

'I'M NOT TRYING TO WAIT TO BE GREAT'

Urgency ripples as Big 12 era ends, SEC challenges loom

By Colton Sulley | Pages 4-7

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FROM THE EDITOR



RAY BAHNER/OU DAILY

Gaylord Family-Oklahoma Memorial Stadium during the OU football spring game.

Join us as we kick off a new season

Dear OU Daily readers,
Thank you for following our sports coverage and picking up our 2023 OU Football Preview.

This fall, I'm honored to serve as the OU Daily's sports editor, following in past editors Mason Young and Austin Curtright's footsteps. It's a responsibility I don't take lightly.

As a senior heading into my second season on the OU football beat, I'm excited to continue taking our audience through the ebbs and flows of the season. Covering football for the OU Daily has, without a doubt, been the best experience of my life. It's given me lifelong friendships with Young and Curtright and experiences I'll never forget such as covering Brent Venables' first season as head coach, wandering through the cornfields of Nebraska, late nights at the State Fair of Texas and losing my AirPods in Ames, Iowa.

I'm super pumped to welcome assistant sports editors Jason Batacao and Louis Raser to the beat. This preview features stories from the three of us, including my piece following Venables' quest to flip the switch in his second season.

In this publication you'll also find stories on two Sooners assistants — new wide receivers coach Emmett Jones and running backs coach DeMarco Murray — who also aim to help Venables lead OU to success before it heads to the SEC in 2024.

On the topic of the SEC move, this preview contains a story detailing OU's tailgating initiative for the conference,

with quotes from President Joseph Harroz Jr., Athletic Director Joe Castiglione, conference commissioner Greg Sankey and Norman leaders.

Other stories include a deep dive into Venables' linebackers and defensive line, including new transfer Da'Jon Terry, and game-by-game previews detailing the Sooners' opponents this season, including new Big 12 members BYU, Cincinnati and UCF.

In addition to the many stories we'll write this season, you can listen to our rebranded OU Sports Podcast: From OU Daily on Spotify and Apple Podcasts. Make sure to follow all of our work at oudaily.com and on our various social media pages, home or away, all season long.

While we have high expectations set by our predecessors, I couldn't be more excited for this season and the team of talented sports writers we have on hand.

Let's get it.



Colton Sulley

Sports editor

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COVER STORY



RAY BAHNER/OU DAILY

OU football head coach Brent Venables during the game against TCU in Fort Worth, Texas, in October 2022.

IT'S CRUNCH TIME

VENABLES IS FULL STEAM AHEAD, BUILDING THE SOONERS FOR SUCCESS IN FINAL BIG 12 SEASON AND AHEAD OF 2024 SEC MOVE

BY COLTON SULLEY • COLTON.M.SULLEY-1@OU.EDU

While en route from Norman to South Carolina on a private jet to interview Brent Venables, Oklahoma Athletic Director Joe Castiglione told the traveling party his plan.

OU President Joseph Harroz Jr., Tim Headington — the Sooners' wealthiest donor — and Zac Selmon, then-deputy athletic director, all understood their orders when they arrived at Venables' home on Lake Keowee on Dec. 5, 2021. They were to hear about Venables' philosophy for their football program then huddle in a separate room to discuss where to go from there.

About 10 minutes into the former Clemson and OU defensive coordinator's emotional spiel about what is now OU's S.O.U.L. Mission program for student-athlete development, OU's president couldn't help himself.

He shot up from the couch and blurted out: "Hey, will you be our head coach?"

Castiglione glared at Harroz, who had ruined his plan, but ultimately gave him the go-ahead as Venables, one of a few coaches on their shortlist, replied, "Are you offering?"

"It was just a hilarious moment," Harroz told the OU Daily. "Because I totally did not handle the moment well. I got caught up in it and wasn't about to wait."

The energy the group felt in the room after signing their new head man to a fully guaranteed 6-year, \$43.5 million contract hasn't wavered an inch over a year and a half later even as the first-time head coach has overhauled a bludgeoned roster, lost his executive director of football administration and is racing to prepare his team to enter the SEC a year earlier than expected.

