

Home Again



BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

Brent Venables' mission as the Sooners' head coach goes far beyond the scoreboard.

If history promises University of Oklahoma faithful anything about the hiring of Brent Venables as the Sooners' 23rd head football coach, it's this: Since WWII, the powers that be have been both fortunate and prophetic when it comes to replacing coaches who voluntarily departed for other head coaching jobs.

Venables returned to OU one week after Lincoln Riley stunned the college football world with the announcement he was resigning to take over at the University of Southern California.

Riley's decision temporarily sent a disbelieving Sooner Nation into various states of panic, anger, shock, anxiety and dismay—all brushed away on Dec. 5, 2021, when OU Athletics Director Joe Castiglione broke the news that Venables was returning to the place where he cut his coaching teeth for 13 seasons as an assistant on Bob Stoops' staff.

That night, several thousand wildly enthusiastic fans braved chilly, gusty conditions to line the fences and tarmac at Max Westheimer Airport to welcome Venables and his family back home to Norman.

It looked like a scene out of a Hollywood movie, but in reality, it was simply an outpouring of excitement and genuine relief directed at the man many fans believed was the only choice as OU's new head coach.

Castiglione believed it, too, and his faith is unwavering despite a somewhat rocky start to the 2022 season.

"Coach Venables was the first call I made. We knew he was someone we were very interested in from the start," Castiglione reflects on the immediate aftermath of Riley's surprise decision. "But there is a process involved in that situation, and we didn't leave any stone unturned. It was a deep dive into anything and everything we felt was pertinent to the building of a superb culture and championship mindset—from Brent's vision for running a program to his recruiting and scheduling philosophy, ideas for balancing athletics and

academics, to his view on the SEC transition.

"In the end, Brent checked every box."

Venables and his new staff have worked tirelessly to create what he describes as a people- and relationship-driven culture focused on the overall success of every single student-athlete in his program, never losing focus of the ultimate goal—building a championship-caliber team.

"We'll strive to be progressive and forward-thinking in everything we do. And everything we do, every decision we make, is about what's best for the players. Serve the heart, not the talent," Venables said at the time of his hiring.

"There is a level of excellence here within this program, instilled by Coach [Bud] Wilkinson, Coach [Barry] Switzer and Coach Stoops, three Hall of Fame coaches who are the example of what the standard looks like. It is my responsibility to relentlessly defend that standard and build upon that standard as we go through our journey here."

A HISTORY LESSON

Venables' connection to Stoops is obvious. In 1999 at age 29, he came to OU as part of Stoops' original coaching staff, eventually serving as co-defensive coordinator, defensive coordinator and associate head coach during a stint that saw the Sooners capture a national championship and seven Big 12 Conference titles while winning more games than any other program in college football.

Other than the fact they each coached at OU, Venables' connection to Wilkinson and Switzer is not so obvious. But it might be even more intriguing.

The modern era of collegiate football began in the immediate aftermath of World War II, and with it came a new beginning for OU's football program under the direction of Jim Tatum.

During the war, Tatum served legendary University of

Missouri coach Don Faurot, assisting with the U.S. Navy's highly successful Iowa Pre-Flight Seahawks football squads against staunch inter-service competition. Notoriety gained from coaching alongside Faurot helped Tatum build a reputation that led OU to hire him as head coach in 1946.

Tatum recruited dozens of military veterans, some of whom had been college football standouts prior to serving in the war, to fill his OU roster. He also hired Wilkinson, another Faurot WWII protégé, as his top assistant.

In his initial season, Tatum led the Sooners to an 8-3 overall record that included a 4-1 Big Six Conference mark, good enough for a share of the league title. OU finished off the year by earning the program's first-ever bowl victory over North Carolina State in the Gator Bowl.

Despite that success, Tatum resigned his OU position just days after the bowl win to take the head coaching position at the University of Maryland. It was discovered that he'd overextended the athletic department's budget by thousands of dollars, leaving the Sooners in the red and looking for answers.

"Jim Tatum turned out to be an unfortunate mistake," longtime OU wrestling coach and athletics administrator Port Robertson said in a 2003 interview. "His questionable ethics and his frivolous spending ended up costing [athletics director Lawrence] Haskell his job. It was a raw deal [for Haskell] but it turned out good for Oklahoma football in the long run."

Wilkinson turned out to be the "good" part of that equation when the 31-year-old Minnesota native became the program's 13th head football coach in 1947.

Under Wilkinson's direction, OU football became a monster success story on the national stage, winning 14 conference titles and three national championships over the next 17 seasons. The Sooners won an NCAA-record 47 straight games, a mark that still stands today.

"Bud's teams created the monster, and it was my job to feed it," says Switzer, OU's coach from 1973 to 1988. "And after me, it was Bob's [Stoops] job to do the same, and now Coach Venables has taken on that role. And I expect he'll be successful doing it, too."

Switzer's success came on the heels of another unexpected



Several thousand Sooner faithful greet newly named head football coach Brent Venables as he arrives at the Max Westheimer Airport in December 2021.



Brent Venables addresses the media and fans during an introductory press conference after being named the Sooners' 23rd head football coach.

