thing that really strikes me about K.J. is the fact that she is such a great leader.

“Every day, all day long, she's a leader. And it shows in the way her teams perform.”

continued



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Oklahoma coach K.J. Kindler reacts to a near-perfect performance (9.875) on the beam by Maggie Nichols during the Sooners' win over Georgia on Jan. 11 at the Lloyd Noble Center.

During her time at OU, Kindler's program has produced 126 All-Americans, 60 Big 12 individual champions, 46 NCAA regional champions and 10 national champions. On top of that, her gymnasts have earned 91 All-Big 12 academic honors and 49 NACGC/W Scholastic All-American honors.

"K.J. is continually recruiting the best and the brightest gymnasts in the country," says Castiglione. "The team's GPA and its graduation rate and what many of those young women are doing as they transition into life after college athletics is really special. And I believe they are most definitely a reflection of their head coach and the members of her coaching staff."

Kindler is no doubt proud of her program's overall accomplishments and the student-athletes who have helped thrust OU women's gymnastics into the national spotlight. It's been

the type of magical ride that generates interest from other major programs, not only for Kindler, but for her entire staff.

"We have created something pretty special here, and I have no plans of going anywhere. Unless they decide to get rid of me," says Kindler, laughing. "What we have done here and the program we continue to build, I believe, attracts a certain type of athlete, gymnasts who want to compete against the best. They embrace that challenge and become better because of it."

"It's exciting to have the opportunity to work in that type of environment here at OU and continue to build something together that we all can be proud of."

Jay C. Upchurch is editor in chief of Sooner Spectator and lives in Norman, Okla.