Although Venables led the Sooners to a 6-7 record in his first season — the program's worst since 1998 — Castiglione believes OU is on schedule for Venables' plan ahead of moving to the SEC in 2024.

"We can't anticipate all of the world we are facing, all of the disruption that happens and evolves in ways that few can predict," Castiglione told the OU Daily in July, before the Big 12 and the Big Ten pillaged the Pac-12's members on Aug. 4. "But that's just the point of how a leader needs to be positioned to be able to adapt, pivot and evolve without compromising a vision or the values."

"It doesn't mean your tactics may not change or alter a little bit based on how you're navigating something, but you don't get your eyes off of focusing on the things that matter most and the way you go about it, and what we're trying to do to build a program of success long term. (Venables has) been exceptionally disciplined and I think in the long run you're going to see how the dividends result from that."

Just like Castiglione entered Venables' interview with patience, the Sooners' second-year head coach is doing the same with the program he leads. While he wants to win now, Venables is realistic about how long it might take, especially given that first and second year players make up 76% of OU's roster.

While such inexperience would seem daunting for many coaches, it excites Venables. After a disappointing first season, he signed the highest-rated recruiting class in program history, ranked No. 4 ahead of Ohio State and comprised of players Venables handpicked to position OU to compete in the SEC.

"Building something and the improvement process takes time, but I'm not trying to wait to be great," Venables told the OU Daily during a one-on-one 15-minute



RAY BAHNER/OU DAILY

OU football head coach Brent Venables and OU President Joseph Harroz Jr. during the game against Nebraska in September 2022.

interview in his office. "That's my mindset. So, do I know that in five years we'll be in a much different place, much more stable several years into our new league and things of that nature?"

"Yeah. But my mindset is to improve every day and all the improvement can't happen fast enough."

'DNA has been proven'

Venables thought he might be dying while he laid on the floor of the then-Reliant Stadium coaches' locker room pregame on Dec. 7, 2002. It wasn't the first time life, and the way Venables meets it head on, left him staggered.

While Venables remembers receiving four IV bags, a shot of Phenergan and a suppository, then-co-defensive coordinator Mike Stoops and his staff panicked. Stoops was in charge of calling the defensive plays and it was Venables' job to signal them to the players from the sideline.

And only Venables knew the signals.

"Who the hell's going to signal?" Venables remembers Stoops yelling.

Notoriously energetic, Venables felt ill on the bus ride to the venue but toughed it out during warmups, hyping up his players before the game. The Sooners were minutes from facing Colorado in the Big 12 Championship Game when Venables passed out.

"That's the only time I've ever seen a coach that had to go in pregame and get put on an IV," Bobby Jack Wright, then-Oklahoma's defensive ends coach, told the OU Daily.

The treatment worked, though Venables had a team manager stand behind him throughout the game in case he passed out again. He didn't and the Sooners defeated the Buffaloes 29-7.

It wouldn't be the last time he required help on the sideline, however. During his time at Clemson, Venables

became nationally known for having a "get-back" coach, the Tigers' strength and conditioning coach Adam Smotherman, whose game-day job was to pull Venables off the playing field in the most frenzied moments during Tigers' games.

Harroz has grown accustomed to, and even had fun with, Venables' intensity. The president shared that he's invited the coach to play golf — a sport that requires a quiet, controlled composure — and took advantage of his boundless energy, defeating him handily.

Harroz, of course, just needs Venables to shine on the football field. And Bill Snyder and Mark Mangino remember Venables' unparalleled passion there from the first day he strapped on pads after transferring to Kansas State from Garden City Community College in 1991 at 20.

"He was probably as into it as any player we've ever had," said Snyder, a Hall of Famer who coached at Kansas State from 1989-2005 and 2009-18. "He was an extremely hard worker, he caught your attention through how well he dedicated his attention to what he was doing."

"Probably as focused of an individual on the football field as you can imagine. A toughness that went right along with all the other characteristics he had and still a good guy off the field. ... He knew how to make that transition on the football field."

