





# THE RILEY FACTOR

With back-to-back Heisman-winning signal callers and a windfall of top prospects lining up to be Sooners, OU is earning a national reputation as **'Quarterback U.'**

**W**hen 33-year-old Lincoln Riley was hired in 2017 to take over the Sooner football reins from a retiring Bob Stoops, few fans were willing to lower their expectations while the youngest head coach in Football Bowl Subdivision history eased into the job.

Turns out, they didn't need to.

After spending his first two seasons at the University of Oklahoma establishing himself as one of the most respected offensive coordinators in the game, Riley was ready to embrace the enormous pressure that comes with leading one of the nation's elite college football programs.

"I am extremely thankful for the opportunity to be the head coach at a place like Oklahoma, and I'm excited about all of the possibilities as we move forward," Riley said in 2017. "It is definitely a situation I feel like I can handle."

And handle it, he has.

In the two seasons since Riley became head coach, the Sooners have won 24 games and a pair of Big 12 Conference titles, as well as making two appearances in the College Football Playoff. In the past four years, Riley has been the mastermind behind a relentless attack that has perennially led the nation in scoring and total offense, while producing consecutive Heisman Trophy-winning quarterbacks, each of whom ended up being the No. 1 overall picks in their respective NFL drafts.

Baker Mayfield spent his freshman season as a part-time starting quarterback at Texas Tech before transferring to OU prior to the 2014 season. After sitting out one season per NCAA transfer rules, the brash QB from Lake Travis High School near Austin, Texas, proved to be the perfect fit for Riley's offensive scheme.

Mayfield went on to finish in the top four of the Heisman voting, both as a sophomore and junior, before running away with the award as a senior in 2017. That season, he led the Sooners to a third-straight conference title while earning the Big 12 Offensive Player of the Year award and unanimous All-America honors. He also

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Photos by Joshua Gateley

broke his own NCAA record for passing efficiency (198.9) and established a new OU single-season mark for total offense with 4,938 yards.

“Bob (Stoops) and I gave Baker an opportunity when he came to the program,” Riley said the night Mayfield won his Heisman. “We opened the quarterback competition up before that season and he went out and won the job. Baker showed me very early on that he had what it takes inside of him to be a great player for us.”

The Cleveland Browns made Mayfield the No. 1 overall pick in the 2018 draft, and he immediately began paying dividends with a rookie season that literally breathed life into the Browns’ organization and its fan base. Mayfield set the NFL rookie record for most touchdown passes in a season with 27

and led the Browns to seven wins, three more than the team had collected over the previous three seasons combined.

After transferring from Texas A&M and spending two seasons as Mayfield’s backup, Kyler Murray finally got his chance in 2018. Murray won the starting quarterback job and provided a record-breaking performance that helped him become OU’s seventh Heisman winner – and the fourth OU quarterback to win the award since 2003.

Murray led the 12-2 Sooners to a fourth consecutive conference title and their third College Football Playoff appearance in four seasons. Leading the nation in total offense with a school-record 5,362 yards, Murray became only the second player in Football Bowl Subdivision history to throw for at least 4,000 yards and run for at least 1,000. He finished the



Lincoln Riley’s first starting quarterback as Sooners head coach was Baker Mayfield, who energized OU fans and stymied many an opponent’s defense on his way to winning the 2017 Heisman Trophy. In Cleveland, the NFL’s No. 1 draft pick has brought out that same energy and enthusiasm in the Browns, who won more games in their first season with Mayfield than in the past three years combined.



Courtesy Cleveland Browns

After two seasons as Mayfield's backup, Kyler Murray stepped confidently into the starting quarterback position in 2018, also winning the Heisman — OU's second quarterback to earn the honor in two consecutive years.

season with 42 touchdown passes and ran for 12 more.

"Kyler is such a great competitor, a winner and really one of the elite athletes I've had the pleasure to coach," says Riley. "During his time with us, he demonstrated great patience and a willingness to do whatever he needed to do to help us win games. Once he got the chance to show what he was capable of, he made the absolute most of it."

As did Jason White in 2003, when he returned from two career-threatening knee surgeries to become OU's first Heisman-winning quarterback. Sam Bradford followed in 2008 on the heels of his own incredible, record-breaking season.

"That's a pretty unbelievable accomplishment," says Riley. "To have four quarterbacks from the same school all win Heismans in that time frame is kind of mind-boggling, if you really think about it. Definitely says a lot about the caliber of players Oklahoma has had play that position."

