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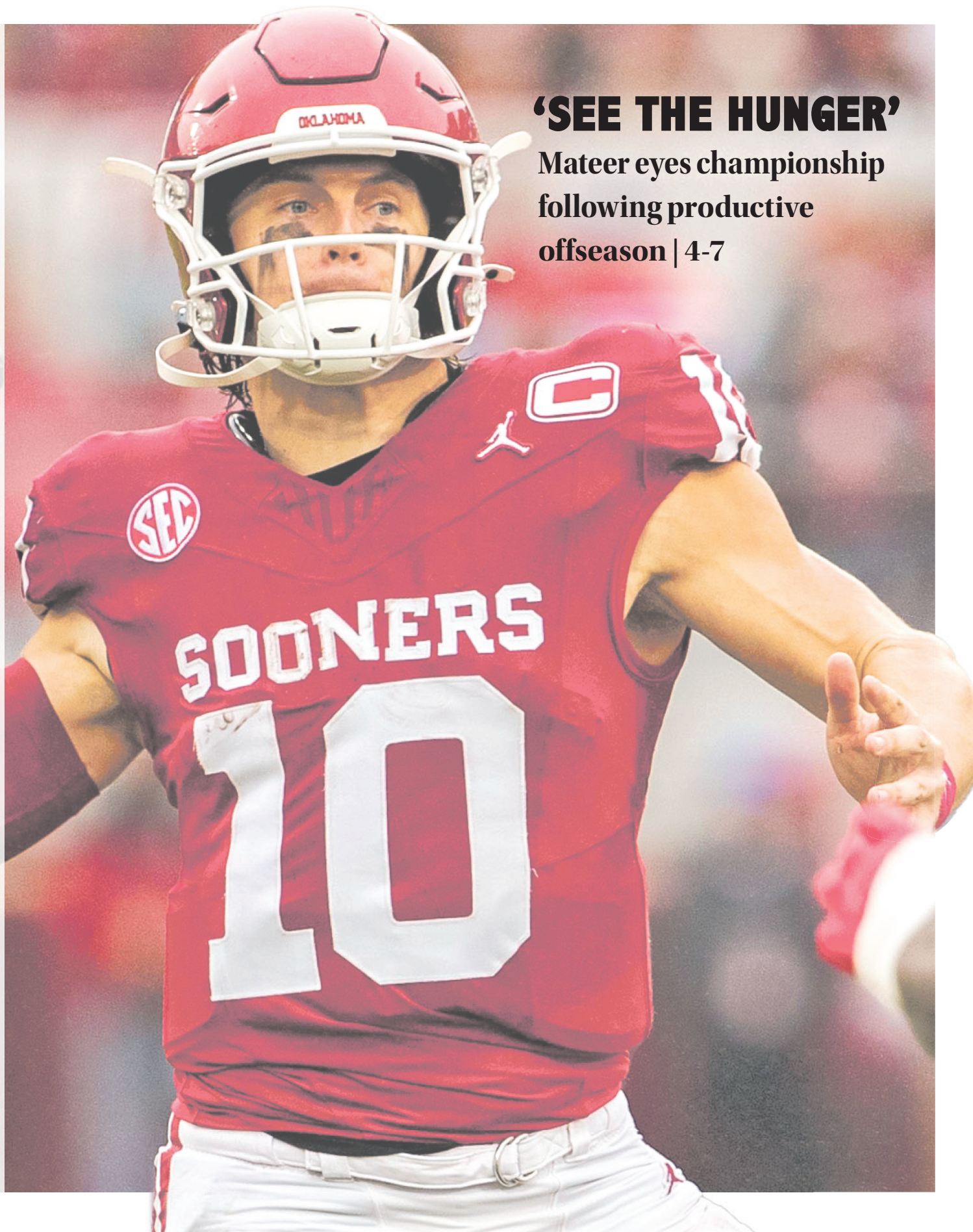
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FROM THE EDITOR



OU football players during the spring game on April 18, 2026.

FILE/OU DAILY

Striving for excellence

Dear OU Daily readers,

I understand you are not satisfied. I understand you are hungry. I understand you dream of a national championship.

Even though last year meant the program's first playoff appearance in the Brent Venables era, it was not enough for you. You smiled under the Friday night lights, surrounded by friends who had seen the highs and lows with you from Knoxville to Dallas, but before you knew it, the joy faded. The Alabama Crimson Tide rolled the Sooners out of the College Football Playoff, and ever since, you have dreamed and hungered for playoff success.

I am heading into my second season as sports editor. I constantly feel inspired by former sports editors George Stoa, Colton Sulley and others, who set a standard of excellence in serving this fanbase during their time at the Daily.

My first season was both challenging and thrilling, but I do not ever lose sight of the privilege and responsibility I have. With such a hungry fanbase, there should never be a dull moment in coverage, so I have brought you

Ferris wheel reports and late nights that only God can restore me from. In between those moments, we explored video content in new, innovative ways while maintaining our in-depth written coverage.

My second season will see assistant sports editor Charlie DiVincenzo become my right-hand man in football coverage. DiVincenzo walks in the steps he dreamed of as a child. He can retell intricate details of Sooner games from a decade ago and sees his role with joyful eyes. I look forward to DiVincenzo challenging me and the rest of the Daily with how we visually tell stories.

In this football preview guide, DiVincenzo, former sports reporter Josh Franklin and I have put together stories on quarterback John Mateer, linebacker Owen Heinecke and position groups. I went into the details on Mateer's off-season, including his work on throwing mechanics and maturity. DiVincenzo dug into what drives Heinecke's mindset when striving for a successful season while dealing with off-field court developments.

We are not satisfied, either. We are



Joshua McDaniel

Sports editor
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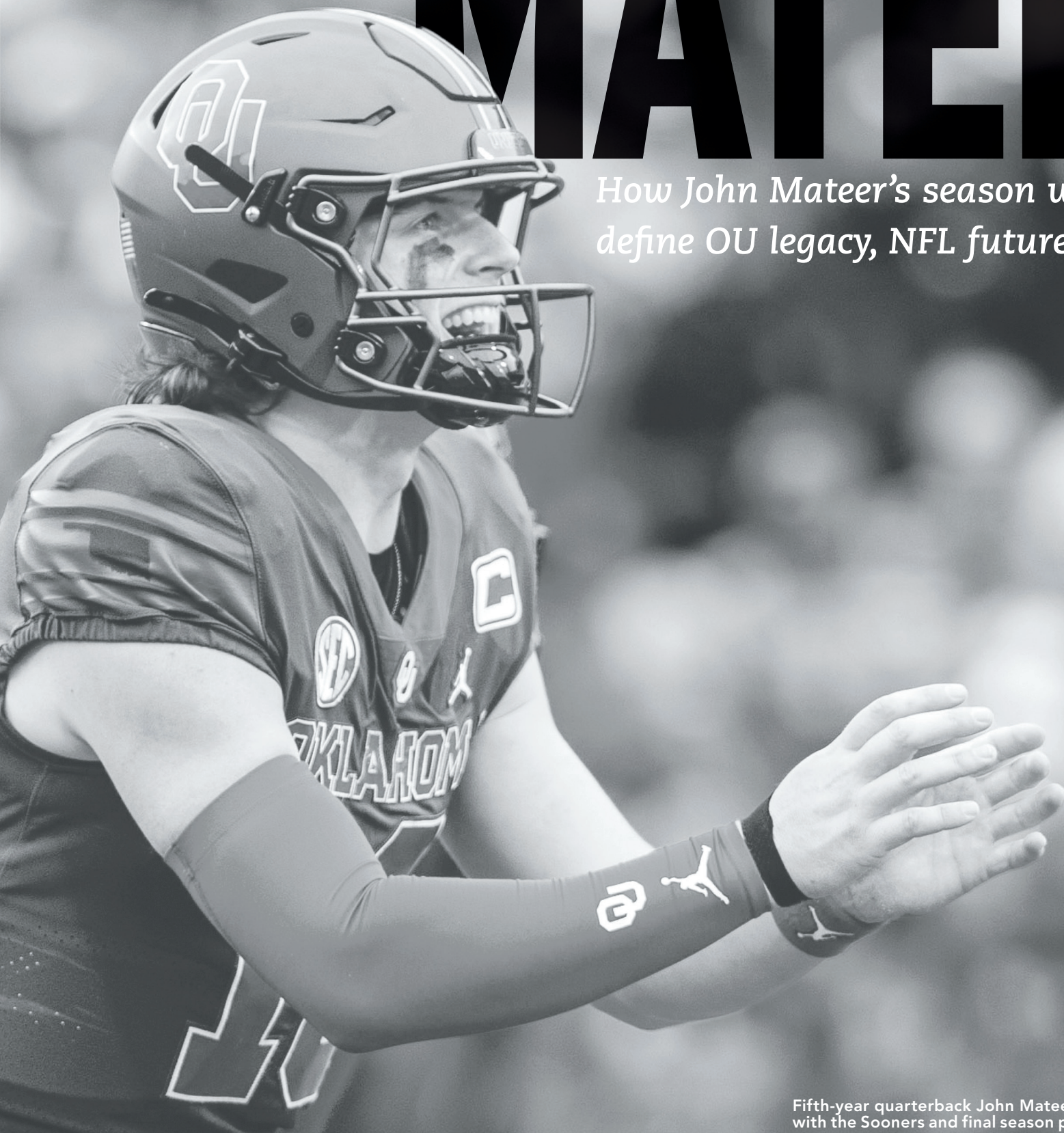
hungry, too.

A year ago, we found great success in our video efforts. We also found avenues to consistently put together written feature stories, providing deep, personal coverage of players. But our systems could have been sharper a year ago, and we have worked diligently since then to better ourselves to best serve you. We understand you are hungry, and we are not here to starve you. We are committed to consistently feeding you the best coverage we can.

With great privilege,
Joshua McDaniel

MATEER

*How John Mateer's season will
define OU legacy, NFL future*



FILE/OU DAILY

Fifth-year quarterback John Mateer is entering his second season with the Sooners and final season playing college football.

EDITOR'S NOTE: A June 23 NCAA ruling created an age-based eligibility system, removing the ability to redshirt. References to player class reflect the new eligibility model unless citing previous seasons.

BY JOSHUA MCDANIEL •
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John Mateer, under the Friday night lights, in front of 83,550 fans at Gaylord Family-Oklahoma Memorial Stadium, had OU leading with about a minute to go in the opening half of the College Football Playoff.

Then he zipped the ball right to an Alabama defender in a momentum-losing pick-six.

Mateer and the Sooners frequently talked about being “hard to kill” during the second half of the 2025 season, and they backed it up, having a 19% chance at a playoff appearance with four games left in the regular season before making it. But after a hot first quarter in the CFP, the quarterback made a costly play that put an end to their dreams of a national championship.

