

BANK OF OKLAHOMA

SOONER FOOTBALL — "A TRADITION OF EXCELLENCE"



The Oklahoman of the Year:

*The University of Oklahoma Sooner Football Team*

## BACK ON TOP

**EARLY DECEMBER 1998. BOB STOOPS IS IN HIS RENTAL CAR, DIRECTIONS NEAR** his lap, a cell phone pressed against his ear. He can talk for only a few minutes because he's on his way to a recruit's house, he's a little lost, it's dark, and the cell is about as clear as two Campbell's soup cans connected with string.

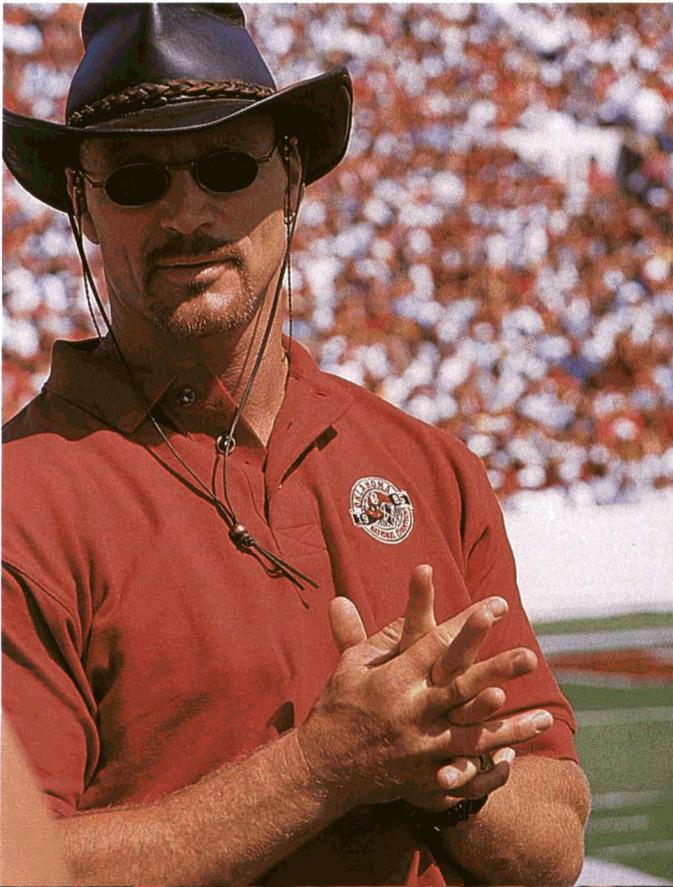
A couple of days earlier, he stood on the steps of Evans Hall, at the center of the University of Oklahoma campus, a sea of Sooner crimson bathing him with applause as he was introduced as OU's twenty-first head football coach. There were, what, a thousand people there that day? It was more pep rally than anything else. They were there to see the latest in a growing conga line of supposed football saviors. This one was thirty-eight, the son of an Ohio high school defensive coordinator. What the hell, he couldn't do any worse than the muddled and confused three-year stay of John Blake (12-22) or the bizarre one-year tenure of Sooner Nation architect Howard Schnellenberger (5-5-1). So they yelled like banshees, not knowing that the OU program was a borderline football Chernobyl. Morale was lower than a Jennifer Lopez neckline. The Sooners hadn't been to a bowl game since 1994, hadn't been ranked since 1995, hadn't challenged for a national championship since 1987.

But they cheered anyway, because they were rid of Blake, and if the new guy bombed, OU could always hire somebody else. Stoops knew how it worked. That's why he was in the rental that December night, trying to salvage what was left of the precious recruiting period. He didn't have a coaching staff yet, and the previous coaches didn't have a single recruit teed up and ready for a home visit. So Stoops arranged a trip and started selling Oklahoma football or, more to the point, selling himself.

"No excuses," is what he said during the interview over the crackle of the cell phone. He said it then; he's said it a thousand times since then. He was rushed, preoccupied, but he was also jacked, assured, as if he just knew this was going to work, that he was going to work. Stoops talked about embracing OU's tradition, about rebuilding its stature. He didn't say anything about five-year timetables or lowered expectations, and he certainly didn't mention the P-word—patience. Oklahoma fans wanted wins, not spreadsheet analyses of the latest Sooners rebuilding plan.

