



OU's SEC Chapter Begins

**LAUNCHING A POWERFUL
ALLIANCE THAT GOES FAR
BEYOND ATHLETICS**

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH AND ANNE BARAJAS HARP



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ON

July 1, 2024, the University of Oklahoma went big.

OU entered the Southeastern Conference with nearly 24 hours of non-stop events, from 1,500 runners sprinting across campus streets at midnight, to “Wake up in the SEC” breakfasts in Tulsa and Oklahoma City, on-campus broadcasts of the SEC Network, to a “Party in the Palace” attended by tens of thousands that closed with a drone show in the skies above the Gaylord Family-Oklahoma Memorial Stadium.

But that was just day one. After a 30-year run in the Big 12, OU’s historic move to the SEC is projected to influence every aspect of campus life.

The impact on athletics alone will be transformative.

“The benefits of our membership in the SEC are innumerable,” says OU Director of Athletics Joe Castiglione. “We are now part of one of the most competitive and elite conferences in the country, full of opportunity for our student-athletes and coaches to represent Oklahoma and all we have to offer. We’re now afforded the chance to tell the Oklahoma story on one of the largest stages in all of college athletics.

“Moreover, our student-athletes and fans are experiencing a competitive landscape like none we’ve ever seen, and it’s driving us to pursue excellence even more.”

“Competing in such a prestigious conference means we will be facing some of the best talent in the country each week,” says OU softball sophomore Ella Parker, who will join her teammates for their first season at OU’s new Love’s Field. The 4,200-seat softball facility—the nation’s largest—was made possible through a \$12 million gift from Love’s Travel Stops and features a 10,669-square-foot indoor training facility and team spaces.

“Athletics impacts the very essence of who we are as a university,” OU President Joseph Harroz, Jr., told an enthusiastic crowd at the celebration commemorating OU’s official entry into the SEC.

“They say the Southeastern Conference ‘just means more,’ and it means more not just athletically, it means more opportunity for our students—for the excitement that comes with economic growth; more opportunity to showcase who we are as a university, who we are as a state and what our values are. This move is good for Oklahoma.”

The SEC move has been hotly anticipated since its 2021 announcement, which triggered a major surge in fundraising. The OU Athletics Department set a record by bringing in \$109 million in FY22, only to break it in FY24, when OU Athletics eclipsed the \$110 million mark in private giving.

“As great as that achievement is, so too is the need for continued investment,” says Castiglione. “The SEC’s breadth, tradition and overall demand for competitive excellence further amplifies the need for support from those who believe in what we’re trying to achieve.”

During the last fiscal year, more than 17,000 Sooner Club donors invested in OU Athletics initiatives. The department also benefitted from a record-setting 17 commitments of at least \$1 million.

Topping that list are Bartlesville, Okla., residents Brian and Kim Kimrey, who pledged \$20 million to the baseball and football programs—the largest single commitment in OU Athletics’ history.

While the move to the SEC is a boon for athletics, the potential impact on OU academics could be just as profound, Harroz says.

“We’ve had record enrollments in our freshman class the last four years. By going to the SEC, that trend will continue.”

“I know most people think of the SEC move as being all about athletics,” says André-Denis Wright, senior vice president and provost of OU’s Norman campus. “But when we say the impact will be felt in every aspect of university life, that means more innovation and opportunities coming to academics and research.

“Joining the SEC will undoubtedly enhance OU’s academic reputation. It will help us attract top-tier faculty and students who are being recruited worldwide,” Wright says. “Being a member of the SEC translates to accessing research consortiums and more education-abroad programs. And our faculty can participate in special SEC programs, such as leadership development.”

Over the past year, OU ranked among the nation’s top four universities in research growth, earning \$386 million in research

Brooks Street bustles with pre-game fan energy.



ERIKAH BROWN

OU soccer meets new SEC competitor the University of Kentucky.