Snyder has known not only Venables, but his wife, Julie, since their earliest days together as Kansas State students, to their 1997 marriage and beyond.

Snyder's appreciation for Venables' all-in approach to everything he does led him to make Venables a graduate assistant once he ran out of eligibility. Mangino, then the Wildcats' run game coordinator, remembers looking out onto the practice field and thinking Venables was a player going through drills.

One day during an intense drill with running backs and linebackers, Venables said something to one of Mangino's players. "Brent," Mangino remembers sternly telling him afterward, "coach your own guys!"

"Boy was he a worker as a GA, he flew around that office. If somebody said, 'Hey Brent, we need this done by 2 o'clock,' it was done at 1 o'clock," Mangino told the OU Daily of Venables, who is up against a new clock in preparation for the SEC. "When we left the practice field, he was just as full of sweat as the players were."

"I remember that you had to hold him back sometimes, he started flying around. ... How could you not love this guy? He's got the energy and the enthusiasm of a 10-year-old kid, I'm telling you, he's got energy going out the windows."

Fast forward to 2023 and Venables, who made \$7 million last season, still gives position groups individual attention and still hops in drills with players. If players aren't doing something correctly, Venables will show — and tell — them how it's done, jackknifing his arms and pumping his feet and bellowing instructions for all to hear.

When Venables and Mangino joined Bob Stoops at Oklahoma in 1999, the program was in shambles. OU was fresh off five consecutive seasons at or below .500, the facilities were in awful shape and Stoops' staff worked in portable buildings the first month on the job.

Their arrival came during the program's lowest point before last season's disappointment. Venables brought the same intensity from K-State to Norman as co-defensive

coordinator with Mike Stoops and helped lead OU's dramatic turnaround to 7-5 in '99 and then a national title in 2000. Wright said while that first-year team didn't always win with Venables helping run the defense, he never felt like the Sooners entered a contest unprepared.

"The great thing was just his preparedness going into every ball game," Wright said. "He was always super prepared. The guy was always one that would always go the extra mile to look at one more clip of video even though you might have watched that game three or four times already."

After learning from Snyder as a player and a young coach, learning from a national championship coach in Bob Stoops who built sustained success, and winning two more national championships at Clemson, Venables called on all those experiences when stepping onto the sideline as a head coach for the first time last fall.

He keeps in touch with all three coaches he's worked under. Snyder even phoned him before he accepted the OU job, not to tell him whether to take it, but to make sure it was actually something he desired and that OU fit with his feelings.

What has Venables taken with him from those three legends?

"Don't get distracted on what it takes and what you're looking for," Venables said. "The DNA has been proven at three great programs in Kansas State and what Coach Snyder was able to do there, and then the renaissance of Oklahoma football and Bob Stoops and then being a small part of what Dabo Swinney has done at Clemson.

"It's the same DNA at all three places and as people, you've got to be good enough. You have to be talented enough, but you've got to find the right people to get all that stuff, even if it's a little shorter and maybe a step slower. It's about finding the right people, and people always make the place."

'We do care about family'

Hearing Venables' passion for family, trust and the goal with S.O.U.L. mission was exactly what Harroz needed to hear.

Seven days before meeting with Venables, Castiglione, Harroz and Bob Stoops, the Sooners' head coach from 1999-2016, witnessed then-OU coach Lincoln Riley tell his team on the morning of Nov. 28, 2021, that he was leaving the program he led for five seasons.

Riley had agreed to become USC's head coach and subsequently took four on-field coaches and three players with him, including starting quarterback Caleb Williams, who won the Heisman Trophy with the Trojans in 2022.

"That's hard to watch," Harroz said of Riley's exit. "Because we talk about character and about family and about doing the right thing, about putting team above self. And all of a sudden, an entire team finds out that the coach is leaving. And that can feel hollow, when it's that uncereemonious, and you find out in that way, and then the coach is gone."