By Gene Wojciechowski

Coach Bob Stoops and his six team captains on December 21, 2000, at the team's last practice in Norman before heading to Miami for the Orange Bowl. From left, Bubba Burcham, offensive lineman, senior; quarterback Josh Heupel, senior, in his practice jersey; Stoops; Chris Hammons, tight end, senior; Seth Littrell, running back, senior; Rocky Calmus, linebacker, junior; Torrance Marshall, linebacker, senior. Photograph by Tom Luker



SHEVAUN WILLIAMS

The more he talked that night on the phone, the more you could see people buying into his pitch. It was no-frills, no-haggle Saturn stuff. Either you believed or you didn't. Stoops had a plan. He was going to win with defense, with special teams, and with a funky spread offense, the likes of which hadn't been seen at OU or the Big 12 Conference for, well, ever. He was going to win with class and with actual athletes who weren't allergic to degrees. You in or out?

That was two years ago. That was before Stoops signed an aw-shucks left-handed junior college quarterback from someplace in Utah, before the Sooners won seven games and made a bowl appearance, before this inexplicably wonderful season of 2000 arrived, full of weekly surprises, oranges splashing to the turf and a place in the national championship game.

All of a sudden, Schnellenberger's reign is an amusing memory and Blake's tenure almost a blessing in disguise. Just think: If either of those two hadn't failed miserably—and OU with them—then Stoops might have a different mailing address than Norman. There never would have been what OU athletic director Joe Castiglione would later call “a magical day” on those steps at Evans Hall. Josh Heupel might be some second-teamer at New Mexico State. And no way do the Sooners beat three ranked teams in a row, climb to number one in the polls, finish 11-0, and then slip past Kansas State, coached by former Stoops boss Bill Snyder, in the Big 12 championship on a frosty night at Kansas City's Arrowhead Stadium.

You should have seen it, and maybe you did. Florida's finest citrus raining from the stands as the scoreboard clock sprinted toward zeros; Castiglione and OU president David Boren, the two guys who hired Stoops, standing on the sidelines as the dream became reality, smiles as wide as the Sooner Schooner; an impromptu team picture; hugs, handshakes, OU players waving their championship T-shirts and caps, backup defensive tackle Jeremy Wilson-Guest aiming his hand-held camcorder at the joyous bedlam. You think there might be a market for his season-long video shots?

And then there was Stoops. Happy, pumped, but composed. Always composed. He eventually made his way into the Okla-

homa locker room, where the two thick metal doors couldn't begin to muffle the team's cheers from inside. About a half-hour later, Stoops boarded the back of a golf cart, Big 12 trophy in hand, and was delivered to the postgame media conference. He didn't need the ride; he could have floated.

#### RON STOOPS SR. TAUGHT HIS SONS THAT TOUGHNESS

and compassion can coexist on a football field, but that toughness, mental and physical, is what separates achievers from players who settle. The Stoops boys were tough as beef jerky, especially Bob. If you saw him play at Cardinal Mooney in Youngstown, Ohio, or at the University of Iowa, you'd remember it. If you were ever hit by him, you'd still feel it. Given the choice between simply tackling a runner or knocking the guy's frontal lobe into another school district, Stoops usually chose the latter.

Same thing happened at Iowa, where he was a four-year starter, a two-time all-Big Ten selection, a star on the 1982 Rose Bowl team, and the Hawkeyes' MVP during his senior season.

The NFL? Didn't happen. Instead, Stoops became a volunteer coach (translation: unpaid gofer) at Iowa in 1983, a graduate assistant until 1987, and an assistant at Kent until Snyder hired him in 1989. That's where he stayed, first as a defensive backs coach and then as defensive coordinator, until Florida's Steve Spurrier called after the 1995 season with one of those offers you can't refuse: coaching autonomy (versus Snyder's successful but stifling micromanaging), world-class athletes, a nice raise, actual sun, the Southeastern Conference, and a living, breath-

ing chance to win a national championship. A no-brainer.

Thanks to Spurrier's state-of-the-art offense, Heisman Trophy winner Danny Wuerffel, and Stoops' opportunistic defense (six touchdowns of its own), the Gators won the 1996 national title. Florida won ten games the following season and another ten after that. Meanwhile, the stink bomb that was Oklahoma football was in full mushroom-cloud splendor.

John Blake, a former OU player and assistant, was a terrific guy, but he never won more than five games in a season, and his Sooner offense seemingly scored fewer points than the Oklahoma soccer team. It was dreadful viewing, which is why Castiglione handed Blake a pink slip, a settlement, and sent him on his way. Castiglione also had a written shortlist of possible replacements, all of them sitting head coaches except one—Stoops.

