

SETTING *the* BAR

Under the direction of veteran coach Ryan Hybl, OU has become a standard-bearer for men's collegiate golf.

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH
Photos - OU Athletics

September weekends are typically reserved for college football on the University of Oklahoma's Norman campus, with sold-out home games attracting more than 80,000 fans on any given Saturday.

When the Sooners go to work on Owen Field, history and tradition take center stage. For this university and its faithful, football is and always will be king.

But that's certainly not to say it's the only game in town—in fact, nothing could be further from the truth. For instance, two-time defending national champion OU softball showcased its booming popularity this fall, playing to standing-room-only crowds at exhibition and intra-squad games.

And in late September, the OU men's golf team drew a record number of participants, including dozens of former players, to Norman for the 2022 Sooner Open, an annual fundraiser held at the Jimmie Austin OU Golf Club.

Excitement surrounding coach Ryan Hybl's program is at an all-time high, as the Sooners have become one of collegiate golf's biggest and most consistent success stories over the past dozen years.

The pinnacle of that story came in 2017 when Hybl's squad brought home the program's second national team championship.

As the 2023 spring season gets underway this month, OU will be working on healthy post-season streaks, including 11 consecutive NCAA Championship berths and six straight NCAA match play appearances, tops in Division-I golf.

"Coach Hybl has created the model collegiate men's golf program here," says OU Director of Athletics Joe Castiglione. "And he's done it the right way, always putting his players in the best position for success, on the golf course and in life."

The Sooners are coming off a record-setting season in 2021-22 when they tied a school mark with seven team victories, including the program's 18th conference championship. OU finished



the regular season ranked the consensus No. 1 team in the nation, and senior Chris Gotterup earned the Fred Haskins Award for the top NCAA Division-I player.

Since taking over, Hybl has guided OU to a total of 35 team titles and produced 14 All-Americans, eight of whom earned the honor multiple times.

For his efforts last spring, the 41-year-old Georgia native was recognized by the Golf Coaches Association of America as a recipient of the 2022 Dave Williams National Coach of the Year Award.

Through it all, Hybl has remained grounded, always focused on improving the blueprint that has proven so effective during his time at the helm.

“It’s an honor anytime you receive an award,” Hybl says. “But what makes something like that special is the attention it brings to the program, and how OU golf is being recognized as one of the best in the country.”

That was not the case when Castiglione tapped Hybl to be OU’s new head coach prior to the 2009-10 season after spending five seasons as assistant coach at his alma mater, the University of Georgia. In fact, the Sooners had not qualified for the NCAA Championships four seasons prior to his arrival.

“When we first got here, the program wasn’t in great shape—but I have to say there were some great pieces of the puzzle already in place, starting with the overall tradition of OU men’s golf,” says Hybl. “There’s a lot of wonderful history here, especially when you look at the achievements some of those teams had in the 1980s. That was a decade’s worth of outstanding teams and some excellent players. Looking back over time, there were a lot of memorable moments and stories that came out of this program.”

Walter Emery penned the first of those when, as an OU sophomore, he won the 1933 National Intercollegiate Golf Tournament, precursor to the NCAA Championships. Ardmore, Okla., native Charlie Coe won a pair of individual conference titles for the Sooners in the late 1940s, and Jimmy Vickers earned medalist honors at the 1952 NCAA Championships.

Fast forward to the decade of the ’80s, which opened with players like Andrew Magee and Jim Begwin earning All-America honors that helped breathe life back into a program that hadn’t qualified for the NCAA Championships in several seasons. A wave of wins followed, aided by more key performances from Grant Waite, Todd Hamilton, Greg Turner, Craig Perks and Glen Day. This culminated in 1989 when the Sooners—led by first team All-Americans Rick Bell and Tripp Davis—earned the program’s first national team title.

“We looked at the success those teams and players had previously experienced and felt they had set a standard of ex-

cellence we believed OU golf could achieve again,” Hybl says of his first season. “We knew we had to change the culture and make the most of our existing assets.”