“It’s pretty bad,” Mateer said after the season-ending loss. “You watch the tape; it was obvious. ... Hate that it’s over. That’s all I’m thinking about right now.”

Unequivocally, the fifth-year quarterback wants to win. He wants to give the Sooners a real shot at contending for their first national championship since 2000, and he has potential to be in the running for the Heisman Trophy at the end of 2026 after leading the betting odds early in the 2025 season. But he needs to step up for that to be possible.

Mateer had a terrific career at Little Elm High School, smashing program records despite playing against bigger schools. He had a successful 2024 season at Washington State, ranking top 15 in the nation in passing touchdowns at a program that has never won a national championship. Now, it is time for him to perform to the standard of a program with the most wins in college football since 1946.

Should Mateer step up in 2026, he would follow the trend of previous great transfer quarterbacks like Baker Mayfield, Kyler Murray and Dillon Gabriel. Mayfield went from 3,700 passing yards and 36 passing touchdowns to 3,965 passing yards and 40 passing touchdowns in his first two years as a Sooner, while Murray jumped from 359 passing yards and three passing touchdowns to 4,361 passing yards and 42 passing touchdowns. Gabriel elevated 3,168 passing yards and 25 passing touchdowns in his first year at OU to 3,660 passing yards and 30 passing touchdowns in his second. None of them won a national championship, but Mayfield and Murray each won the Heisman after reaching the semifinals of a then-four-team playoff.

“The first year, you may be wide-eyed, and things are going 100 miles an hour,” former OU quarterback Paul Thompson

“You grow up and you dream of being in that situation, so I try to stay where my feet are. But sometimes, you realize the opportunity that you’re given, and ... there’s nothing like it.”

**JOHN MATEER,
OU QUARTERBACK**

said. “But every year, the game slows down. You get more mature.”

Mateer has a chance to do what none of those three did: claim the grand prize. He’ll have a defense behind him that was No. 6 in the nation in 2025; Mayfield and Murray’s defenses ranked worse than No. 60 in their semifinal seasons in 2017-18. In the last five years, the national champion teams have had top-10 ranking defenses.

Mateer could combine a dominant defense with a top-flight offense, which would increase the likelihood of a national title, Heisman Trophy or better NFL prospects. But for that to happen, he needs the throwing mechanics and maturity to perform under pressure.

“As a kid, you grow up and you dream of being in that situation, so I try to stay where my feet are,” Mateer said at SEC Media Days. “But sometimes, you realize the opportunity that you’re given, and ... there’s nothing like it.”

Mechanics: Building back better

Mateer awkwardly side-armed a throw during a low-scoring win over Missouri late last season, an uneasy sight when he studies the film.

Though he felt uncomfortable watching the game back, the throwing motion stayed in line with a trend in 2025. The side arm was a habit he already had before last year, according to Mateer. Following his return to the field 17 days after an early-season thumb injury, the habit worsened.

“It’s a pattern that I already had: (my arm) drops, ...” Mateer said at SEC Media Days. “It kept going because I had no strength in the ball. ... You watch it, and the elbow dropped a little bit to be able to come across (because of the thumb). There’s a clip against Mizzou, and it’s, like, direct on, it’s a fade, and I cringe. ... I had to compensate. I had to adapt.”

Mateer revamped his throwing mechanics during the offseason with the help of Chris Hess, a biomechanics specialist, long-time quarterback trainer Mike Keith and OU quarterbacks coach John Kuceyeski. Hess gathered data on the quarterback’s arm path, release point and ground connection, and Keith constructed a plan around it. Kuceyeski worked on Mateer’s throwing during his time at the OU practice facilities.

“Now, it’s keeping it tighter, ...” Mateer said at SEC Media Days. “The elbow, it’s raised back to pretty even.”

Kuceyeski said in March that the complex process meant a gradual shift.

“It’s not the easiest, and everybody wants you to go from here to here (quickly),” Kuceyeski said. “And that’s not going to happen; everything is gradual. So if we can just start to get the arm angle here more consistently, that’s going to be great.”

It starts from his base, according to Kuceyeski. Mateer spent extensive time not only working on his arm positioning but also how his feet operate as a quarterback.

“The biggest thing is his foundation, his platform, growing from a great platform, having consistency in his drops in his pockets, and he dedicated himself to that, ...” Kuceyeski said. “Obviously, it’s the one

time of year you can really work the kinesthetic bottom half and just really drill it. ... The feet and the arm angle (are) really the two operational quarterback play things we really worked on.”

Kuceyeski has worked with Mateer since January 2023 while at Washington State, and the two often make goals in the offseason. The quarterbacks coach has always been impressed with Mateer’s goals and determination to reach them.

“That’s been the greatest thing with him, is, he just continues to get better, ...” Kuceyeski said. “He’s grown up a lot. He’s grown up a lot, obviously, as a human as well. I’m just really proud of (how) he’s very process driven. It’s always going to be a process, and that’s what’s going to give him success.”

Mateer’s high school baseball coach Matt Harbin, who he keeps in contact with, said this

reflects a continuation of an attitude Mateer has had since he was younger. Harbin watched Mateer develop from a freshman varsity starter to a record-breaking leader in his

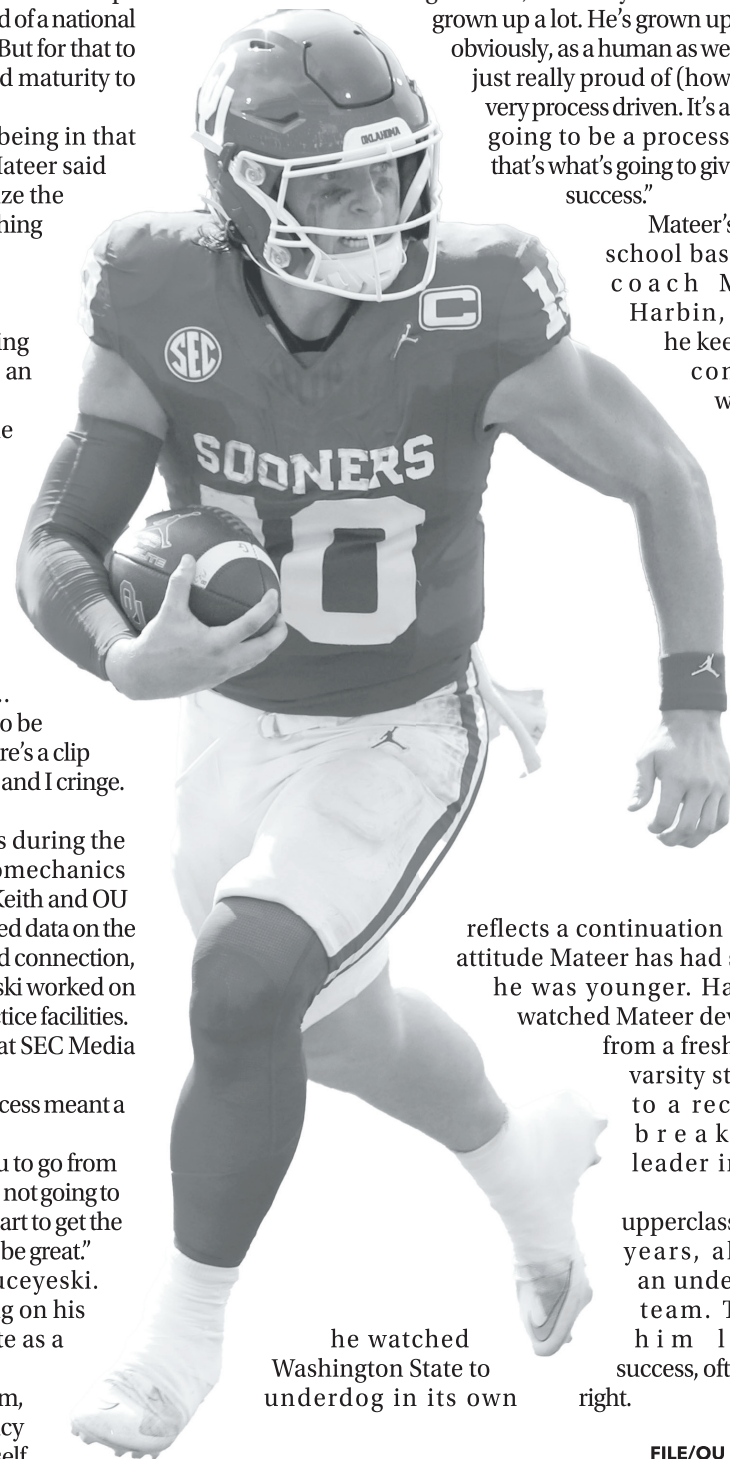
upperclassman years, all on an underdog team. Then he watched him lead success, often an

he watched Washington State to underdog in its own

right.

FILE/OU DAILY

Then-redshirt junior quarterback John Mateer during the game against Auburn on Sept. 20, 2025.





FILE/OU DAILY

Then-redshirt junior quarterback John Mateer with then-freshman offensive lineman Michael Fasusi and offensive coordinator Ben Arbuckle during the game against Alabama on Dec. 19, 2025.

Now, as Mateer looks to win national success, he has taken his offseason approach to another level.

“Once you get done and everything gets healthy, well now it’s, ‘OK, now I know I got to work because I’ve seen what my floor is, and I’ve got to raise that floor to raise my ceiling,’” Harbin said. “That’s really how he’s always approached things. He never shied away from his mistakes. Some guys will only focus on the successes and the good results. He’s never been that guy that only focuses on that. And I think that’s what people are starting to see.”

Maturity: Systemizing success

Mateer still thinks back to when he first returned from injury in a loss to Texas in the Red River Rivalry, in which OU failed to find the end zone.

It was an ugly showing from the whole team, especially

Mateer, who barely surpassed 200 passing yards and threw three interceptions. His injury was an obstacle then and throughout following games, but he does not give in to the talk that he returned too soon.

“I’m glad I did it because it showed me that you can fight through a lot, even though I obviously was not 100%,” Mateer said at SEC Media Days. “It was a very difficult thing to do, but I’m glad I did it. Even though I failed, I’m glad I put myself in a vulnerable position because I’ve learned so much.”

Mateer matured through the challenges of last season, recognizing his needs for better throwing habits and ability to settle into offensive systems. He admits he previously would get too excited with trying for explosive, game-altering plays. “Making plays is a lot of fun, so you kind of want those to happen, which is true,” Mateer said at SEC Media Days. “But staying on schedule, learning how to win the game is a big one,



FILE/OU DAILY

Mateer made an effort during the offseason to tighten his throwing with OU quarterbacks coach John Kuceyeski.