The trio acted swiftly, banding together to not only try to retain players while preparing for a bowl game, but also to console the leaders in the locker room. Harroz met with captains Pat Fields, Jeremiah Hall, Caleb Kelly and Spencer Rattler.

"We do care about family," Harroz told them. "And we



REGHAN KYLE/OU DAILY

Head coach Brent Venables during the game against Kansas in October 2022.

care about you."

Harroz said it was basically a complete 180, going from watching the players learn Riley was leaving to interviewing Venables and hearing his passionate vision for players — on and off the field. It all left him so ready to run through a wall he instead interjected with the job offer.

And while Castiglione might have wanted a more tempered approach, he told the OU Daily that Venables was the first person he thought of to fill the Sooners' vacancy when he learned of Riley's decision. The two had stayed in touch after Venables left OU in 2012 after 13 years to lead Clemson's defense and Venables said familiarity played an important part in his return to Norman.

"Trying to take a program that's been really good for a long time to great (was attractive to me)," Venables said. "And that's in every part. So culturally, systematically in some ways, and then in many ways too, carry on the rich history and tradition in the most tumultuous time in college football history with the portal and NIL."

It's only going to get tougher for Venables and the Sooners. Joining the conference where everything "just means more," has its challenges as big-time schools are on the docket seemingly every weekend. Next season, for example, OU will host Alabama, Tennessee and South Carolina, while playing at, among others, Auburn, LSU and Mississippi.

Venables is crystal clear on where he wants OU to be. He understands the expectations he inherited and isn't shying away from them.

"Nobody's ever just walked away from Oklahoma," said Venables, zooming right past Riley's exit that facilitated this opportunity. "I had several amazing conversations about the vision of our program, and how we do what we do, I think, was attractive to them. Football's incredibly

important, this is a performance-based profession, I'm in charge of winning games, but how we do it matters to the leadership of this university, and that is aligned with my values as well."

One of the most important agendas in Venables' blueprint was finding someone to lead S.O.U.L. mission, the player developmental program that stands for "Serving Our Uncommon Legacy." Venables thought of one of the best linebackers he's ever coached and a eight-year NFL veteran: Curtis Lofton.

After an hour-long phone conversation with Lofton's wife, Venables hired him as director of S.O.U.L. Mission, specializing in life skills and as NFL liaison. Lofton, who played under him at OU from 2005-07, grew up without his father and credits Venables for building him into the man he is today.

"He not only made me a great football player, he was a teacher of the game," Lofton told the OU Daily. "(He) made me a great football player, but more importantly, the way he led his family and the way he was a father were some of the things that I implemented and are some of the reasons why I'm back doing what I'm doing.

"Because I don't have to. I've been really successful in my life and I don't really need a job, but to whom much is given, much is required. Part of the reason why I was successful was because of Brent Venables. ... Without him, I wouldn't be Curtis Lofton."

Doing the same for others is the job Venables is in Norman to pay forward, just as others did for him coming out of the challenging circumstances he faced growing up.

'Keep the main thing the main thing'

The closeness of exactly those old bonds led Mangino to pick up the phone in February and dial an old friend.

In Oklahoma City to visit his daughter, Mangino asked Venables if he could spend a day at the Sooners' facilities and chat with the coaching staff. Upon arrival, the atmosphere was better than he could've imagined and he left feeling better than he already did about Castiglione's hire of Venables.

"Nothing's changed. Brent is super positive," Mangino said. "They have done a tremendous job recruiting. When I went into the weight room and I saw the portal transfers and early signees and stuff, I was impressed. They've got some good looking cats now, I mean, they look like Oklahoma kids normally look."

One of the most encouraging signs to Mangino, other than the return of his buddy, strength and conditioning coach Jerry Schmidt, was the family atmosphere in the room. Mangino hasn't coached at OU since 2001 and he had players coming up to him, shaking his hand and welcoming him back to Norman.

Ask anyone on his staff, from his past or in his inner circle: Venables is going to succeed at OU. It's a matter of when, not if. All the way to Harroz, that view is resolute.