Those assets included a championship-caliber golf course and quality practice and teaching facilities in the Charlie Coe Golf Learning Center. But Hybl realized OU was still lagging behind other high-profile programs, so he went to Castiglione seeking help.

“I believed we needed to level the playing field between us and some of the top programs in the country, and Joe agreed. That’s where the genesis for the Ransom Short Course came from,” says Hybl, referring to a \$2.75 million donation from 1966 OU graduate Jerry Ransom that provided the OU men’s and women’s golf teams with expanded, elite-level training facilities. A recent \$5 million gift from Ransom will update the Coe center and create a new indoor golf performance center.

“Joe Castiglione has always been behind us 100%. Plus, we’re fortunate to have the support of a lot of people who care about this golf program and its players.”

Such support, combined with Hybl’s tireless efforts to improve every facet of the program, began paying dividends in his second season when the Sooners earned a trip to the NCAA Championships. According to OU’s head coach, that achievement can be traced directly to the arrival of Abraham Ancer.

“To be able to bring in a player like Abe was pivotal to what we were trying to do, because even though we had some good pieces around him, he helped carry us during his time here [2011-13],” Hybl says.

Ancer’s impact on the program helped put OU golf back on the national map, which, in turn, helped attract a growing line of talented players that included Will Kropp, Grant Hirschman, Michael Gellerman and Max McGreevy.

Around that same time, Hybl received a commitment from a young phenom named Brad Dalke, who was not slated to arrive at OU until the 2015-16 season.

Meanwhile, the Sooners qualified for the NCAA Championships in 2012 and again in 2013. They’d climbed back into the national top 25 by Hybl’s third season and won





2019 graduate Brad Dalke was recruited to play for the Sooners as a 12-year-old. “We felt Brad was an important piece of the future that we could look forward to building around,” Hybl says.

three team titles in the spring of 2014, including the San Diego Regional by 20 strokes.

But it wasn't until the 2015 season when the Sooners finally broke through to qualify for the match play portion of the NCAA Championships. Dalke, a freshman, played a key role that season, as well as for the three that followed.

“A lot of people thought I was crazy at the time for recruiting a 12-year-old, but we felt Brad was an important piece of the future that we could look forward to building around,” Hybl says.

Dalke arrived in the same recruiting class as Blaine Hale and Quade Cummins, both of whom would prove instrumental in helping pen more chapters in the program's ongoing story—none bigger than the 2017 national title campaign.

“Obviously, winning an NCAA title was a huge moment for this program. That season was an amazing journey, and to be able to hoist that trophy at the end of it said a lot about the players who helped make it happen,” says Hybl, pointing to a lineup that included Dalke, Cummins, Hale, McGreevy,

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Hirschman and Rylee Reinertson.

“I’ve been lucky enough to play in the Masters and the U.S. Open, but I’d have to say my favorite golf moment was winning that national championship in 2017,” Dalke says. “That was a magical week when everything came together for us. To experience that with my teammates and coach Hybl is something I’ll always cherish.”

OU golf continues to flourish, evidenced by the team's current streak of six NCAA match play appearances. The Sooners narrowly missed winning another title in 2021, finishing runner-up to Pepperdine.

“Our team and our program have continually evolved and developed over the past decade, and our facilities keep getting better and better,” Hybl says. “We’ve had a lot of gritty, tough players come through here—so many guys who know what it means to fight for every single shot and who deserve a lot of the credit for this program's overall success.”

While Hybl is too busy working to keep OU on top to soak up any of the spotlight, his impact isn't lost on anyone who follows college golf, especially insiders.

“Because of Coach Hybl, I am more involved in the OU golf program than I have ever been,” says Magee, who graduated in 1984 and went on to enjoy a 20-year career on the PGA Tour. “Not only has he done a great job of recruiting players and building the program into something really special again, but he's also taken the time to build relationships with a lot of former OU players and maintain close ties to all of the guys he has coached. It feels like one big fraternity.

“That was obvious with all of those folks who showed up at the Sooner Open event in September. Young players see that camaraderie and want to be a part of it, which you have to believe is great for the future of OU golf.”

Jay C. Upchurch is editor in chief of Sooner Spectator and lives in Norman, Okla.