"You could see the hunger, you could see the determination, you could see that he was going to put in the work. ... He's got a lot of fight in him."

**PAUL THOMPSON,
FORMER OU QUARTERBACK**

watching more film and learning scheme-on-scheme."

Back in his days leading underdogs, he often needed to make big plays to help his teams have chances of winning, but playing for the Sooners is different. Unlike before, he has a defense that will keep the team in challenging games by itself, something even his star OU predecessors lacked. It has prompted him to systemize success.

"Most of his career, ... we were down early and he had to create a big play. You had to have those big momentums that everybody sees, the break for 25 yards or, you know, throw deep downfield," Harbin said. "I think winning a football game is more about managing every drive and keeping every drive and staying away from the three and outs, and especially when you have a lead. It's more clock management and still progressing and not getting too passive that you're always giving the ball back and giving them more chances to have their big moments. You can't teach that."

Mateer has had to learn to adapt to playing with a lead, something that has required a different mentality from the quarterback.

"For probably the first time in his career, they had leads in a lot of the quarters instead of trailing, and so it's a different mindset, ..." Harbin said. "He's talking about ... being that

complete first-quarter-to-fourth-quarter guy that manages the game as they continue to score and control the clock."

In the offseason,
Mateer
has

worked on forming better habits and leaning into systems to help him not feel like "things are going 100 miles an hour" come fall. And since Mateer is a team leader, as he has worked to mature, he has pushed others to as well.

"I've definitely raised my intensity," Mateer said at SEC Media Days. "We need to be better. I need to be better, and for that to happen, we all need to be better. ... When the mental errors come around, you let them hear it a little bit.

But there is a fine line, and I think I'm only able to do that because when they succeed, I try to do my best and give them their praise."

Thompson, who led the Sooners' offense in 2006, noticed a shift in Mateer this summer. After all of the swings of 2025, with big individual and team aspirations as well as pro prospects on the line, Mateer seems determined to meet the moment.

"Last season ate him up, not only from, obviously, having to miss (a game) and not coming back and, in his own words, not even performing up to the best of his capabilities," Thompson said. "My short time around him a (few) weeks ago, you could see the hunger, you could see the determination, you could see that he was going to put in the work. ... He's got a lot of fight in him."

FILE/OU DAILY

Mateer is entering the 2026 season with a top-ranking defense behind him, a chance few of his predecessors had.



RUNNING BACKS

‘Super promising’: OU rushing game looks to improve, add depth

BY CHARLIE DIVINCENZO • CHARLES.R.DIVINCENZO-1@OU.EDU

Coming off a 2025 season in which OU ranked No. 13 out of 16 Southeastern Conference teams in rushing yards, a major offseason objective for the Sooners was to improve their ground game.

OU's 2026 rushing attack is expected to be led by a familiar one-two combination as junior Xavier Robinson and sophomore Tory Blaylock return to anchor the backfield. Fifth-year quarterback John Mateer also returns to bolster the run game, having led the team in rush attempts and rushing touchdowns in 2025.

Mateer emphasized the team's improvements rushing the ball in spring practice.

"It's just important as a team and as a unit to be able to run the football, ..." Mateer said. "It's been really good, like, super promising, super proud of all the alignment and the running backs, tight ends, receivers. Perimeter blocking has been better, tight end blocking. Running backs are running. It's all leveled up."

Robinson, who battled a sprained knee during the 2025 season, will look to stay healthy entering the 2026 campaign, his third year in crimson and cream. Despite the injury, the junior finished 2025 with 421 rushing yards and four touchdowns while adding 106 receiving yards and another score through the air.

Blaylock appeared poised to emerge as OU's lead running back after a strong start to the 2025 season, highlighted by 100-yard performances against Temple and South Carolina. However, a lingering shoulder injury limited his production throughout the year and prevented him from firmly establishing himself as the Sooners' No. 1 running back. Despite the setback, Blaylock still finished his freshman campaign with 480 rushing yards and four touchdowns, leading the team in rushing yards.

Behind the two returning running backs, the position room will feature a competitive battle for carries and snaps out of the backfield. Freshmen Jonathan Hatton Jr. and DeZephen Walker will compete alongside junior Colorado State transfer Lloyd Avant for playing time.

All three of the newcomers found the end zone in the 2026 spring game, with Walker leading the group in rushing yards with 81, followed by Avant with 69 and Hatton Jr. adding 26 of his own.

Head coach Brent Venables believes what he saw from the running back room in the spring game was encouraging.

"Really proud of that group," Venables said. "They worked incredibly hard. (Running backs coach Deland McCullough) did a fantastic job of giving them the tools to be able to go and execute at a high level."

Offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach Ben Arbuckle also praised the running backs following the game.

"They ran violent," Arbuckle said. "They ran hard downhill; they were able to break some trash arm tackles. ... I think that's huge."

Avant, the most experienced of the three challengers, brings a versatile skill set to OU's backfield. At Colorado State, the junior rushed for 417 yards and five touchdowns while adding 24 receptions for 261 yards and another score through the air in 2025. His ability as a pass catcher could carve out a significant role in the Sooners' offense, which lacked a true receiving threat out of the backfield during the 2025 season.

Between the five running backs, the Sooners possess something they have lacked in recent seasons: depth. Each running back brings a unique skill set to the table, giving OU a variety of options in the backfield. The last time OU mustered more than three 300-yard rushers in the same season was 2023, when four Sooners went over that mark. OU will look to capitalize on the team's versatility as they attempt to climb from the bottom tier of the SEC in rushing production.

FILE/OU DAILY

After a knee injury in 2025, junior running back Xavier Robinson looks to stay healthy this season.





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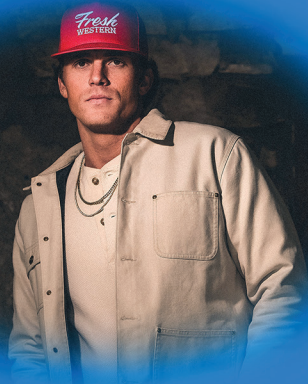
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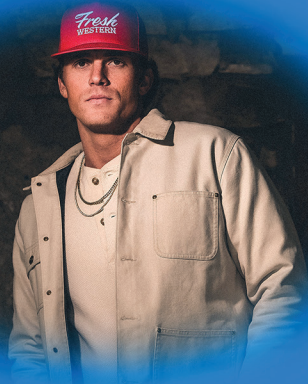
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WIDE RECEIVERS

‘Fierce competitor’: Wide receivers look to provide spark for OU offense

BY JOSHUA MCDANIEL • JOSHUA.J.MCDANIEL-1@OU.EDU

The Sooners are looking to go into 2026 with an explosive attack at wide receiver.

Returning fifth-year wide receiver Isaiah Sategna is expected to lead the group. Sategna recorded a team-leading 965 receiving yards in 2025.

The 2021-22 Gatorade Arkansas Boys Track and Field Player of the Year showed off his speed all season for OU after three years at Arkansas. He had four games in 2025 with at least 100 receiving yards, coming against LSU, then-No. 22 Auburn, then-No. 8 Mississippi and then-No. 22 Missouri.

Sategna showcased his explosiveness in the Sooners' spring game, recording a 50-yard reception. However, more than his on-field production, offensive coordinator Ben Arbuckle said he has been impressed by Sategna's development as a leader.

"The coolest thing about Isaiah is watching him grow into a leadership role, ..." Arbuckle said. "Watching him bring along young guys and be an example at practice, ... that's been awesome."

As Sategna leads the wide receiver group, transfers Parker Livingstone and Trell Harris bring additional firepower to the offense. Livingstone arrives after recording 516 receiving yards as a redshirt freshman at Texas last season, while Harris finished with 847 at Virginia this past year.

"(Livingstone) feels the game really well, feels the space, and he picked up the offense (quickly)," fifth-year quarterback John Mateer said in March.

Livingstone added that he takes pride in his quickness.

"I think I get slept on on my speed, ..." Livingstone said. "That's my strongest advantage."

He also said that he always carried an extra level of excitement when preparing for the Red River Rivalry game and plans to bring that same energy for the Sooners.

"That's the best game in college football," Livingstone said. "When I was at Texas and getting ready for that game, like, that was the game of the year. That's what we all look forward to. ... We wanted to go there, and we wanted to beat the crap out of OU. So now being in the OU jersey, I want to go there, and I want to beat the crap out of Texas."

Mackenzie Alleyne is the next wide receiver looking to provide a spark to an offense that ranked No. 79 in the nation last season. The junior impressed the team throughout the spring despite recording just 72 receiving yards in 2025 at Washington State.

"He's had an awesome spring," Arbuckle said. "He's a fierce competitor. He understands the position. It's helped that he was with me at Wazzu for a year, so it's not really that new to him. ... He's (also) bought into completely everything that coach (Brent) Venables preaches to us."

Alleyne redshirted his first year at Washington State in 2024 when Arbuckle and Mateer guided the program to the No. 6 offense in the nation. While Mateer found success that season, Alleyne said the quarterback has become even more confident.

"More comfortable in the pocket, he's putting the ball right where it needs to (be), right where he needs to put only for me to get the ball," Alleyne said. "So I know that I can always expect the best from him, and I'm going to give him the best."

FILE/OU DAILY

Fifth-year wide receiver Isaiah Sategna hopes to capitalize on his award-winning speed in his final season at OU.

TIGHT ENDS

OU tight ends room revamped for 2026 season

BY JOSH FRANKLIN •
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Coming off the program's most productive season at tight end since Mark Andrews recorded 958 receiving yards in 2017, the Sooners will look to maintain that production despite having a new starter.

Following the departure of former OU tight end and current Tennessee Titan Jaren Kanak, who was OU's position leader in 2025 with 533 receiving yards, OU's tight end role is completely revamped. New tight ends coach Jason Witten, a former Dallas Cowboys player, will lead a plethora of incoming talent.

The Sooners' newest additions, fifth-years Rocky Beers and Hayden Hansen, will likely lead the group as they bring the most experience.

Beers, now at his fourth school, is coming off the best season of his career. He pulled in 31 receptions for 388 receiving yards and seven touchdowns in 2025 with Colorado State before he was sidelined due to injury. Beers joined OU alongside fellow Colorado State transfer, junior running back Lloyd Avant, who praised Beers as a multitool tight end.

"(Beers is a) physical guy, all-around tight end," Avant said at OU's spring media day. "I would say he's a do-it-all on the field, (from) special teams to offense to blocking and running and catching the ball."

Beers is the brother of former OU women's basketball and now Connecticut Sun forward Raegan Beers, who spent two seasons in Norman and racked up many NCAA and league honors before the move to the WNBA.