"With all the changes that are taking place in college football right now and in athletics as a whole, it is so easy to be discouraged," Harroz said amid another wave of conference realignment chaos. "It is so easy to get overwhelmed."

But reflecting on who leads the football team — a program whose "There's only one Oklahoma" slogan has become the catchphrase of the entire university's recent rebrand — gives him comfort.



REGHAN KYLE/OU DAILY

Head coach Brent Venables during open fall camp in August.

“The guy’s focused, he’s intense,” Harroz continued. “You see what he’s doing with recruiting classes, he knows who he is. And I’d say his energy is even greater than it was, which gets a little scary. The guy’s intense. But I’m a hundred percent in.”

Being around him as a coach, a friend and a player for decades, Snyder, Mangino and Lofton also believe the fires Venables has been through will help him succeed this season and have the Sooners SEC ready.

But this offseason didn’t start as planned.

Julie Venables was diagnosed with breast cancer on June 16 and underwent surgery on July 28 in New Orleans. The pair have four kids.

It’s the very dynamic of the game developing not just the player, but the man that has helped Venables persevere in battles like these before. He grew up in a household that experienced domestic violence. His mother died during the Sooners’ 2005 season after spending her final days living with Brent and Julie in Norman. In the span of two days in 2011, he lost a linebacker he coached, Austin Box, to an overdose, and his brother, Kirk, who was 43.

Mangino said he’d known Venables for 20-plus years before learning some deeper details of Venables’ upbringing. Venables mostly kept things inside but would occasionally open up to him.

Years later, in a season that will demand both in new ways, Venables is closer to mastering the balance of football and family life.

“It’s all about family,” Venables said. “So in every way, your football life is your family. Not the game, but the football family, and so you’re on this journey together as a family. It reflects your faith and you prioritize. I say, ‘Keep the main thing the main thing,’ and be faithful to things that you believe in, and that helps. That’s your compass, for you to prioritize and not lose your way.”

As a stack of papers canvas his desk like his hallmark defenses and countless meetings jam his schedule like pass rushers swarming an opposing quarterback, Venables is figuring out how to lead a program and the people in it to success on and off the field, in football and in life.

To Venables, success isn’t measured by the number of trophies lining the Switzer Center, or whether he someday

earns a statue on campus like four of his predecessors.

“(Success) is our love for one another, how competitive we are, and our ability to overcome,” he says, sharing one last piece of his overall vision as he rushes out of his office to make it to a meeting he’s late for, 32 days before the season opener and 11 months before his team transitions to the SEC.

“How we measure our success is the type of men that we develop to the game. It’s improving, it’s getting better. It’s getting the most out of what we got, and it’s maximizing a small window and all those areas that I’ve said. Nothing takes a backseat to anything.

“It’s graduation. It’s boyhood to manhood. It’s our guys having an amazing college experience. I have failed them if they’re miserable and winning games. ... The fun’s in the winning no matter how you win.

“I don’t want to ever lose perspective. If we lose perspective, then you’re going to be miserable on your journey. ... We’ve got a small window on this earth and I want us to have love and appreciation and joy in the doing.”

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OU football passing game coordinator and wide receivers coach Emmett Jones during the Sooners' spring open practice in March.

NEW COACH DRIVES RECEIVERS INTO 2023

Emmett Jones aims to cultivate leadership and grow well-rounded players

BY LOUIS RASER • LOUIS.D.RASER-1@OU.EDU

When Skyline High School's coaches held meetings and film sessions during the 2006 season, Derick Roberson remembers a young, charismatic coach inserting himself.

Emmett Jones, at 31 and with five years as a high school assistant, entered the program as one of its younger coaches. His youth, however, didn't reflect his maturity.

Jones was a detail-oriented, game film junkie who brought a high standard of success along with him. If upholding that standard meant calling out more experienced coaches, he'd

do it.

And he did.

"It all came from his desire to win and the way he prepared and watched film," Roberson said. "If he saw a coach (make a mistake) he'd say, 'Man, I've watched the film, that's not what they're going to do.' He didn't have a problem letting you know that wasn't right. He wasn't (mean) when he was doing it, he was just pointing it out, like, 'Listen, if we're going to win, it has to be done this way.'"