Castiglione had been quietly following Stoops' career for years. “I just made a mental note,” says Castiglione of Stoops' progress. “I noticed that he constantly received more responsibility than older, more experienced coaches.”

There were two face-to-face meetings and another five or so hours spent talking on the phone. The two men discussed recruiting, scheduling, staffing, character, rebuilding plans, academics. You name it, they talked about it. By the time the November 24,



**Clockwise from top left, Brian Bosworth, an All-American linebacker for OU during the Eighties, plays mentor to linebacker Rocky Calmus, another All-American who this season broke the Boz's school record for tackles for losses; President Boren, along with athletic director Joe Castiglione, brought the Stoops version of Sooner Magic to Norman in 1998. Here, he can't contain his enthusiasm after a big play during the team's regular season; defensive line coach Jackie Shipp, co-defensive coordinator and Bob Stoops' younger brother, Mike Stoops, and Coach Bob Stoops study the action on the field. Above, Mike and Bob Stoops poised midplay at the Orange Bowl.**



SHEVALIN WILLIAMS



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS



SHEVALIN WILLIAMS

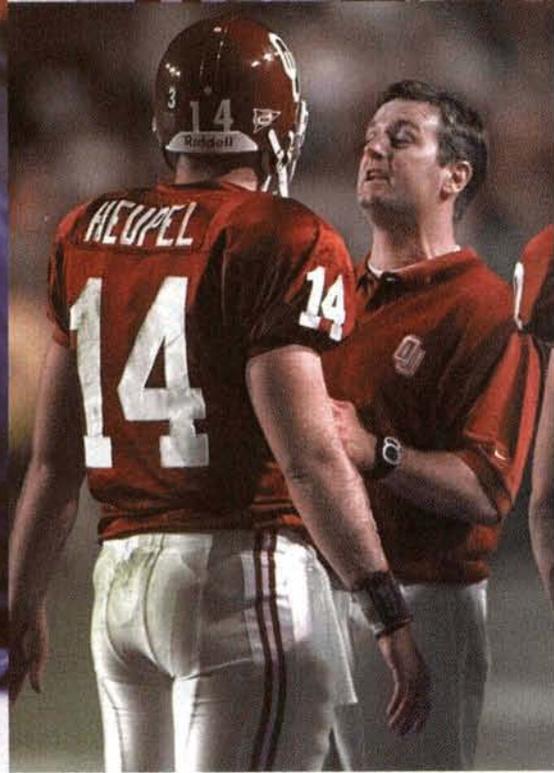
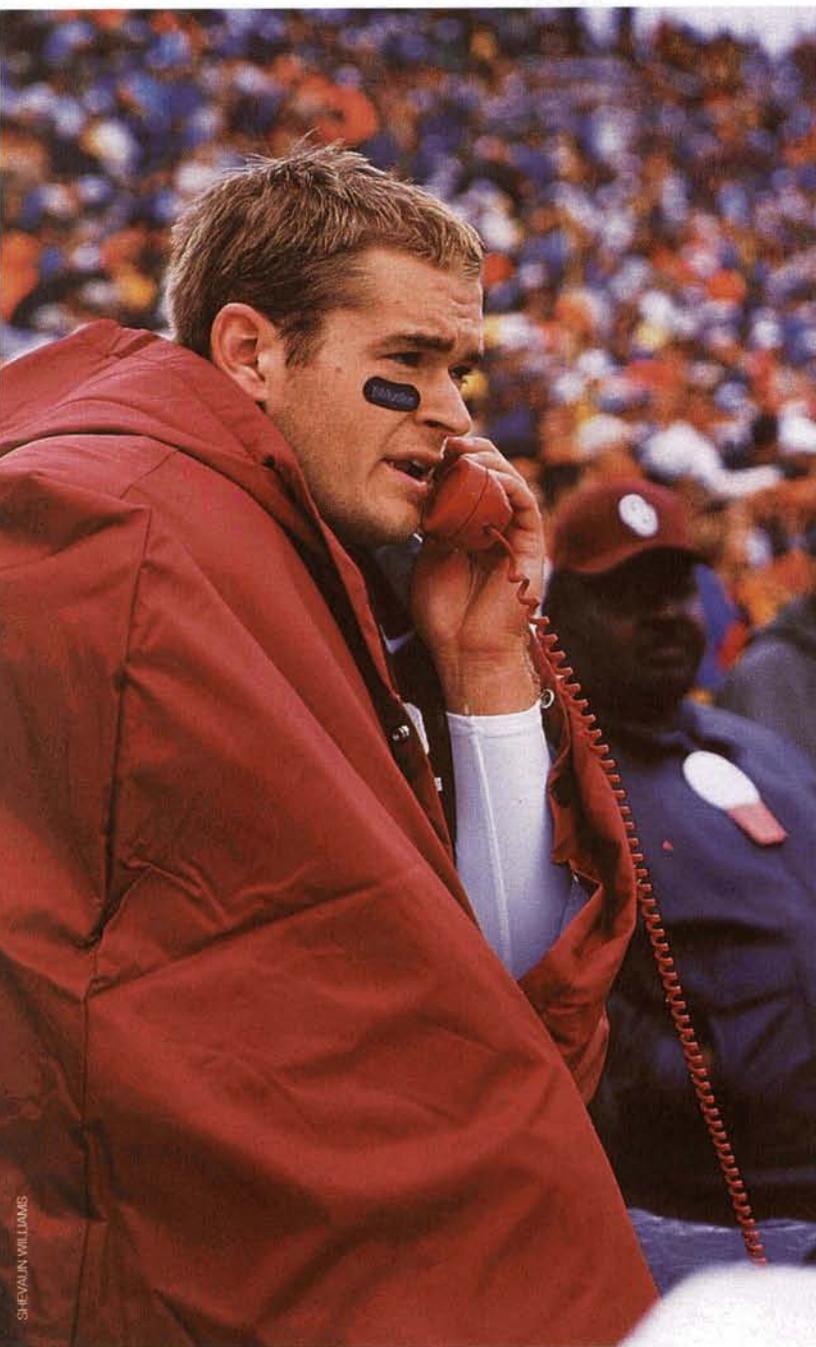
1998, meeting was done, Castiglione knew he had found his man. "It became clear to me that he was truly a special human being," says Castiglione. "It also became very clear to me that while he wasn't a head coach, he acted like one, he carried himself like