“We have an opportunity for **generational change** by equipping these young people and pouring life into them.”

coaching departure after the Sooners had gone 11-1 and captured the Big Eight crown during the 1972 season. The '73 squad was loaded with returning talent and expected to contend for a national title. But Coach Chuck Fairbanks opted to become head of the NFL's New England Patriots.

“I think everyone was surprised when Chuck decided to leave, mainly because we felt we were on the verge of doing some really big things,” says Switzer, who was promoted from his offensive coordinator position to head coach. “I knew with the kind of talent we had coming back—the Selmon brothers, Joe Washington, Rod Shoate and several others—that we had a chance to be really good. And we were.”

The 1973 OU team went 10-1 and won the Big Eight title. Over the next two seasons, the Sooners went a combined 22-1, highlighted by a pair of national championships in 1974 and '75.

In all, Switzer's teams won three national titles and a total of 157 games in 16 seasons, breaking Wilkinson's program record of 145 victories. Both are members of the College Football Hall of Fame.

Stoops, who was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2021, eventually passed both legendary coaches in the win column, posting 190 during his time at the OU helm from 1999 to 2016.

Prior to the 2017 season, Stoops handed the reins to offensive coordinator Riley, whose adept play calling helped

the Sooners earn four consecutive Big 12 titles and make three appearances in the College Football Playoffs.

BACK TO THE PRESENT

After serving as Clemson's defensive coordinator for the past 10 seasons—a position he took upon leaving OU in 2011—Venables' return to Oklahoma has been seen as a major positive for any number of reasons, not the least of which is his leadership.

Known for passion and energy both on and off the field, the 51-year-old Kansas native has been lauded by past and present players for his ability to encourage and inspire, and for his overall stewardship of the OU program.

“Coach Venables is passionately convicted to what he believes. A big part of that is his love for people and unwavering stand on doing what's right for every student-athlete under his watch,” says former OU player Josh Norman, who joined Venables' staff as part of its S.O.U.L. Mission team. “He loves the University of Oklahoma and this football program. He is the real deal. The players here see it every day, his compassion and his conviction both to this program and to them as individuals.”

“I've been around some great leaders over the years, but no one who has had the positive impact Coach Venables brings to work with him every single day.”

The S.O.U.L. Mission, or “Serving Our Uncommon Legacy,” is a four-man team made up of former players Norman, Curtis Lofton, Caleb Kelly and Ryan Young, each charged with assisting in the overall development of current players, including how they deal with daily challenges in the classroom and life.

“It's a leadership initiative program. It's all-encompassing—their manhood, mentorship, there's a spiritual aspect. The staff is at every practice and meeting. They're very intertwined in our players' lives,” says Venables.

“We have an opportunity for generational change by equipping these young people and pouring life into them. Making sure we're not just asking the right questions but putting the right resources and people where they need to be.”

Of course, Venables is just as



Ty Russell/OU Athletics

Coach Brent Venables locks arms with players as they walk onto the field in Lincoln, Neb., on Sept. 17. The Sooners routed the Cornhuskers 49-14.



Josh Gateley/OU Athletics

Brent Venables is a passionate coach from the sidelines, as seen during OU's September game against Kansas State.

passionate about the actual football side of things, and it shows in high-energy practices focusing on precision execution, maximum effort and overall physicality.

"Coach Venables' energy is amazing. He's always on. That energy is contagious, and we feed off it every day," says starting running back Eric Gray. "What Coach V is doing with this program is unlike anything I've ever been a part of. The care, the family atmosphere—and especially the way you are treated as a student, as a person and not just as a football player.

"The culture he and his staff are creating here is special."

Venables spent the first 28 years of his coaching career as an assistant with a variety of job titles, always listening, watching, learning and teaching. In 2016, he earned the Frank Broyles Award, given to the nation's top assistant coach. And in 2021, he became the highest-paid assistant in the country as Clemson University's defensive coordinator and assistant head coach under Dabo Swinney.

Venables had no idea his first head coaching job would land him and his family back in Oklahoma, or that he would be embraced so enthusiastically by the Sooner Nation.

"This is a special place and an amazing opportunity," says Venables, whose wife, Julie, and daughters, Laney and Addie, have settled back into Norman life. The couple's sons, Jake and Tyler—both of whom played for their dad at Clemson—remained in South Carolina to finish school.

"It's been an exciting time for us. I see my transition back to Oklahoma as a little easier and more comfortable situation


because of my being here for 13 years. I have established, well-rooted relationships and a certain comfort level with the community.

"I'd paid close attention to OU football since I left because of those relationships and the time invested here. The familiarity I have with OU has been a major positive compared to taking a job at another program."

Venables is well aware of lofty expectations and pressures that come with the job, and he's no stranger to challenges that arise at any given moment in today's college football environment. He believes the chemistry and shared vision within his coaching staff are critical to the program's long-term success.

"When you are dealing with relational people and coaches who understand what team and family is all about, you are building something that is sustainable and has the potential for longevity," says Venables. "We were looking for coaches who love the grind and love to compete—guys who value what real transformation is and what this profession is all about, serving the hearts and souls of the players.

"You only get one opportunity to do it the right way the first time."

If history has anything to do with it, now is that time for Brent Venables. 

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