"A lot of credit also has to go to everyone who has been a part of this program during that time. Guys typically don't win the Heisman Trophy on their own. They need a lot of things to come together to create that situation — and it starts by having a good deal of support from everyone around them."

Murray zeroed in on what he calls the "Riley Factor" as one



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of the major reasons for his success at Oklahoma.

"Coach Riley isn't just a great offensive coordinator or great head coach — he's a lot more than that to the OU program and its players," says Murray, who was taken with the No. 1 overall pick by the Arizona Cardinals in the 2019 NFL Draft. "He brings so much positive energy every day to every situation, and everyone inside that building feeds off of it."

### Attracting Great QBs

With Mayfield and Murray off showcasing their respective talents in the NFL, it would be natural to think that OU's quarterback situation might be a bit unsettled headed into the 2019 season.

But that could not be further from the truth. In fact, Riley's offense has become a magnet for top quarterback prospects.

In 2018, the Sooners signed Tanner Mordecai, the nation's 11th-ranked, pro-style prep QB from Waco, Texas. This year's recruiting class was highlighted by the signing of the nation's only five-star, pro-style QB prospect, Spencer Rattler from Phoenix.

This summer, Riley and his staff got a commitment from

Brock Vandagriff, a junior from Bogart, Ga., who is the No. 1-rated overall prep quarterback prospect in the class of 2021.

"I love everything they do at Oklahoma with the offense. Coach Riley has such a great mind for the game," says Vandagriff. "It was so much fun watching Baker and Kyler during their time there, and all of the amazing things they did. I can't wait to be a part of all that great tradition and history."

The future of the position at OU looks to be in good hands during the next few years.

Although Riley had yet to announce an official starter for QB going into August camp, in all likelihood, that position will go to Jalen Hurts, the graduate transfer and former starting quarterback for Alabama. Named the SEC Offensive Player of the Year as a true freshman in 2016, Hurts' talent and experience not only could lead OU to a potential fifth straight Big 12 Conference title and an eighth national championship, but also make Heisman history.

Hurts' preseason odds stand at 6-1 to become the third OU quarterback to capture the Heisman in the last three years. In the 84-year history of the award, only three other collegiate

RIGHT — The Sooners' next starting quarterback will likely be Jalen Hurts, the former national championship-winning QB from Alabama, who transferred to OU to use his last year of eligibility playing for Coach Riley.



LEFT — Sooner head coach Lincoln Riley discusses a play with Kyler Murray during the 2018 OU-OSU game, which the Sooners won. Riley's success in bringing out the best in his field generals has led some commentators to refer to the University of Oklahoma as "Quarterback U."



programs have produced consecutive Heisman winners – Yale, Army and Ohio State.

No school has ever won three in a row.

Hurts gives OU a seasoned leader who is equally adept at running or throwing the football. He was 26-2 as a starter and helped lead Alabama to the 2017 national title. After receiving his degree in public relations last December, he was eligible to transfer and play immediately for another Division I program.

He chose Oklahoma.

Since his arrival in January, Hurts has spent long hours watching game film of Mayfield and Murray demonstrating their unique talents while running Riley's prolific offense.

Mayfield is familiar with the pressures that Hurts will face this coming season, but he believes the veteran signal caller is equipped to handle whatever comes his way.

"(Jalen) doesn't need to try and do anything that Kyler and I did. He needs to do what he's best at. That's good enough," says Mayfield. "There's a reason he's (at OU), there's a reason he's a national champion. He's already proved himself.

"Him being a leader – he needs to continue that first and foremost."

With Hurts seemingly poised to step in and guide the offense in 2019, the Sooners are favored to win the Big 12 again. And if everything goes as expected, another Heisman Trophy making its way to Norman is not out of the question.

"To get the opportunity to go to another top-tier school

and to find yourself in a position where you are replacing two Heisman winners – you can't look back at history and say that's ever happened before," says Hurts. "It's definitely a unique situation, but it's one I feel like I am built for. I knew what I was getting myself into when I decided to come to Oklahoma, and I'm excited about the possibilities."

## Taking to the Air

There was a time, not all that long ago, when the Oklahoma football program was known for great running backs and dominating defenses. The main byproduct of those two factors was winning championships, including 30 conference titles and six national titles between the years 1946 and 1998.

During that half-century span, the Sooners produced a who's who list of dynamic ballcarriers that featured a trio of Heisman Trophy winners – Billy Vessels, Steve Owens and Billy Sims – along with a number of fan favorites and All-Americans like Greg Pruitt, Joe Washington, Marcus Dupree and De'Mond Parker.