Hansen brings in Southeastern Conference experience as he spent the last three seasons with the Florida Gators, recording 30 catches for

254 yards and two touchdowns in 2025. Like Beers, Hansen is also a versatile tight end who is excited to make an



FILE/OU DAILY
Fifth-year Rocky Beers transferred to OU from Colorado State for his final year of eligibility.

impact in both the passing and running game.

"I got some news for you guys. (The run game is) here, and it's looking good," Hansen said during spring practice. "We're pounding the rock every practice. It's a beautiful thing to see. ... We are moving the rock, and we are doing it well."

Both players led the position in receiving yards in the 2026 spring game as Beers recorded four receptions for 65 yards and Hansen followed with three receptions for 34 yards.

Other members of 2026 tight end room include fifth-year John Locke Jr., senior Kade McIntyre, sophomore Trynae Washington, sophomore Jack Van Dorselaer and freshmen Ryder Mix and Tyler Ruxer. With all of the new and returning talent, Witten believes everyone has a shot at the starting job despite bringing in seasoned veterans.

"Rocky and Hayden were already signed here when I joined the staff, but I see what the organization saw in those young men," Witten said at spring media day. "I think they're eager as fifth-year players to take advantage of every opportunity. So I really like their work ethic, ... It's going to be an open-room competition. I think that's going to bring out the best in our group."

With the starting job vacant due to Kanak's departure, OU will start its sixth different tight end since the 2020 season.



FILE/OU DAILY
New OU tight ends coach Jason Witten is a former tight end for the Dallas Cowboys, a position he held for years.

OFFENSIVE LINE

*‘Feels like magic’:
OU offensive line
sees communication
improvement*

BY CHARLIE DIVINCENZO • CHARLES.R.DIVINCENZO-1@OU.EDU

After a bounce-back 2025 campaign, OU’s offensive line enters 2026 looking to continue its upward trajectory.

The Sooners entered the 2025 season with major questions surrounding the offensive line. After a tumultuous 2024 drive that ended with a 6-7 record and a disappointing loss to Navy in the Armed Forces Bowl, there were concerns about whether OU could rebuild the unit up front.

Offensive line coach Bill Bedenbaugh responded by overhauling the room, bringing in a fresh group of talent for 2025. The revamped unit played a key role in OU’s turnaround, helping the Sooners finish 10-3.

Now as 2026 begins, a lot of the same faces and veteran leaders will man the offensive line as the offense looks to jump to new heights.

The projected starting offensive line for 2026 features sophomore Michael Fasusi at left tackle, junior Eddy Pierre-Louis at left guard, fifth-year Jake Maikkula

at center, sophomore Ryan Fodje at right guard and fifth-year Arkansas transfer E’Marion Harris at right tackle.

Fasusi, a former five-star recruit in the 2025 class, said in the spring that he has improved in multiple facets of his game.

“I definitely see myself getting better in every single scheme,” Fasusi said. “My hands have been faster, more aggressive.”

Pierre-Louis discussed the mental strides he made during spring practice.

“My discipline (has improved),” Pierre-Louis said. “You don’t have to be up (at the top) each and every day, but you have to continuously make small, good improvements. And that’s been the main thing.”

With four of the five starting lineman returning from last year, continuity is expected to facilitate success for the group next season.

Fasusi said the continuity, combined with Harris’ addition, has helped elevate communication across the unit.

“The time that was put in ... feels like magic,” Fasusi said. “(We’re) a coordinator with each other, commenting on every single play.”

Head coach Brent Venables emphasized the experience returning along Oklahoma’s offensive line during the Sooners’ spring media day.

“You got (Maikkula) and (Fodje) and (Fasusi) and (Pierre-Louis), and then you got Heath Ozaeta in there as guys coming back and then E’Marion Harris from Arkansas,” Venables said. “We got a little more experience coming back on offense.”

Harris was a coveted transfer in the 2026 cycle, ranking as high as the seventh best offensive tackle available and 67th best overall player on 247Sports. The fifth-year, who started in 11 games in 2025 and 13 in 2024, will look to give OU a veteran presence up front.



FILE/OU DAILY

Then-freshman offensive lineman Michael Fasusi during the game against Auburn on Sept. 20, 2025.

SPECIAL TEAMS

*OU special teams heads into 2026
with award-winning experience, quickness*

BY JOSHUA MCDANIEL • JOSHUA.J.MCDANIEL-1@OU.EDU

Coming off a College Football Playoff appearance, OU heads into 2026 expecting another strong year from its special teams unit as it returns both its starting kicker and punter.

Fifth-year kicker Tate Sandell announced in January that he would return to OU, opting against the 2026 NFL Draft despite being the best at his position last season. He won the Lou Groza Award, given to the nation's best kicker, after completing 23 of 24 field goals during the regular season, including converting 7 of 7 attempts from 50 yards or more. He also finished the season 35 for 35 on extra point attempts.

Sandell's award-winning season broke records. As the SEC special teams player of the year, he made 24 consecutive field goals, more than the previous program high of 18. He also tied the Neyland Stadium record for longest field goal at 55 yards in a road win over Tennessee.

Special teams coordinator Doug Deakin said in March that Sandell has more to accomplish.

"He's back because of unfinished business, ..." Deakin said. "The way that Norman and the state of Oklahoma wrapped their arms around and endeared themselves to Tate, he wants nothing more than to double down and come hang our own banner rather than just qualifying and making the playoffs."

OU also returns fifth-year punter Grayson Miller. He started all of his 12 games played in 2025 and was an all-SEC first-team pick by coaches and the Associated Press. He set a single-season program record with 24 punts of at least 50 yards.

Miller earned the starting role after then-redshirt junior Jacob Ulrich injured his hamstring early in the 2025 season. Miller averaged 47.8 yards on four punts, the longest being 59 yards, against Michigan in his first start.

"Ulrich wins the job, pulls his hamstring, and next thing you know, Miller — though, to his temperament and how he approached every practice and how much better he got from spring through fall camp and then Michigan being his first game — really took off," Deakin said.

Deakin made clear that Miller would receive first-team reps leading up to the 2026 season but did not state that Ulrich is out of the running for the starting spot.

"It will absolutely be neck and neck," Deakin said. "Miller will take the first reps, but Ulrich is right there with him. Miller knows he can't take a single rep off because Ulrich wants that job, too."

FILE/OU DAILY

Then-senior kicker Tate Sandell broke records last season.

The Sooners keep their speedy wide receiver and punt returner in fifth-year Isaiah Sategna. He returned 24 punts for 318 yards in 2025, with his longest being 43.

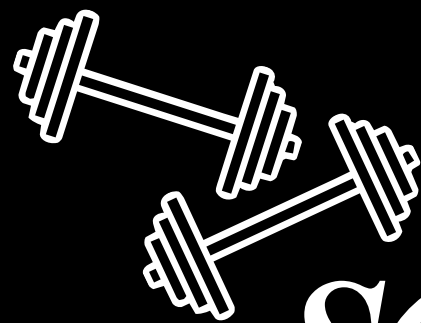
"He possesses God-given talent of how fast he can go," Deakin said. "When the ball is in his hands, he has the ability to make the first miss — (that is) what you look for in a punt returner. He's got that check, then speed to take the five-yard return, make it a 10-plus."

OU also added junior running back Lloyd Avant in the offseason, who returned 11 kickoffs for 268 yards at Colorado State in 2025. The Sooners returned only two kickoffs — amounting to 16 yards — as a team in 2025 but have another weapon if they choose to make adjustments in 2026.

FILE/OU DAILY

Then-redshirt junior punter Grayson Miller was selected as an all-SEC first-team pick in 2025.





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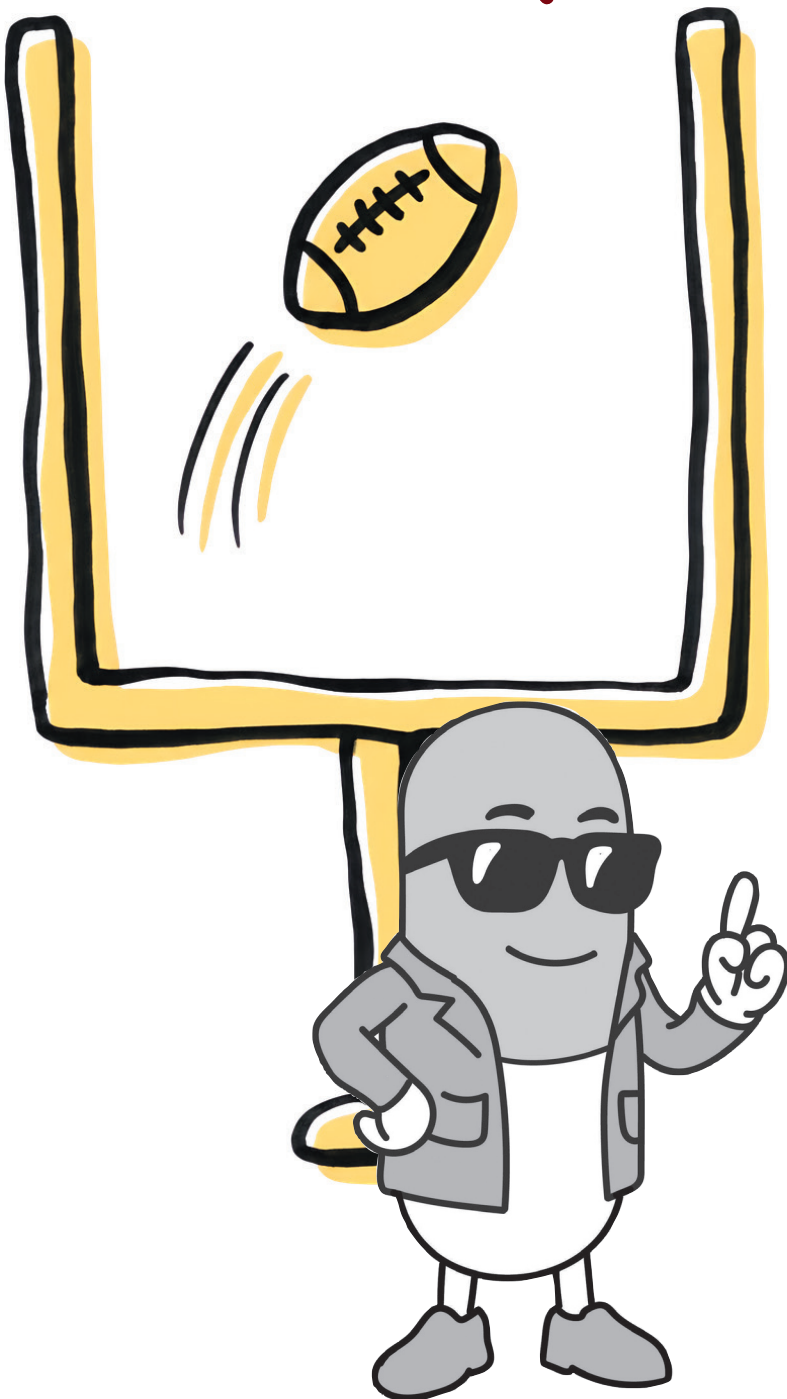


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Football season has arrived.