**Clockwise from top left, Wide receiver Damian Mackey, from Union City, California, works out with an OU trainer; OU sophomore Cary McCall of Tulsa makes his election feelings clear; Josh Heupel talks to an offensive coach in the press box; co-defensive coordinator Mike Stoops gives defensive back Roy Williams a talking-to; Coach Stoops and Josh Heupel get down to business; during a postgame interview, Heupel personifies grace under pressure within of a throng of reporters and cameras.**

one—and I mean that in a positive way." As the search continued and Castiglione spoke with other candidates, "Bob was head and shoulders above them all."

This would be Castiglione's first marquee hire of his five-month OU career. Screw it up, and the once-proud Sooner football legacy would need a Jaws of Life to escape the bottom half of the conference standings. So Castiglione consulted with other assistant and head coaches in the business, with—gasp!—members of the media, with alums who had a good sense of what fit and what didn't at OU.

Competition emerged. Clemson was looking for a new head coach. So was South Carolina. And so was the school that scared Castiglione the most, Iowa. No dummy, and fearing Iowa was also



SHEVAUN WILLIAMS

AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

wooning the high-profile Stoops, Castiglione made his recommendation to Boren. A November 28 meeting was arranged at the same Admiral's Club room at DFW where Castiglione had first interviewed with the OU president just seven months earlier.

Boren and several members of the Oklahoma board of trustees conducted the interview with Stoops. Castiglione said little and instead studied the reactions of the OU administrators as Stoops answered their questions. He could tell it was going well. Body language was positive. The exchanges were conversational, not adversarial. There were understanding nods and knowing grins. Boren now says he knew ten minutes into the meeting that OU didn't need to interview anyone else.

When they were done, Castiglione escorted Stoops from the

room and asked for a few minutes to meet with Boren and the board members. Castiglione returned to the meeting and was asked, "So, who's going to stay behind and give up his seat on the university plane so we can take Stoops back?"

Stoops was brought back into the room and offered the job. He didn't say yes.

"Bob," said Castiglione, sensing something was wrong, "you're going to be the next great coach at Oklahoma."

Said Stoops: "I told Iowa that I was going to talk to them tomorrow."

Castiglione could feel his stomach do a two-and-a-half somersault with a twist. Iowa. Honest to God, Castiglione thought about stashing Stoops in the nearby Hyatt and keeping him there



until they got his signature. Then it hit him: One of the very things Castiglione most admired about Stoops—his word—was now in full view. Stoops could have ditched Iowa right then and there. Instead, he risked angering OU because he had committed to a meeting with Iowa the next day.