And those legendary names are just for starters.

There are at least a dozen other running backs who helped carry on that spirited tradition during a period when the OU brand became synonymous with college football royalty.

In more recent years, the program's path to continued success has been altered dramatically – even as its reputation as a national powerhouse has continued to flourish. Where

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running backs once dominated the headlines, quarterbacks and passing have become the centerpiece of Oklahoma's offensive attack.

Prior to Bob Stoops' arrival as head coach in 1999, OU's starting quarterbacks in college football's modern era had thrown for a combined 39,393 yards and 289 touchdowns. In the 20 seasons since, eleven full-time starting QBs have thrown for almost 70,000 yards and 600 TDs.

Three years after signal caller Josh Heupel led the Sooners to the 2000 national title and finished second in the Heisman voting, quarterback Jason White claimed the statue outright. In his two-plus seasons as a starter, White threw for 7,922 yards and 81 TDs, both school records at the time.

Five years later in 2008, Sam Bradford brought home the Heisman on the heels of what was, at the time, the greatest single-season performance ever by a Sooner quarterback. In leading OU to the brink of a national title, Bradford threw for 4,720 yards and 50 touchdowns.

Other quarterbacks who have made significant contributions to the program's success during the past two decades include Nate Hybl, Paul Thompson, Landry Jones, Blake Bell and Trevor Knight.

"This program has been fortunate enough over the last 16 years to have some really special players come through and play at an extremely high level on the biggest stage," says Riley. "I know all of our players are very aware of the guys who have come before them and helped lay the foundation for all of the success OU has experienced over the years."

It's not like Stoops' teams completely abandoned the running game during his 18 seasons as OU's head coach.

Far from it.

Even while Oklahoma was becoming known for its outstanding quarterback play – thanks in part to its recent quartet of Heisman winners – the program has managed to produce its share of high-profile running backs. But unlike in the past when they might have seen their names at the top of the marquee, players like Adrian Peterson, Samaje Perine, Quentin Griffin, DeMarco Murray, Joe Mixon, Damien Williams and Rodney Anderson have more often than not either shared top billing or played supporting roles in their teams' respective offenses.

"Oklahoma has always had great running backs, but with the evolution of up-tempo passing offenses over the last few years, the emphasis has definitely shifted to recruiting great passing quarterbacks," says Mark Clayton, a two-time All-America receiver who set career records at OU for catches, receiving yards and touchdown receptions (2001-04). "It's a trend we've seen happen all across college football, but especially in the Big 12 Conference where throwing the ball

has been the dominating factor for basically every team in the league."

## Quarterback U

"Oklahoma has such a great history at that position going back years and years, so to hear someone refer to our program as 'Quarterback U,' that is certainly a nice compliment," says Riley.

The football world will no doubt be watching as Hurts prepares to step in at quarterback and possibly vie for another Heisman Trophy this season. To make that happen, he will need help from a mostly inexperienced offensive line that lost four starters to the NFL draft in April, as well as a group of gifted receivers who have spent much of the offseason working to build a rapport with their new QB.

Even with the departure of Murray and several other key offensive starters, Riley believes there are plenty of positives on that side of the ball – beginning at quarterback.

"With Jalen, it's not like you are starting from scratch or having to make huge adjustments to your offense. He brings a lot of game experience with him, and he's going to work hard and do whatever it takes to be successful during his time here," says Riley.

"The expectations are very high on both sides of the ball, and we feel like we've got the right people in place to meet those expectations."

Those words must be music to the ears of Oklahoma football fans everywhere – the same fans who have become accustomed to seeing great passing attacks on Saturdays. The same fans who are patiently waiting for the university to add the statues of Mayfield and Murray to Heisman Park, located just east of the Gaylord Family-Oklahoma Memorial Stadium.

While their statues may still be in the planning stages, their legacies have already been carved in stone.

"Having great players like Baker and Kyler experience the success they had here – it's obviously been a major positive for us as far as attracting talented players at that position," says Riley. "If you are a young quarterback sitting out there trying to figure out where you want to go, I believe they are going to look at Oklahoma as a place offering an incredible opportunity. You can go play quarterback at a lot of different places, but you don't get the same opportunity everywhere.

"The rewards here for being the guy and for playing the position well, I believe you can easily argue, are higher than they are anywhere else in the country. So that makes it a pretty special situation."

A situation Sooner fans eagerly await.



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