



Lynette Lobban

The crack of a bat and whoosh
of a basketball hitting nothing but net
may be over for the season, but Sooner athletes hold fast
to hope for the future and memories of a lifetime.

THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

There is a magical quality about sports, especially at the collegiate level, that captivates and inspires millions of fans across the country, from Oklahoma to California to New York and everywhere in between. It is rooted in the wholesomeness of amateur competition and consumed in large doses on autumn Saturday afternoons, and basically every other day of the week, during the nine-month academic calendar year.

It is made up of rivalries and championships, great success stories and struggles—all of the elements that go into the lifelong dreams of its dedicated participants, the student-athletes.

Their hard work and collective journeys are an integral part of who we are in this country.

All of that was on full display in Oklahoma's Big 12 Conference regular-season finale at TCU in early March, a game the Sooners had to win if they hoped to punch their ticket to the NCAA's Big Dance.

That day, junior Austin Reaves scored a career-high 41 points, including the last two on a 12-foot, fall-away jumper just before the final buzzer, to help OU overcome a 20-point second-half deficit to defeat the Horned Frogs 78-76, and set off a jubilant celebration that lasted well beyond the team's three-hour bus ride home from Fort Worth.

"It was an incredible game, a great win," says senior Kristian Doolittle. "For Austin to lift this team up like he did—it was such a display of heart and determination and came at such a critical time in our season."

Five days later on March 12, the Sooners were still riding high on that victory when, a few hours prior to tipoff in their Big 12 tournament opener, the lingering euphoria was muted by something unfathomable—an invisible opponent immune to scouting reports and well-conceived game plans.

COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus pandemic that had begun sweeping the globe a few months earlier, brought the Sooners' season to an abrupt end. The Big 12

Championship and every other sporting event in the country was either postponed or canceled.

In an unprecedented move based on extreme caution for the health of its teams and their fans, the NCAA canceled all of its remaining championships for the 2019-20 academic year, including March Madness, and those for baseball, softball, golf, wrestling and gymnastics.

It is a decision that impacts lives and livelihoods, and one that comes with profound financial costs for all collegiate athletics programs, large and small. The NCAA will distribute \$375 million less to respective universities this year due to the cancellation of its men's and women's postseason basketball tournaments alone.



Joe Castiglione, vice president of Intercollegiate Athletic Programs, says talking to coaches and student-athletes after the NCAA made the decision to cancel spring sports was an emotional experience for everyone.

But the biggest and most devastating impact is that on the student-athletes, most of whom have been practicing and preparing for their respective athletic endeavors for much of their young lives.

"Standing in front of student-athletes and having to explain to them that their season was over immediately, the abrupt nature of that ..." says OU Athletics Director Joe Castiglione, referring to the difficult conversations between OU coaches



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In January, OU senior Maggie Nichols posted her 18th career 10 with a perfect score on vault, helping the No. 1 Oklahoma women's gymnastics team with their victory over No. 9 Alabama. Nichols will return to OU in the fall to complete her master's degree in sports broadcasting.

and their athletes in the aftermath of the decision. "Because of the world we're in, the pure emotion of what we do and how everybody works so hard, not just preparing for that season, but a single season could be the culmination of the work of many seasons—everybody had to deal with the shock of that news."

The news that their hopes and dreams, at least for this season, had been unceremoniously shelved was emotionally devastating for many.

"It all came as such a shock. I'm not sure I've been able to wrap my head around it, other than the realization that it is disappointing and heartbreaking for so many people," says OU senior Maggie Nichols, two-time NCAA all-around champion who was the favorite to win again in 2020.

"On one hand, I know it's the right decision for the safety and welfare of all the athletes and everyone involved. But you also wish there was a way to still have the opportunity to finish your career the way you always hoped you could—com-

peting for another national title."

National titles may not have been on Doolittle's mind, but the chance to play in a third straight NCAA tournament was something he would have relished.

"It was obviously very disappointing the way everything happened, especially with the entire rest of the season getting shut down like it did," says Doolittle, who was OU's leading scorer and rebounder this season. "I would have loved to see how the season played out and to have had that chance to go to the (NCAA) tournament again. That's what you live for as a student-athlete—to compete against the best.

"But I think we all understood why it had to happen. Ultimately, basketball is just a game and we are talking about people's lives with the coronavirus situation. There's really nothing anyone could have done differently."

OU was on spring break when the news initially broke regarding the NCAA's decision, and before the student body could return to classes the following week, OU Interim President Joe Harroz announced that, to help slow the spread of the virus, the entire campus would shut down immediately and all classes would be moved to an online format for the remainder of the spring semester.

"Our decision (to shut down campus) is based on the recommendations from the CDC and our state and national leaders," Harroz read from a prepared statement on March 18. "COVID-19 presents an unprecedented challenge, but I'm confident as ever in the OU community's ability to navigate the coming days with care, wisdom, and a collective resolve."

Reality Check

A month into the new order of college life—online classes, staying at home and avoiding social gatherings—hope that spring football practice might return, and the annual Red-White Game could go on as planned for April 18 faded.

Still, head football coach Lincoln Riley remained cautiously optimistic as to how the pandemic might affect the 2020 season when the fall semester arrives.

"I think it's impossible to predict when we'll have a season, but I am extremely confident we will have a season at some point," Riley told ESPN's "First Take" in early April. "It may

look different. The schedule may look different. Fans in the stands may look different. Starting times may be different. We don't know. We have to be ready to adjust."

Riley's interview came across as positive news during a time when social distancing has helped create a situation where the patience of student-athletes, coaching staffs and fans has been put to the test as they wait out the pandemic, reminisce about what was, and dream of what could be again.