And here are Professor Pill's prescription drug safety reminders and game day checklist.

Hey, Sooners!

Football season is finally here, and that means Saturdays filled with tailgates, school spirit, and cheering on the Sooners. Whether you're spending the day on Campus Corner, meeting friends before kickoff, or watching the game from home, it's important to make smart choices that keep everyone safe.

Tailgates are all about making memories—but those memories shouldn't include preventable emergencies.

If you take prescription medications, remember that they should always be used exactly as directed by your healthcare provider. Taking more than prescribed, using someone else's medication, or sharing your own prescription can have serious consequences, even if it seems harmless in the moment.

If alcohol is part of your game-day plans, be especially careful. Many prescription medications can interact with alcohol in dangerous ways, leading to increased drowsiness, slowed breathing, poor decision-making, or even overdose. If you're unsure whether it's safe to drink while taking a medication, talk with your doctor or pharmacist before game day.

Just like you wouldn't leave your phone or wallet unattended at a crowded tailgate, don't leave prescription medications sitting out on a table or in an unlocked backpack. Keeping medications secure helps prevent theft, accidental use, and misuse by others.

Your Game Day Safety Checklist

- Take medications only as prescribed.
- Never share prescription medications—even with friends or family.
- Avoid mixing prescription medications with alcohol unless your healthcare provider says it's safe.
- Keep medications stored securely and out of sight.
- Plan ahead for a safe ride home if alcohol is involved.
- Dispose of unused or expired medications safely at a permanent medication drop box.

Every winning team has a game plan, and your health deserves one too. Making a few smart decisions before kickoff can help you enjoy every touchdown, celebration, and tradition safely.

Professor Pill is here to help! Follow along for simple tips on the safe use, storage, and disposal of prescription medications. Protect your prescriptions. Protect your people.

Think twice.

Boomer Sooner!



Thirsty's Times



VOL. 01, NO. 001

FAN WORK IS THIRSTY WORK

18-19 SEPTEMBER 2026

Drink in Game Day at Thirsty's

Coca-Cola's Thirsty's Fan HQ Heads to the Palace on the Prairie

There's Only One Oklahoma — and Coca-Cola's Thirsty's Fan HQ wouldn't miss it for the world.

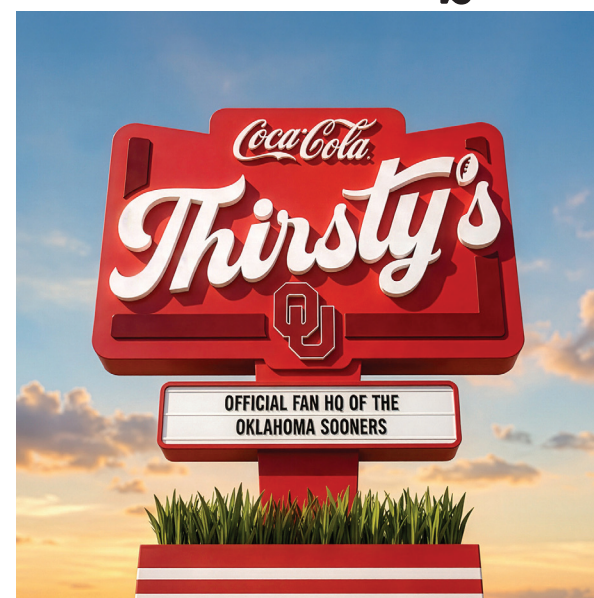
Thirsty's knows all too well that fan work is thirsty work. That's exactly why they're coming in hot to OU to help Sooners cool down and refresh their fan work, one sip of Coca-Cola at a time.

This diner-inspired space was created for those who love Boomer and Sooner like they're a part of the family, who hear "Boomer!" and without missing a beat hit "Sooner!" and who bring that Sooner Magic feeling to every game day. Every corner is designed to celebrate the unmatched energy and passion that make OU fandom unlike any other.

What's on the menu? Thirsty's is serving up everything Sooners need to kickoff the season like a champion, from games, giveaways and good times like photo-worthy moments and must-try, free merch. And of course, the fan special: ice-cold Coca-Cola to fuel your fandom all day long.

So, grab your crew, throw on your crimson and cream, and make your way to Thirsty's — the newest fan destination where OU pride is always on the menu.

You can find Thirsty's Fan HQ at Gaylord Family - Oklahoma Memorial Stadium (near Gate 6) on September 18th & 19th, for two days only, celebrating the Oklahoma Sooners vs. New Mexico. Follow @thirstysfanhq or go to thirstysfanhq.com for official timing and to pre-register for a quicker entry experience.



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September 18th & 19th

LIFESTYLE

AMA With Boomer & Sooner

We hopped in a booth with OU's favorite, big-eyed fluffy ponies to ask them some burning questions.

So, what's your favorite part of game day?

B: Running out. They don't call it the Palace on the Prairie for nothing, I feel like royalty!

S: Going crazy for the crowd with the RUF/NEKS and Lil' Sis for every TD.

When did you get your start?

B: 2005. We turned 20 last season!

S: We're SO mature now.

Thoughts on the Sooner Schooner's real ponies?

B: "Real"?

S: Yeah, what are you trying to say?

What song gets you pumped for fan work?

B: Hours before game time this one will NOT stop singing the fight song... **S:** It's literally about us!

Any last words?

They then took turns screaming their names.

FAN SPOTLIGHT

Superfan Shoutout: OU Nana

Most fans show up for their team. Patti Gunter shows up for just about everyone.

Better known as OU Nana, Gunter's been a fixture of Sooners athletics since 1968. Today, you can find her cheering on just about any sport she can get to, rocking her signature crimson visor and jersey with "OU Nana" across the back.



But her fan work doesn't stop at the final whistle. Her nickname is inspired by the role she plays for the Sooner community—offering grandma-level care for athletes, coaches and fans. She jokes that she's baked over a million brownies for OU teams. Her deeply devoted fandom even extends to her home décor, from OU toilet paper to saltshakers.

And when game day arrives, Nana brings the energy. She's been known to rally crowds, proving enthusiasm has no age limit.

If the kids have got the energy, I've got the energy," she says.

At Thirsty's, that's the kind of fan work we love to see. Cheers to you, OU Nana!

STYLE



The Sooner Style Playbook

Game day at the University of Oklahoma is a showcase of Sooner style. Scroll through the latest OU game day outfit inspo and it's obvious that trend-setting is "Sooner born and Sooner bred".

Walk around Campus Corner and you'll spot Sooner staples mixed with Southern flair: preppy dresses, moisture-wicking polos, red-and-white gingham, vintage-style tees, and of course, cowboy boots. Throw on an OU bucket hat, button pins, a cozy quarter-zip or a clear stadium bag with OU straps, and you've got a look that's ready for the Palace.

For 2026, expect the Sooner fan uniform to keep evolving, with fans finding new ways to put their personal spin on the classic OU game day look.

At Thirsty's Fan HQ, that same spirit of personalization continues. While refreshing their fan work with an ice-cold Coca-Cola, fans can customize free, exclusive Thirsty's merch for a unique keepsake that reflects their own fandom.

But no matter what you're wearing this upcoming season, one thing's for sure: while the team knows how to play like a champion, Sooner fans will always know how to dress like one.

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C O B U G K T I W Y A F Q C Z E
C R E A M Q R Y M D F V K F O O
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COCA-COLA
FAN WORK
CRIMSON
CREAM
THIRSTYS
GAYLORD
SOONER MAGIC
SEC

HOROSCOPES

Game Day Horoscopes



ARIES March 21 – April 19
Your fiery fan work is contagious. Channel it into leading the loudest “BOOMER! SOONER!” the stadium has ever heard.



LIBRA September 23 – October 22
Balance comes naturally today. You’ll be a pro at watching the game, cheering on the Sooner Schooner, and bonding with friends at the same time.



TAURUS April 20 – May 20
Friends will look to you to secure the perfect tailgate spot. Fear not, you’ll execute the plan flawlessly like Sooner Magic.



SCORPIO October 23 – November 21
Stars reward die-hard Sooner fans who never stop believing. Stay loud and hopeful like the loyal fan you are.



GEMINI May 21 – June 20
Stars predict your chatty fan work attracts a new OU friend before half. Don’t be surprised if they join your tailgate



SAGITTARIUS November 22 – December 21
Your boundless team enthusiasm turns a simple game into an unforgettable party Boomer and Sooner would be proud of.



CANCER June 21 – July 22
Your care-giving instincts are playing like a champion today. You’ll be making sure everyone’s fan work is refreshed and ready for kickoff.



CAPRICORN December 22 – January 29
Saturn has you thinking like Coach Venables—steady, strategic, and one play ahead. Keep working the plan. It’ll pay off.



LEO July 23 – August 22
The spotlight has a funny way of finding you on game day. Your wild crimson and cream face paint just might make the jumbotron.



AQUARIUS January 20 – February 18
Today’s most original game day outfit on campus belongs to you. Embrace marching to the beat of your own fight song.



VIRGO August 23 – September 22
Today’s stars favor your prep. Cooler packed, lucky jersey on, all that’s left to do is scream the OU chant as loud as you can.



PISCES February 19 – March 20
You’ll find yourself in the right place at the right time for an unforgettable OU game day. Let your strong intuition lead the way.

GAME DAY EVENTS

OU Tailgating Is Leveling Up

Tailgating at OU is getting a refresh for the 2026 football season. The North Oval is back as a free, first-come, first-served destination for Sooner Nation. There, fans can bring their own setups and enjoy food trucks, giveaways, the Pride of Oklahoma and even select games on LED videoboards.

For fans who’d rather skip straight to the celebration, there’s a new option: reserved, turnkey tailgates on Boyd Lawn. This fully furnished experience comes with it all, even catering’s available.

So, before heading into the Palace on the Prairie, grab an ice-cold Coca-Cola and explore which tailgate style is more your vibe. Either way, you’ll be kicking off game day like a champion.