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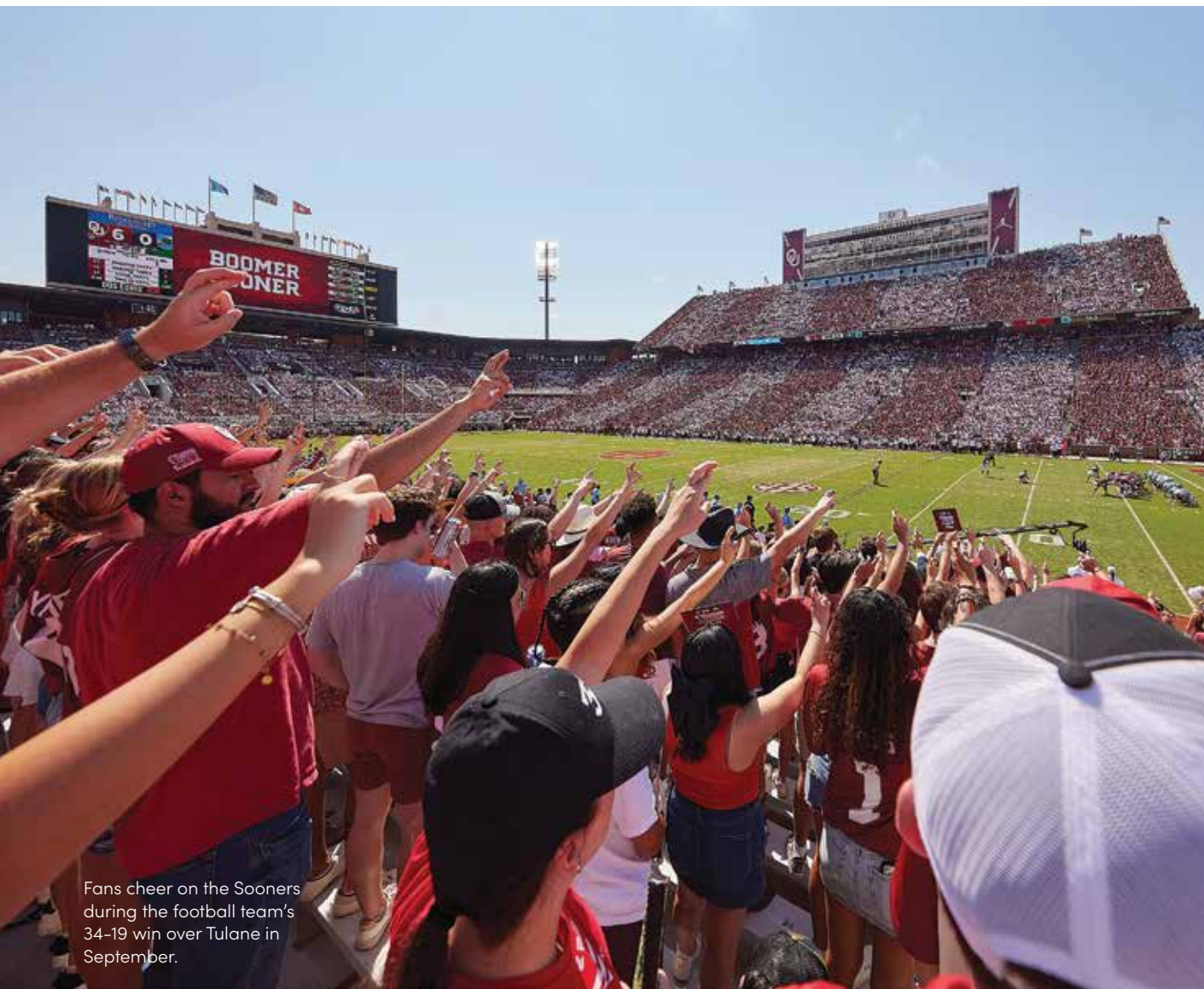
OU President Joseph Harroz, Jr., addresses audience members at the July 1 SEC Gala.



REGHAN KYLE/OU ATHLETICS

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—André-Denis Wright



Fans cheer on the Sooners during the football team's 34-19 win over Tulane in September.

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awards that Wright says will positively impact people's lives through scientific discoveries and economic development. With SEC institutions having invested more than \$8 billion into research and development, access to increased funding and collaboration will help OU generate even more research awards.

During the July 1 gala, SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey shared with the audience that the slogan, 'It just means more,' was never meant to be solely about sports.

"'It just means more' includes the educational, cultural and economic impact of our universities upon our states," he said.

For the 2024-25 academic year, SEC institutions are projected to collectively drive more than \$104 billion into the economies of their respective host communities and states.

In Oklahoma, OU's membership in the SEC is already providing a boost to local and state economies.

“OU’s special history and traditions immediately make for great storytelling moments in the SEC. We have amazing fans and more than a century of great competition to celebrate.”

—Joe Castiglione



OU ushers in a new era with an impressive drone show during the July 1 SEC "Party in the Palace."

SOPHIA ARMOURDIAN



OU sophomore Ryder Cowan competes at the Ben Hogan Collegiate.

MICHAEL MEEK/OU ATHLETICS



College GameDay hosts Pat McAfee, left, and Lee Corso, right, banter with special guest Blake Shelton.

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The first official signs came in September, when the Sooners hosted the University of Tennessee in their inaugural SEC football game. An estimated 8,500 Tennessee fans made the trip to Norman to watch the sixth-ranked Volunteers do battle with No. 16 Oklahoma.

"It was a great weekend to celebrate OU football and its newly minted spot in the SEC," says Norman Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Scott Martin. "One of the things we know about SEC schools—their fans travel well. We were all kind of waiting to see if it would happen as we were told, and sure enough, the people came. Just the magnitude of the Tennessee fanbase was amazing."

OU's Max Westheimer Airport, which is scheduled to undergo a major renovation in 2025 thanks to a \$36.5 million federal appropriation and a private gift from the Pigman Family Charitable Fund, more than tripled its average number of scheduled arrivals and

departures during the OU/Tennessee week.

While the full financial picture won't develop until after football season concludes, Martin believes that Norman's economic impact—which averaged about \$11 million per home game in 2023—could easily double this fall.

"Historically, the economic impact for a home football game in Tuscaloosa, Ala., is over \$30 million, and in Knoxville, Tenn, it's over \$40 million. Based on those numbers, we know that the raw economic impact will be significantly more for our community," Martin says.

Also booming is the OU gameday fan experience, with tailgating locations expanding across campus to include Boyd Lawn, areas along Asp Avenue and near Oklahoma Memorial Union. RV locations at the Duck Pond and the Lloyd Noble Center's long-held SoonerRVillage were in overflow mode during some early season games.

The campus mood was amplified by the appearance of ESPN College Gameday, where thousands gathered on the south oval—some camping overnight for a front-row view of country music artist and native Oklahoman Blake Shelton, legendary sports broadcaster Lee Corso and seven-time national championship coach Nick Saban.

"OU's special history and traditions immediately make for great storytelling moments in the SEC," says Castiglione. "We have amazing fans and more than a century of great competition to celebrate.

"We believe OU is exactly the right fit for the SEC, with its grand, oversized traditions," he says. "We're looking to show off OU and Norman to SEC fans all over the country, and this is just the start." **S**

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