



# IF YOU LIGHT IT, THEY WILL COME

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OU's recreation fields are finally lighted, and students  
are basking in the playful possibilities.

B Y D A N A B R A N H A M

**A** **GLOW AGAINST A** cloudless black sky, the University of Oklahoma's recreation fields buzz with students' cheers and jeers as a half-dozen soccer teams face off on a cool evening.

A year ago, the fields would have been dark and quiet at this hour.

Recent installation of new LED lighting for the recreation fields—thanks to funding from the OU Student Government Association—means students can now play well into the night, creating more opportunities for participation.

Before, games had to be crammed in before sunset, which meant kickoff times often clashed with students' academic schedules or mealtimes.

Joining an intramural team was a natural fit for Morgan Casillas, an OU advertising senior from Tulsa, Okla., who has played intramural soccer for three years and grew up playing the sport. Now, after long days of classes, she and her friends have extra hours to unwind on the field.

"I love it," Casillas says. "It just allows more time for us to be out here, and it's more flexible with our schedules."



Fit and Rec Director Amy Davenport and Dean of Students David Surratt at the inaugural night game.

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Intramural sports also help students build community, she says. Through sports, students who might not otherwise cross paths come together.



Flag football under the lights.

ERIKAH BROWN

Students and staff celebrated the first action under the lights with 8-on-8 soccer matches on Feb. 6.

“It’s been fun—a three-letter word to sum it up, it’s been fun. It’s been absolutely amazing,” says Amy Davenport, the director of OU Fitness and Recreation.

“The night the lights were turned on, one of our student employees grabbed a football, looked at another employee and said, ‘We have to throw the ball under the lights!’” Davenport recalls. “It was really neat to watch their excitement.”

Lighted fields had long been on OU Fitness and Recreation’s wish list.

“OU was one of the only schools in the Big 12 and the SEC without lighted recreation fields for students,” Davenport says.

Research backed up the demand for lights and the additional extracurricular opportunities they would create: At 4 p.m. Monday through Thursday, more than 10,000 OU students were still in their academic classes during the fall 2021 semester. Days become shorter throughout the semester as natural light wanes.

Students overwhelmingly wanted the opportunity to be outdoors and play sports after the

A player heads the ball during intramural soccer. Lighting means that OU students can enjoy intramural sports throughout the year.



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sun went down, they responded in an OU survey.

Fitness and Recreation took the data to the Student Government Association, or SGA, which ultimately decided to fund the project.

Their support provides not only more opportunities for students to play, but also more opportunities for student employees to officiate, Davenport says.

Plus, more playing hours means popular sports like flag football, a fall semester favorite, can now be offered during the spring, too. Soccer, which normally starts in March, was able to get underway about a month earlier this year.

“SGA made a huge impact on student lives by funding this project,” Davenport says. “It’s so much more than play—it’s health. It’s wellness. It’s teamwork. It’s communication.”

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When Jerry Bruns arrived on OU’s Norman campus from New York in 1990, he didn’t know a single person in the state, he says. Playing intramural sports—just about every one that was offered—was how he made friends and found his community.

“Intramurals were probably the best part of college for me,” he says. “I loved it.”

Bruns, who now owns a Play It Again Sports franchise selling new and used sports equipment in Norman, was happy to hear about the new lighting system and what it means for future generations of OU students.

Since games won’t have to start so early, “it takes away a lot of that burden of finding people to play a sport with you,” he says. “I think it’s a definite positive.”

Brian Limekiller, a political science senior from Tulsa, has played intramural sports for most of his time at OU, including soccer, softball and basketball. It was tough to find times when a group of students could all meet for early games.

“Being able to play later—7:30, 8, 9—I think it’s a great improvement,” he says, walking away at the end of a soccer game on the newly lighted fields. “Intramurals cover a lot of different groups of people. I think the installation of lights will make it accessible to many more people.”

Even students who haven’t played intramural sports before are making use of the new opportunities. Jack McGowan, an OU nursing senior from Fort Worth, Texas, joined one of his first games after a friend asked him to fill a spot on their soccer team.

McGowan says he got to help a friend, and he benefited, too: The fresh air and exercise was a perfect stress-reliever, especially since he had a capstone project presentation the next morning.

“That’s why I’m out here,” he says. “Just having a good time.” 📍

*Dana Branham is a former reporter for The Oklahoman and a freelance writer who lives in The Village, Okla.*