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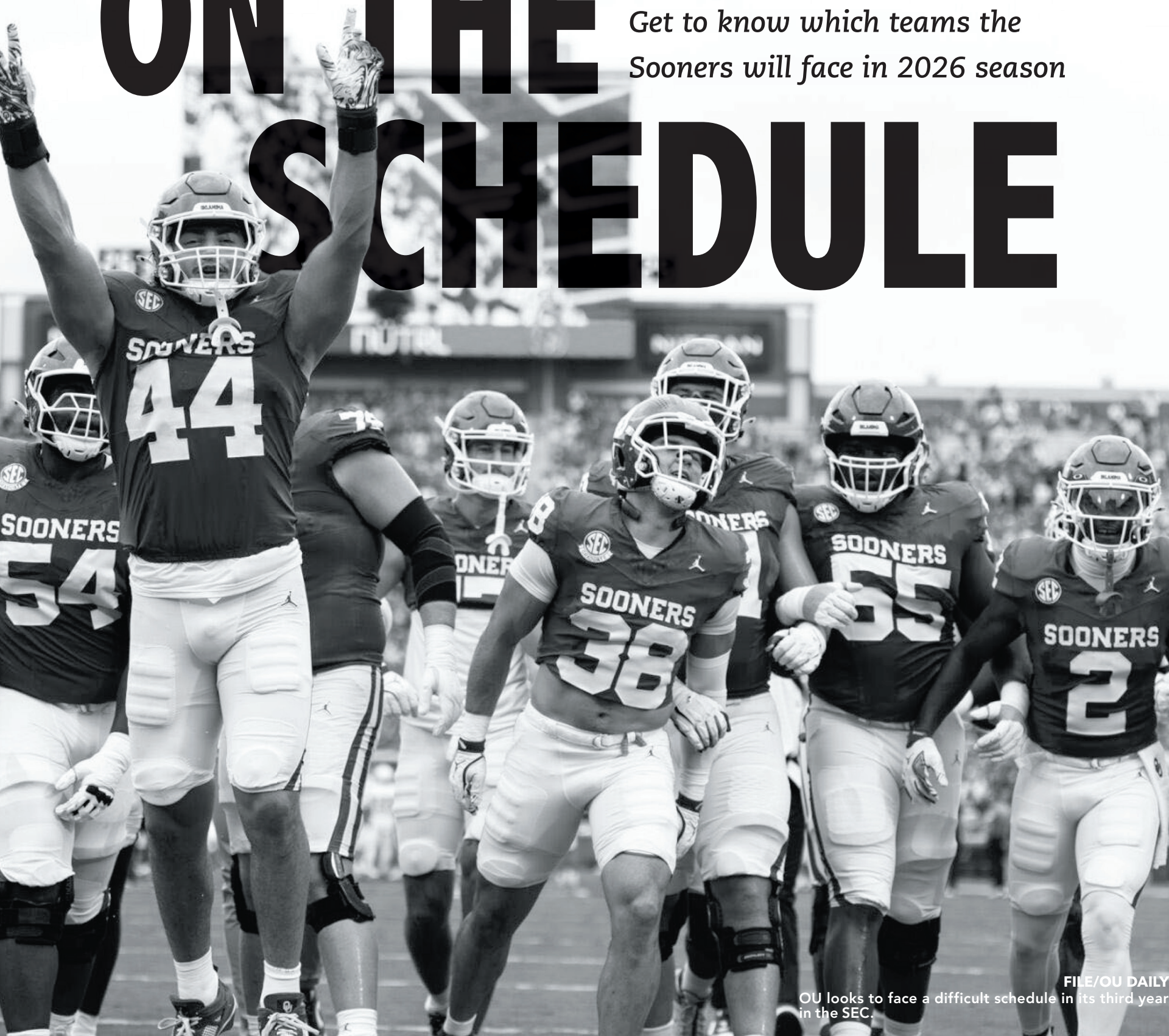


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ON THE SCHEDULE

Get to know which teams the Sooners will face in 2026 season



FILE/OU DAILY
OU looks to face a difficult schedule in its third year in the SEC.



FILE/OU DAILY

Fifth-year quarterback John Mateer and junior running back Lloyd Avant during spring practice on March 30, 2026.



FILE/OU DAILY

The Sooners will head to Ann Arbor to face Michigan after defeating them in Norman in 2025.

**BY CHARLIE DIVINCENZO •
CHARLES.R.DIVINCENZO-1@OU.EDU**

Sept. 4 vs. UTEP

The Sooners open the 2026 season against the UTEP Miners, marking the first meeting between the programs since a 45-13 OU victory in 2022. OU has won all five matchups against UTEP since 2000 and will look to continue that streak.

The season opener was moved to Friday night, giving Sooner fans a head start on the college football weekend. Fifth-year quarterback John Mateer enters the year looking to pick up where he left off early last season, when he emerged as a Heisman Trophy contender before a broken thumb derailed his efforts.

Sept. 12 at Michigan

OU heads to Ann Arbor for one of the most anticipated non-conference games of the season, renewing a rivalry between two of college football's most storied programs.

OU defeated Michigan 24-13 in Norman last season behind a dominant defensive performance that held Michigan's then-freshman quarterback Bryce Underwood to 142 passing yards on nine completions. This year's rematch brings new storylines for both programs, including the Wolverines' first marquee test under new head coach Kyle Whittingham. While much of the attention will center on the quarterbacks, this game could ultimately be decided in the trenches. OU returns one of the SEC's top defensive units after leading the conference in total defense a season ago, while Michigan will once again lean on its physical style of play under Whittingham.

With programs built around defense and line play, the second game could provide an early measuring stick for both teams' College Football Playoff aspirations.

Sept. 19 vs. New Mexico

Week 3 features a unique matchup as New Mexico visits Norman for the first time since 1935, when the Sooners earned a 25-0 victory. It will be just the third meeting between the programs in the last century and OU's final nonconference game before SEC play begins.

The Lobos enter 2026 after a 6-2 campaign in the Mountain West Conference and a 9-4 overall record, but the team will need to improve defensively after surrendering an average of 22.3 points per game last season. OU will look to capitalize before the schedule becomes significantly more challenging.

Sept. 26 at Georgia

Few games on the 2026 schedule carry more anticipation than OU's trip to Athens to face Georgia. It will be the programs' first meeting since the 2018 Rose Bowl, when the Bulldogs beat the Sooners 54-48 in double overtime to advance to the national championship game.

While that matchup became an offensive classic, this year's meeting is projected to be different. With OU head coach Brent Venables and Georgia head coach Kirby Smart leading two of the nation's premier defensive programs, points could be at a premium. OU finished first in the SEC in total defense last season, with Georgia close behind in second.

Oct. 10 vs. Texas in Dallas

Coming off back-to-back Red River Rivalry losses and having been outscored 136-43 over the last four meetings, the Sooners will look to get back in the win column against the Longhorns. OU is 1-3 against Texas under Brent Venables, and injuries have played a significant role in the rivalry during his tenure.

Last season, Mateer returned for his first game since breaking his thumb, throwing for 202 yards while tossing three interceptions. In the 49-0 loss in 2022, former OU quarterback Dillon Gabriel was ruled out with a concussion just minutes before kickoff, forcing the Sooners to rely on tight end Brayden Willis to take snaps in a makeshift offense.

Texas, meanwhile, returns one of the nation's most talented rosters, led by senior quarterback Arch Manning.

The Longhorns also landed what ESPN ranked as the nation's No. 3 transfer portal class, headlined by former Auburn five-star wide receiver Cam Coleman. The class also features former Oklahoma running back Hollywood Smothers, who spent time at North Carolina State after leaving Norman before transferring to Texas.

Riding a two-game losing streak in the rivalry, OU will be looking to reverse the trend against its biggest rival.

Oct. 17 vs. Kentucky

The Sooners will face Kentucky for the first time since 1982, when OU earned a 29-8 victory in Lexington. OU leads the all-time series 2-1 and will meet the Wildcats for the first time as SEC opponents.

Kentucky enters 2026 under first-year head coach and former Oregon offensive coordinator Will Stein, whose high-powered offenses helped the Ducks rank second in the Big Ten last season. Senior Notre Dame transfer Kenny Minchey is expected to take over at quarterback as Stein looks to reshape the Wildcats' offense.

After a disappointing 5-7 campaign in 2025, Kentucky hopes to take a step forward, but it will be challenged by an OU defense that is projected to once again rank among the nation's elite. The Sooners return one of the SEC's projected top defensive units, anchored by junior defensive lineman David Stone and fifth-year linebacker Kip Lewis.

Oct. 24 at Mississippi State

The seventh game of OU's 2026 campaign sends the Sooners to Starkville for a matchup against Mississippi State, led by third-year head coach and former OU offensive coordinator Jeff Leiby.

Leiby's first year at Mississippi State was a difficult one, as the Bulldogs finished 2-10. Facing growing pressure entering his second season, he guided the program to a 5-8 record against one of the nation's toughest schedules, with several close contests against ranked opponents.

The meeting will mark the first in program history between OU and Mississippi State.

Oct. 31 vs. South Carolina

Gamecocks head coach Shane Beamer, a former OU assistant head coach for offense, returns to Norman for the second



Then-redshirt senior wide receiver Keontez Lewis and then-freshman offensive lineman Ryan Fodje during the game against Illinois State University on Aug. 30, 2025.



Junior defensive lineman Wyatt Gilmore and senior defensive lineman Taylor Wein led OU's defense last season.

FILE/OU DAILY



FILE/OU DAILY

OU lost to Alabama in the first round of the College Football Playoff on Dec. 19, 2025.

time since taking over the program. The teams first met in 2024, when South Carolina earned a 35-9 road victory. OU responded the following season by traveling to Columbia, SC and tying the series with a 26-7 win at Williams-Brice Stadium.

South Carolina returns senior quarterback LaNorris Sellers, along with edge rusher Dylan Stewart, a projected first-round selection in the 2027 NFL Draft.

In last season's victory, running back Tory Blaylock powered the Sooners on the ground with 101 rushing yards, and establishing the run could once again be key to the Sooners' success.

Nov. 7 at Florida

For the first time in program history, OU will travel to "The Swamp" to take on Florida.

Although this will be the Sooners' first meeting with the Gators as SEC opponents, the programs have met twice before. Florida defeated OU 24-14 in the 2009 BCS National Championship game before the Sooners earned a measure of revenge in the 2020 Cotton Bowl, routing the Gators 55-20.

Florida enters 2026 under new leadership after hiring former Tulane head coach Jon Sumrall. The Gators will also be breaking in a new quarterback following the transfer of former five-star recruit DJ Lagway to Baylor. Sophomore Tramell Jones Jr. and junior Aaron Philo are expected to compete for the starting job throughout fall camp.

