

Sooner Nation

Caleb Kelly: The former Sooner linebacker is teaching others how to become a S.O.U.L. Man

BY TAMI ALTHOFF

It's no surprise that Caleb Kelly emerged as a leader during his time at the University of Oklahoma.

From the moment the five-star linebacker arrived in Norman from Fresno, Calif., in 2016, his eagerness to lead by example has earned the respect of coaches, teammates and fans. In addition to his former role in the locker room, he speaks regularly at churches, youth groups and community events.

Now he has been tapped by new head football coach Brent Venables to join his S.O.U.L. (Serving Our Uncommon Legacy) Mission, an in-house program that hires former football players to mentor current players in their lives outside athletics by focusing on life skills, professional and career development, and community engagement.

Kelly will lead the professional and career development side of the mission, a role for which he is well-suited. While helping the Sooners win five Big 12 Championships and three straight College Football Playoffs, Kelly was also busy in the classroom. He has earned three OU degrees: a 2019 bachelor's in communications from the Dodge Family College of Arts and Sciences; a 2020 master's in administrative leadership (now organizational leadership) from the College of Professional and Continuing Studies; and a 2021 MBA from Price College of Business.

"If you accomplish becoming a S.O.U.L. man, or an uncommon man, then you are great in every aspect of life," Kelly says. "It's basically developing the man, not the football player. If you handle your business in every aspect of life, whether it's on the field, off the field, in the classroom, in relationships and just life in general interacting with other people, then obviously the football portion will come on its own."

Kelly says he had no expectations of a future with OU

when his football career ended. He missed the majority of the 2019 season and the entire 2020 season with two separate knee injuries. He says it is an absolute pleasure to work for his alma mater.

"I find it a complete honor because I've been recognized as somebody who influences people in a positive way, and now my job description says that I'm supposed to do that, as well," he says. "It really aligns with my personal goals and beliefs, and I get to instill those goals and beliefs in the younger players to come."

Also joining the S.O.U.L. Mission team are former OU linebacker Curtis Lofton, former tight end Josh Norman, and Ryan Young, former Dallas Cowboy and character coach with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

"Our number one goal is to graduate our players," says Venables. "We're going to give them every resource possible to support that journey. We want to equip our players with the life skills they will need, from their NFL dreams to their CEO goals."

Kelly is a great example for Venables' S.O.U.L. mission. With the realization that football wouldn't last forever, he chose tracks in leadership and business when it came time to pick a graduate program.

"I always wanted to be the boss," he says. "I wanted to make sure that I could be the head of a company or a team."

"The online program in leadership really helped because I could plan ahead. It gives you flexibility. Because I was hurt, I also interned [with Sooner Sports] while I was taking my classes in this degree since it allowed so much time."

Kelly, who's wanted to be a professional football player since the age of 7, says he expected to be at OU for three years before heading to the NFL. Due to football-related injuries—Kelly endured five surgeries in four years—and the COVID-19 pandemic, Kelly's three-year plan turned into six.



TV Russell / OU Athletics

Caleb Kelly has led by example since arriving on the OU campus in 2016. In addition to his football career, the five-star linebacker has earned three OU degrees—a bachelor's and two masters.



Former OU five-star linebacker Caleb Kelly has been tapped by head football coach Brent Venables to join his S.O.U.L. Mission, an in-house program that hires former football players to mentor current players in their lives outside of athletics.

Along with his work ethic and strong faith, working toward his degrees kept Kelly mentally healthy when injuries forced him off the field and he began to realize that his NFL dreams were no longer realistic.

“Every time injuries put a massive change in my life, I had to go through physical, emotional and mental struggles as I went through the healing process,” he says. “I overcame them with my faith first. My beliefs and religion have given me peace through all my injuries and struggles. I always made sure to stay busy and keep my mind occupied with tasks to get done instead of just sulk in my sadness or pain.”

Kelly believes his experiences will help him relate to current student-athletes and show them there is life after football.

“A lot of players don’t even finish their degree. But having three degrees, it’s like, ‘Wow, this guy did this. Every time he

got hurt, he picked something up.’ ”

As Kelly prepares for his new role with OU football, he says he’s grateful for everything the university has given him and looks forward to giving back as a mentor.

“Our goal is to create the uncommon man by ensuring we keep ‘the main thing the main thing,’” says Kelly, who explained “the main thing” is prioritizing education and integrity above athletics.

“Spreading love and positivity to others and actually impacting them is the best thing I think I can do.”

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To learn more about the College of Professional and Continuing Studies and its online degree programs, visit pacs.ou.edu/degrees.