Sooner rather than later

If the unthinkable happens and college football season becomes a casualty of COVID-19, that could spell trouble for many athletics programs that depend on football revenue to fund their annual budgets. College football generated \$6.5 billion during the 2018-19 academic year, which averages out to almost \$51 million per school. Close to 80 percent of college athletic budgets are built on a foundation sustained by football revenue.

Castiglione and many of college football's top decision-makers meet regularly to discuss various scenarios amid the pandemic, with one goal in mind—to find the right balance between making plans for a season and listening to key health and government officials.

"We're looking at all kinds of models," says Castiglione, "between a full season starting on time, to slightly altering the start of the season—whether that means moving it



Ty Russell/OU Athletics

Sooner Head Football Coach Lincoln Riley remains optimistic about the 2020 season. "I feel by September, the world is going to need football," Riley told reporters during a conference call in early April.

ous sports to help meet their goals, but they've done it without any hands-on assistance, equipment or machines located on campus.

"I give Coach Wylie, our strength staff and our nutrition team a bunch of credit because you can't just lay out a blanket plan for your

team," says Riley. "You have to take (a lot of) things into consideration and that's what we've tried to do."

Something Positive

In late March, the NCAA Division I Council announced that it would be extending eligibility for student-athletes who participate in spring sports that were impacted by COVID-19. Members also adjusted financial aid rules to allow those teams affected to carry more members on scholarship to account for incoming recruits and student-athletes who had been in their last year of eligibility and who ultimately decide to stay for an extra year.

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up a couple weeks, back a couple weeks—generally speaking, whether that means a shortened season, whether that means moving the entire season or portion of a season to the spring."

In the meantime, student-athletes from all sports have done their best to continue to train and prepare for whatever the future brings. One of the main challenges of transitioning to the current reality has been consulting with their respective coaches and trainers to create individualized workout plans.

OU strength and conditioning coach Bennie Wylie and his staff have been instrumental in that regard. They have worked with coaching staffs and student-athletes from vari-



Ty Russell/OU Athletics

ABOVE - When the NCAA Division I Council announced that it would be extending eligibility for student-athletes in spring sports impacted by COVID-19, All-American pitcher Giselle Juarez, along with fellow seniors Nicole Mendes and Shannon Saile, announced they would return for the 2021 season.



OU Athletics

LEFT - Kristian Doolittle, the senior forward from Edmond, Okla., racked up 1,188 points during his OU basketball career before the season was suspended by the NCAA in March. Now, Doolittle has his sights on the 2020 NBA draft set for June 25.

That news was cause for celebration where seniors on Patty Gasso's OU softball team were concerned. All-American pitcher Giselle Juarez, All-Big 12 utility player Nicole Mendes and second-team All-Big 12 pitcher Shannon Saile—the program's lone seniors—officially announced in a joint statement released on Twitter their intentions to return for the 2021 season.

"We are celebrating with the student-athletes who have seen their college careers extended," says Castiglione. "At the same time, we empathize with winter-sport participants who are disappointed they weren't afforded the same extension. For the spring sports, there will be significant complexities that administrators, coaches and student-athletes will work through.

“These are unprecedented times in so many ways, and each day provides a new set of opportunities and challenges.”

While winter sports were not included in the decision, that did not stop Nichols from appealing to the NCAA’s sense of fairness where student-athletes in sports like gymnastics, basketball and wrestling are concerned.

On the morning of April 6, Nichols made public a 236-word message via her Twitter account that stated a case for offering that same extended eligibility to all winter sport athletes.

“We understand that the season was canceled for a reason bigger than sports to ensure everyone stays healthy and safe during this time, but seniors will have no opportunity to represent our universities and compete in the sport we have worked our whole lives for again. Most importantly, we do not have the opportunity to end our careers on our own terms,” Nichols’ message stated.

“The complexity of figuring out a solution is understandable, but it is the right thing to do. We deserve one last opportunity to compete.”

Nichols is not absolutely certain whether or not she would return for another season if the NCAA were to actually include winter sports athletes in a revised decision, but she believes that opportunity should exist—not only for herself but for all seniors who find themselves in her position.

For now, she will work toward her master’s degree in journalism via her online class schedule, which she admits has taken some getting used to.

“It’s incredibly strange, and also difficult. I miss being on campus and in that atmosphere,” says Nichols. “It’s difficult from a learning aspect but also it’s difficult not seeing my classmates and professors. Overall, I am enjoying the challenge of doing school online and interacting via Zoom, but it has definitely been a transition.”

The hustle and bustle of campus life has been replaced mostly with silence.



OU Athletics

Senior wrestler Christian Moody (125), claimed third place at the Big 12 Championship in March. Moody also qualified for his fourth NCAA Championship, which was canceled for the 2020 season.

And nowhere is it more evident than inside the various athletic venues, like the Gaylord Family-Oklahoma Memorial Stadium, Marita Hynes Field, the Lloyd Noble Center, and the Sam Viersen Gymnastics Center, where Nichols and her teammates tirelessly honed their skills.

It is a somber reminder of the existing reality.

Hopefully, that will change in the not-too-distant future. But trying to pinpoint an exact date is next to impossible while COVID-19 remains a threat.

“We really can’t talk about any seasons until we start talking about when we’ll be able to welcome student-athletes back on campus for any kind of preparation,” says Castiglione.

For now, the chimes that ring out from the Oklahoma Memorial Student Union carillon and echo across the OU campus serve as a reminder that the Sooner spirit is still strong and will remain so in anticipation of a speedy return of students and glorious seasons to come.

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