Nov. 14 vs. Mississippi

Coming off a season that ended in the College Football Playoff semifinals, Mississippi returns much of its core for a pivotal mid-November showdown in Norman. Sixth-year quarterback Trinidad Chambliss and junior running back Kewan Lacy, two of Mississippi's most dynamic offensive playmakers, both announced they would return for the season. Mississippi enters 2026 with Pete Golding as head coach after Lane Kiffin's midseason departure.

Mississippi has won all three meetings in the series, dating back to 1999. The team's two most recent victories came in the 2024 and 2025 seasons.

Last season, OU wide receiver Isaiah Sategna burst onto the scene with a long touchdown that nearly sparked a Sooner comeback, and with Sategna returning for his fifth-year campaign, he'll be a player to watch.

Nov. 21 vs. Texas A&M

For the first time since the 2013 Cotton Bowl, when Heisman Trophy winner Johnny Manziel led Texas A&M to a 41-13 victory, the Sooners and the Aggies will meet in Norman. The matchup renews a rivalry that dates back to 1903, with OU holding a 19-12 advantage in the all-time series.

This time, however, both programs enter with new faces and heightened expectations. Texas A&M returns senior quarterback Marcel Reed, who elected to forgo the NFL Draft after leading the Aggies on a surprising run to the College Football Playoff under head coach Mike Elko.

OU also exceeded expectations in 2025, closing the regular season with four straight victories to finish 10-2 before falling to Alabama in the opening round of the College Football Playoff. With this matchup serving as the second-to-last game of the regular season, it could carry significant College Football Playoff implications for both teams.

Nov. 28 at Missouri

The Sooners close the 2026 regular season on the road against Missouri, renewing a rivalry that once defined the Big 12 before the Tigers departed for the SEC. Now reunited in the same conference, the annual matchup has taken on new significance.

Much like the previous week's showdown with Texas A&M, this contest could carry major College Football Playoff implications. Missouri is coming off an 8-5 season under head coach Eli Drinkwitz and will be looking to rebound in 2026.

OU holds a commanding 68-25-5 advantage in the all-time series. Last season, the Sooners delivered one of their best defensive performances of the year, defeating the Tigers 17-6 in a victory that vaulted them into the top 10 of the national rankings.

Missouri is expected to be led by former Mississippi quarterback Austin Simmons, who transferred to Columbia, MO in January. Meanwhile, the status of star running back Ahmad Hardy remains uncertain heading into the season after being shot in May.

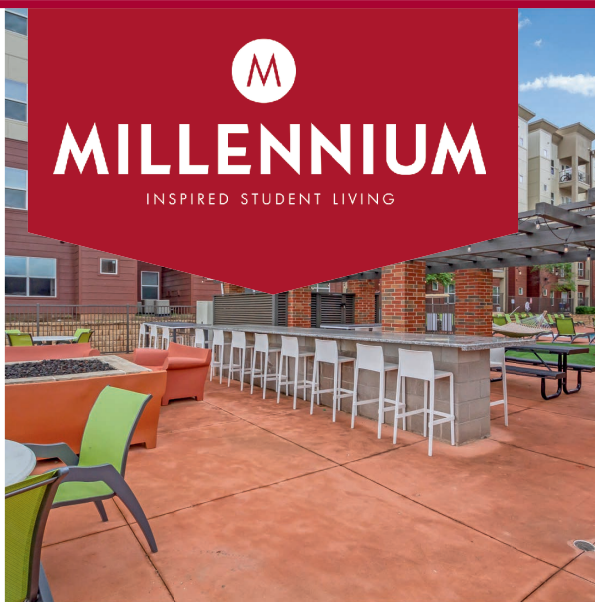


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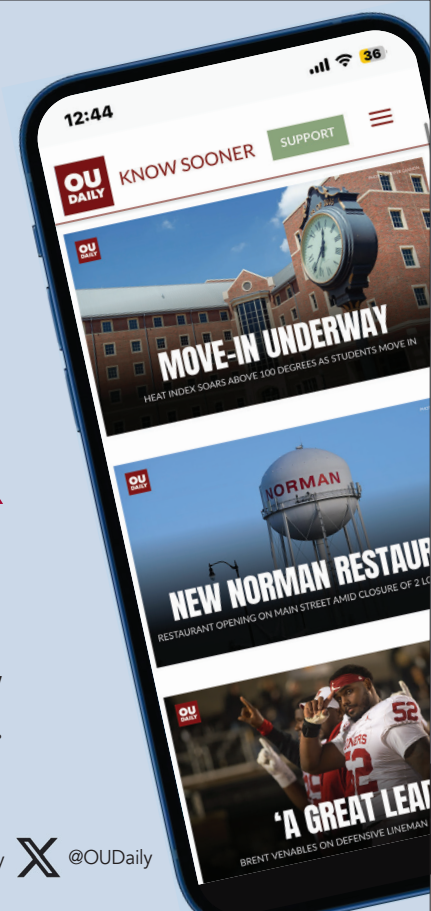
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DEFENSIVE LINE

OU defensive line ready to tackle 2026 season

BY JOSH FRANKLIN •
JOSHUA.T.FRANKLIN-1@OU.EDU

OU's defensive line is one of its most experienced position groups heading into the 2026 season.

Despite losing Damonic Williams, Gracen Halton, Marvin Jones Jr. and R Mason Thomas to the NFL, the Sooners retained three of their most productive players on the defensive frontline. Juniors Jayden Jackson and David Stone and senior Taylor Wein headline the group that will battle it out in the trenches.

Stone is the most productive returner for OU, registering 43 total tackles, 16 solo, 1.5 sacks and one pass deflection last season; marking him as OU's No. 7 overall defensive player in total tackles in 2025 and the No. 1 overall defensive lineman in that category, ahead of players like Halton and Thomas. The Del City native had a breakout season after registering just six total tackles in the 2024 season.

"David Stone, who's a very highly recruited guy coming out of high school, is the top guy in the country," head coach Brent Venables said at SEC Media Days. "(Many people) proclaimed him or wrote stories about (how) he might be a bust and things of that nature. He didn't listen to any of that. He just put his head down and worked and had an outstanding sophomore year."

Wein also had a breakout season in 2025, posting the second-most tackles among defensive linemen with 39 total tackles, 22 solo, 7 sacks, one pass deflection, one interception and a forced fumble. Similar to Stone, Wein's 2024 season saw very little production with just two tackles, but he elevated his game in 2025 to become an all-SEC second-team player and one of the most formidable players in the box.

"Taylor Wein's ... one of the lowest paid guys on our roster, a guy that we offered his senior year in high school

SHAYFER CANNON/OU DAILY

Junior defensive lineman Jayden Jackson's tenure on the team is set to shape him into a leader this season.



in the playoffs, ..." Venables said about Wein's standing before 2025. "All Taylor did was become an all-SEC player (and) lead our team. ... And so I say that just to remind, certainly myself, but everybody, that every year there's a new storyline when it comes to players emerging, players coming out of nowhere."

The last key returner for OU is Jayden Jackson, who has been a steady force over the last two seasons. His 2025 stats include 28 total tackles, 12 solo and three sacks, which nearly mirrors 2024, when he had 30 total tackles, 10 solo and two sacks.

Jackson's high usage in both of OU's previous Southeastern Conference seasons give him the experience to be one of the leaders both on and off the field for OU's freshman class, which features four-star edge Jake Kreul and three-star defensive lineman James Carrington.

"This is a line of scrimmage league. Make no mistake about it. The margins are incredibly small," Venables said. "I would argue that if you lose the line of scrimmage in any particular game, most of the time, you're going to lose the game. It's not by if you're going to lose; it's by how much you're going to lose. So that's where it starts for us. It's not only a mentality. You recruit to that. You nurture that."



FILE/OU DAILY

Junior defensive lineman David Stone is one of OU's top returners to the defensive line.

HEINECKE

An unexpected encore: Owen Heinecke's final season



FILE/OU DAILY

OU linebacker Owen Heinecke after his court hearing on April 16, 2026.

BY CHARLIE DIVINCENZO • CHARLES.R.DIVINCENZO-1@OU.EDU

Just months after a breakout 2025 campaign, Owen Heinecke faced the possibility that his OU football career was over.

Instead, a successful court challenge granted the linebacker one more year of eligibility, bringing back one of the Sooners' defensive leaders for a season raising championship hopes.

Heinecke totaled 74 tackles, four pass deflections and a forced fumble in his third full season of college football after just 11 combined tackles the previous years. However, as he looked to improve further, his college career almost came to an end because of an unusual eligibility situation.

Having appeared in three games for Ohio State's lacrosse team in 2021, the NCAA counted the season as a full year of eligibility, retroactively exhausting his final year. Like several athletes across the country challenging eligibility rulings, Heinecke filed for an injunction and took his case to court. Cleveland County District Court Judge Thad Balkman ruled in Heinecke's favor, granting him one final season of eligibility.

"I'm appreciative of Judge Balkman and his discernment. I'm excited — Sooner for one more year," Heinecke said following the ruling.

Head coach Brent Venables believes the sixth-year linebacker has yet to reach his full potential.

"The game was just starting to slow down for Owen," Venables testified during Heinecke's trial. "I really believe there's another opportunity for Owen to take a huge leap. ... He's just scratching the surface on what he can become."

Heinecke's unique path has provided some advantages. He participated in OU's 2026 Pro Day for NFL draft prospects and received valuable feedback from scouts on areas of his game that still needed refinement. That experience gave Heinecke a clearer understanding of what it takes to reach the next level, a mindset he will carry into his final collegiate season.

"I was able to kind of get the sneak peek of what all these NFL scouts think of me and what these coaches want from me, ..." Heinecke said at OU's fall media day on Aug. 4. "To come back and have a year in college to kind of develop that skill set going forward, I think is a huge head start for me, and one that I'm really excited about."

As Heinecke settles back in, Venables sees the linebacker working to raise an already high bar.

"He shows up in the building every day trying to raise the standard, ..." Venables said on Aug. 4. "When you care more, you'll do more, and when you do more, that's what it looks like as far as having a chance to have a championship type of locker room."

Junior defensive lineman Danny Okoye believes Heinecke's return extends far beyond what he brings on the field, pointing to the veteran linebacker's leadership as one of the team's biggest assets.

"We kind of needed another leader on defense, ..." Okoye said on April 18. "Having him back in the room is definitely going to be a great benefit for our defense. ... Having a dude in the room who has experience, who has film, who has that voice, who people will listen to, is always going to be great."

Heinecke was a constant presence during spring practice, even while awaiting clearance. He regularly helped teammates during drills despite not being able to participate himself, displaying the leadership qualities that have been part of his identity since high school.

Former Bishop Kelley High School teammate Kale Livesay

believes the extra year of eligibility will only add to Heinecke's impact on the field and the locker room.