“I don’t want you to meet with those Iowa people, but I understand,” said Castiglione. “All I ask is that you call me as soon as you’re finished with the meeting.”

Castiglione didn’t sleep that Sunday. And when he didn’t hear from Stoops the next morning, he began to consider the worst. Stoops had gone to Atlanta for the meeting, been swept off his feet by talk of reviving his alma mater, been overwhelmed by emotion, and accepted Iowa’s offer. Then the phone rang. It was Stoops.

“I had a visit with the Iowa people,” said Stoops.

Castiglione held his breath. “And?” he said.

“I would just like to ask, when do you want me there?”

“I’ll have a plane sitting in Gainesville at 8 o’clock Wednesday morning.”

Oklahoma had itself a football coach.

The introductory press conference was typical Stoops. He didn’t tell people what they wanted to hear but what they needed to hear. There would be no mention of obstacles or timetables. “He says the right things,” says a proud Spurrier, who monitored the arrival from afar and whose son, Steve Jr., is a member of the OU coaching staff. “That’s why he’s so popular. He said there are no excuses for losing. He’s never talked about it taking three, four years to rebuild.”

Stoops related the same thing to his team. “Everybody in this room has been through a lot,” he said that day. “But before you leave here, I want you to have a great experience.” And then he laid down the law. “This is not a rebuilding year. We are not going to make any excuses.”

Sooners strong safety Roy Williams recalls that first team meeting with a smile. “That’s the thing I remember most about it,” he says. “Him saying it wasn’t a rebuilding year.”

Privately, Stoops knew there was some heavy lifting to do. Recruiting was a mess. Discipline and work ethic was a problem. Attitudes needed a major redo.

“I think our approach with our players from day one was no limitations and no finger-pointing,” Stoops says. “I told them right off the bat they were our players, that we were in this together.”

Along the way, Stoops and his newly hired staff signed the likes of cornerback Derrick Strait, who redshirted in 1999 but blossomed into a potential star this season; wide receiver Antwone Savage, who became the 1999 Big 12 Freshman of the Year; junior college transfer Torrance Marshall, the 1999 Big 12 Defensive

Newcomer of the Year; and Heupel, a recruiting afterthought, really, who was the 1999 Big 12 Offensive Newcomer of the Year and, well, you know how 2000 turned out for him.

“That’s hitting the jackpot,” says Stoops of the haul. “Those recruiting services don’t always know everything.”

#### OU’S BOREN LEANS AGAINST A PLASTIC MINIATURE

goalpost in Suite 230 at Arrowhead Stadium. He wears a dark sport coat, white dress shirt, and a red OU-logo tie. Some sort of fish dish is available in the silver serving pans. Kickoff against K-State is only a few minutes away. It was Boren who first approved Stoops’ original contract and later approved a lucrative extension, offered even before the Sooners finished the regular 2000 season undefeated. “I’m not caught by surprise he would do this,” says Boren. “But I thought we were on a three-year path, on a four-year path. I thought we’d finish 8-3, maybe 9-2. An 11-0 season exceeded the expectations of everybody.”

Boren is sensitive to Oklahoma’s image as a football factory. He has vivid memories of the off-field chaos that highlighted previous OU teams, beginning with semiautomatic gunfire from the windows of Bud Wilkinson Hall. He happily mentions the number of OU National Merit Scholars and the staggering amount of endowment funds in place. He is proud of his university, and right now, he is especially proud of his football coach and this perplexing team. He says he would not trade Stoops for any other coach in America and, by God, you believe him. A politician at heart, Boren can smell phony a mile away. Maybe that’s why he admires Stoops.

“He is a person at peace with himself,” Boren says. “Bob Stoops is what he appears to be. He’s for real.”

About three-and-a-half hours later, after Oklahoma has disposed of the Wildcats, you can find Boren wearing a Big 12 Championship hat and trading high-fives with OU fans as he walks down the stadium tunnel toward the Sooners locker room. Someone offers congratulations. Boren turns to say thank you, and that’s when his misty eyes betray him.

Glance out at the field, and Heupel is busy hugging his father. Blood is caked on Heupel’s right elbow. He is a human grass stain. His best completion of the night comes when he takes an orange and sticks it in his mouth—Orange Bowl, here he comes.