"I have no doubt that (eligibility) experience has motivated him even more to make the most out of every practice, every game and every opportunity he gets this season," Livesay wrote in texts to OU Daily. "If anyone is going to play with something to prove, it's Owen."

Livesay wrote that when sharing a locker room with him in high school, he saw firsthand Heinecke's competitive edge and

leadership that elevated everyone around him.

"He made us feel like losing was not an option," Livesay wrote. "He made us feel like we were all working as hard as him (even if we weren't) and he would ensure that each of us were putting 110% into every play."

Another former high school teammate, Grayson Hall, remembers Heinecke's ability to lead.

"(Heinecke was) most definitely a leader. But more so by actions," Hall wrote in texts to the Daily. "Never was the one to give the speech in the locker room but definitely someone you wanted to follow out the gate onto the field."

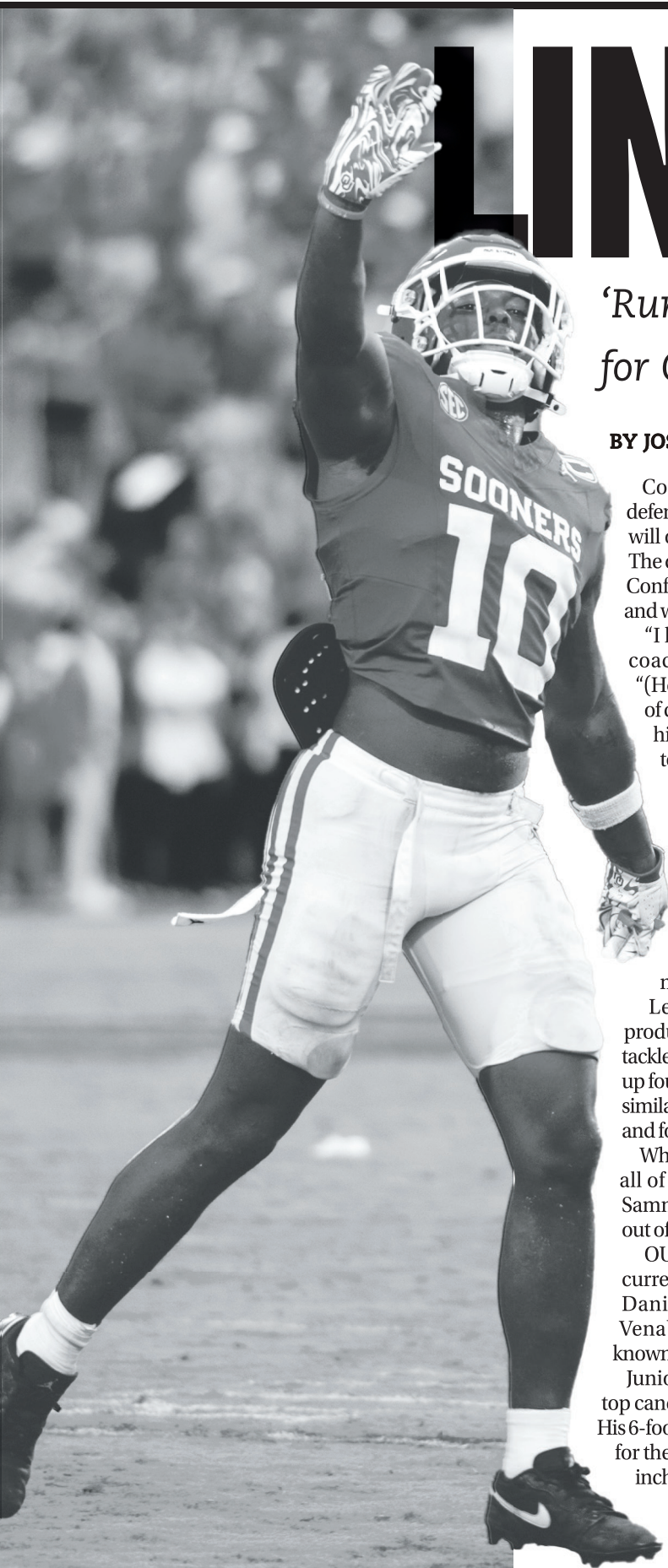
Those who knew Heinecke long before he became one of OU's defensive leaders say his return is the culmination of years of relentless work, and they expect him to make every snap of his final season count.

"He's a different breed," Hall wrote. "The dedication he has is unmatched and OU is incredibly lucky to have him. He's going to leave everything he has out (on) the field."

SHAYFER CANNON/OU DAILY

Heinecke's class was disputed due to the three lacrosse games he played at Ohio State in 2021.





LINEBACKERS

'Run the show': Linebackers to play crucial role for OU defense

BY JOSH FRANKLIN • JOSHUA.T.FRANKLIN-1@OU.EDU

Coming off his third straight year as a top-three defensive contributor, fifth-year linebacker Kip Lewis will once again be in command of the OU defense. The defense claimed the top spot in the Southeastern Conference in opponent yards and points per game, and was in the top seven nationally in both metrics.

"I love watching Kip play on game day, ..." head coach Brent Venables said at spring media day. "(He's) one of the most disruptive linebackers in all of college football that's invested in this program, ... his wisdom and all of his experience is just going to be great."

Lewis' partner in disrupting offenses across the country is sixth-year Owen Heinecke, a player who burst into stardom in 2025 and continued to make headlines after the season was over with his eligibility dispute.

"Owen's just a guy you want to fight for, and we've got a locker room full of great young men," general manager Jim Nagy said at spring media day.

Lewis and Heinecke were the Sooners' most productive defensive players in 2025. Lewis made 76 tackles and wreaked havoc on quarterbacks by picking up four sacks and four pass deflections. Heinecke had similar numbers, recording 74 total tackles, three sacks and four pass deflections.

While OU was able to retain both, it couldn't hoard all of its wealth at the position as former Sooners Sammy Omosigho and Kobie McKinzie transferred out of Norman following the 2025 season.

OU also saw the departure of former Sooner and current Atlanta Falcons linebacker Kendal Daniels. Daniels was a versatile player for OU that filled Venables' hybrid linebacker-defensive back role known as the "Cheetah."

Junior defensive back Reggie Powers is among the top candidates to slide into the starting "Cheetah" role. His 6-foot, 212-pound frame puts him on the smaller side for the role, considering Daniels was listed at 6 feet, 5 inches and 242 pounds; however, Powers was able to

make an impact in 2025 by recording 31 tackles, one sack, one pass deflection and a forced fumble.

As for the traditional linebacker role, a handful of players could see their names in the mix with Lewis and Heinecke in 2026. Senior Taylor Heim and junior transfer Cole Sullivan look to be the frontrunners to fill Omosigho and McKinzie's spots.

Heim registered tackles in five games for OU in 2025, including wins against then-No. 4 Alabama and then-No. 22 Missouri, and recorded 12 tackles and half a sack in his outings. Sullivan spent the last two seasons at Michigan, where he was the No. 3 linebacker for the Wolverines. He recorded 44 tackles, two sacks, three interceptions and a forced fumble in 2025, making him a top-five defensive player in Ann Arbor.

"The expectation here is for the linebackers to run the show," Sullivan said on April 9. "Coach Venables emphasizes that, stresses that to us, so that's definitely important for us to be able to command the defense."

FILE/OU DAILY

Junior linebacker Cole Sullivan during spring practice on March 30, 2026.



FILE/OU DAILY

Fifth-year linebacker Kip Lewis finished last season as a top-three defensive contributor for a third consecutive year.

DEFENSIVE BACKS

Top players return to OU's defensive backs unit

BY JOSH FRANKLIN

• JOSHUA.T.FRANKLIN-1@OU.EDU

OU's secondary is positioned to have another strong year after it finished fourth in the Southeastern Conference in passing yards allowed per game, an improvement from seventh place, out of 16, in its inaugural campaign in the league.

Spearheading the no-fly-zone are defensive backs Courtland Guillory and brothers Peyton and Eli Bowen under the leadership of new cornerbacks coach LaMar Morgan, who spent the last two seasons at Michigan, and safeties coach Brandon Hall, who has been with the program since 2022.

Junior defensive back

after Kendal Daniels' departure to the NFL. Powers saw time at the Sooners' hybrid "Cheetah" position in 2025 and is now a leading candidate to step in as the starter, transitioning from his traditional defensive back role to one that includes both defensive back and linebacker duties.

Guillory solidified himself as a worthy replacement for former Sooner and current Atlanta Falcon Billy Bowman Jr., who was drafted in 2025 following four seasons in Norman. The Houston native drew praise from teammates for his growth during his freshman season, in which he was tested by some of the top receivers in the league.

"He didn't waver," Peyton Bowen said ahead of OU's 2025 matchup with Tennessee. "His moment got called again. (He had) those plays that were iffy in the Auburn game, but he was still there (and) in a position to make it. He was panicked. It's what freshmen do, and so the way he bounced back now ... just shows how good of a player he's going to be."

Guillory was tested in OU's win over Auburn on Sept. 20 when he played 6-foot-3-inch wide receiver Cam Coleman, who is now a Texas Longhorn. Coleman caught three passes for 88 yards and a touchdown that day, getting the better of the young defensive back. However, for the rest of the season, Guillory deflected the most passes on the team, helping him finish tied for first on the team in 2025 and 13th in the SEC.

Peyton Bowen enters his senior season as the most experienced player within the position group and can extend his streak of reliability in the secondary. He has appeared in every game, posted at least 33 tackles a year over the last three seasons, racked up seven pass breakups, and registered two interceptions during the 2025 season.

Peyton Bowen's younger brother, junior defensive back Eli Bowen, looks to recreate the production he provided in both his freshman and sophomore seasons. Eli Bowen recorded 24 tackles, three pass deflections and two interceptions in nine starts in 2025 and has recorded at least three pass breakups and an interception in both seasons. With Eli Bowen's experience over the last two seasons, he is poised to be another leader of the secondary.

"I'm not usually talkative, and I'm not a big leadership guy with words. I'm more by action," Eli Bowen said on April 13. "(Being an upperclassman) called me to be more talkative and help other guys to get their process in getting help with connecting the playbook with each call."

Guillory and the Bowen brothers gear up for another season against some of the top receiving threats in the country, but after sharing the field for a season, they have more chemistry and experience.

Reggie Powers is poised for an expanded role in 2026

FILE/OU DAILY

Brothers Eli and Peyton Bowen return for their junior and senior seasons as defensive backs.





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A young man with dark hair, wearing a blue t-shirt, is sitting in the driver's seat of a car. He is smiling and looking towards the camera. His hands are on the steering wheel. The car's interior, including the dashboard and rearview mirror, is visible. The background shows a blurred street scene.

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