On the other side of the tunnel runway is OU co-defensive coordinator Mike Stoops, Bob’s younger brother, soul mate, and friend. “I don’t know if we’re the most talented team,” he says, stopping every few moments to congratulate players. “It wasn’t easy down the stretch. But Bob’s never changed through it all. It’s like we felt this is our destiny.”

There might be something to that. There were the blowout wins against University of Texas at El Paso, Arkansas State, and Rice, the semi-blowout against Kansas, the can-you-believe-it? 63-14 win against Texas. There was a ten-point victory against K-State and



**Left, Bob Stoops, buoyed by a five-year, \$7 million contract, enters the stadium with his sea of crimson. Above, linebacker Torrance Marshall, a Miami, Florida, native, was named Most Valuable Player of the Orange Bowl; Marshall made a key interception in the first quarter and played on both offensive and defensive teams.**



the decisive wins against Nebraska and pitiful Baylor. There was the squeaker against Texas A&M, the tough win against Texas Tech, the near-disaster against Oklahoma State, and the Big 12 Championship clincher. That's why everybody is popping off about Sooner Magic and former OU terror Brian Bosworth is making the rounds in the locker room, why Oklahoma coaching legend and unofficial good-luck charm Barry Switzer is a frequent visitor. "Bob came into a situation and did all the right things from the beginning," says Switzer. "I observed. I watched the beginning of the transition. I watched the results. He is the catalyst that has brought a new era to Oklahoma football."

**WITH THE EXCEPTION OF SEVERAL OU EQUIPMENT** managers, the Oklahoma locker room at Arrowhead is almost empty. The Sooner players, armed with their postgame meal of Charlie's Chicken in a Styrofoam box, make their way to the team bus. Roy Williams grimaces as he walks. "I'm sore as hell," he says. "My body is hurting."

Carol Stoops crouches against a wall as she waits for her husband to emerge from the coaches' dressing room. She still has those coed looks (Bob and Carol were college sweethearts), and listen to

her long enough, and you'd swear you were talking to Stoops himself. Everything upbeat.

"Bobby and I are both such positive people," she says of the 2000 season. "We'd never say something couldn't be done."

Bob Stoops believed it could be done. So did his team, which had that wonderful mixture of talent, nerve, and shared purpose. And if you want to get positively corny about it, there was a certain bond there that nobody outside the program will fully understand.

Stoops finally emerges from the wet towels and the balled-up athletic tape. He looks like he's ready for a *GQ* photo shoot. Black leather jacket. To-die-for specs. Cool shirt. Slacks. Black leather shoes. Husband and wife walk up the Arrowhead tunnel arm-in-arm. Just before they reach the opening and just moments before the assembled Sooner fans let loose with a cheer to send your eardrums running for cover, Stoops gives Carol a tender hug. Destiny. 

**Oklahoma kicker Tim Duncan made the difference for the Sooners: His two field goals were the first six points on the board at the national championship game. With hanged head, Chris Hope, a free safety for Florida State, suggests the nature of the game—FSU's dashed hopes.**



## THE 2000 NATIONAL CHAMPIONS

Wednesday had turned into Thursday, and still they lingered on the Pro Player Stadium field, their Oklahoma uniforms proudly streaked with grass, dirt, and bloodstains and who knows, maybe a few tears of joy as well. Senior captain Bubba Burcham, who began his OU career five years ago as an afterthought, cupped a palm-corder in callused hand and happily taped away. What a picture: Sooner teammates making a beeline for ESPN's on-field set and then happily chiding analyst Lee Corso for picking Florida State, not OU, to win the national championship; Sooner fans rushing the field as they shared the moment on cell phones, all the time dodging overzealous security guards; Oklahoma president David Boren, wearing a smile from Miami to Norman and back again, telling reporters that, yes, "My feet left the ground two or three times tonight." Could you blame him? Oklahoma's seventh national title might have been its most improbable. Think about it. A second-year head coach takes a team one year removed from an Independence Bowl loss and somehow squeezes thirteen consecutive wins out of it, including an Orange Bowl victory against double-digit favorite and defending national champion Florida State. Better yet, Bob Stoops does it with a quarterback who throws about as hard as a slow-pitch softball pitcher and with a roster that features twenty-three freshman and sophomores. "It's easy to say, 'Oklahoma is back,'" said Stoops that night, his words nearly drowned out by the cheers of OU fans. He is right, of course. Back, and apparently here to stay.

—Gene Wojciechowski