Jones' remarks weren't taken as disrespect. The other coaches knew how much he prepared and watched film as well as his football IQ. In fact, Roberson, then in his eighth year at Skyline, found himself and a few other coaches doing the same in future meetings.

"I had never seen anybody like him," Roberson said. "He was way ahead of his years, and I think he made all of us around him better. He helped me become a head coach. ... I think we were all really good coaches and we're in these

positions now because of our abilities, but Emmett made it known, “This is the standard. And it has to be a standard of excellence.”

To him, his youth and inexperience were irrelevant; “Leadership has no age.”

Now, Jones reiterates the same four words to OU’s receiving core, one plagued with inexperience and youth. The Sooners don’t have a receiver with a 500-yard season on its roster. Sixth-year senior Drake Stoops and juniors Jalil Farooq and LV Bunkley-Shelton are the only ones with over 250-yard seasons.

Outside of those three are six freshmen, three sophomores and four upper-classmen, only two of whom have caught a pass in a collegiate game. Jones

has implemented a unique coaching style involving a different player a week working as a “teacher” in the room, regardless of their class.

“It gives us the opportunity to step up and get closer with the other (receivers),” freshman receiver Jaquaize Pettaway said. “Rather than the coach telling you what to fix in your routes and stuff, it could be one of your teammates who you’re close with telling you (how to improve) your break or your cuts. That coming from a player is really important. It’s really impactful because it’s coming from your brothers, and it’s going to make us all closer (in) the end.”

Jones believes it not only helps the development of the receivers in both the teacher and student roles, but contributes to an overarching theme he hopes to establish within the young group: brotherhood.

“My objective with (this) room is ... (to) bring everybody together, create a family, create a brotherhood atmosphere where we’re all in it together,” Jones said. “We are competing against each other, but at the same time, we’re all doing it for each other.”

Jones’ unique coaching style doesn’t just lie within the hash marks. After practice, he’d routinely make sure his players had rides home, were well-fed and attended class the next morning.

Jones keeps in contact with many of his former players, a testament to the relationships he built off the field. When former Texas standout receiver Mike Davis heard about Jones taking the job at OU, the bond with his former high school coach and father figure trumped the bitterness of the rivalry.

“Coach Jones is family to me,” Davis said. “I just want him to go where he’ll be happy and do what he knows how to do best, which is help guide young men to grown men, help young guys become pros and win games.

“I don’t want to twist it, I’m a Texas guy. But when it comes to coach Jones, that kinda stuff goes out the window. He can go

anywhere, I’ll still be the same supporter.”

Davis says Jones is one of the few coaches he’s been around who possesses the trifecta of coaching traits: teaching well on the field, getting his players mentally prepared and relating to his players.

Jones is as knowledgeable as anyone when it comes to X’s and O’s. It’s why he spent the majority of his early coaching days inside press boxes relaying information to Roberson. Former Kansas and current Cincinnati Bengals receiver Kwamie Lassiter II credits Jones for teaching him how to know the defense, a trait which helped him accumulate 1,463 yards in the three years Jones was there.

“Sometimes you’d see him in the locker room pacing back and forth, you’d think he was getting ready to put pads on,” Lassiter said. “He gives a good speech to the guys. He always had me ready to play, there was not one game I wasn’t ready to play, mentally, because he always had me fired up.”

It’s safe to say Jones has work to do to fill the 1,083-yard void left after Marvin Mims Jr. was drafted by the Denver Broncos. Roberson, however, believes OU’s young receivers will have more work cut out for them just to keep up with their new coach.

“The young receivers, they’re going to have to grow up fast,” Roberson said. “But he’s gonna have them ready.”

The belief comes from his experience alongside Jones.

“When he first got (to Skyline), we didn’t have the best receiving core,” Roberson said. “But he knew how to call plays to get them in the right position to make plays. And it was because he coaches them hard. He’s gonna let them know ‘Hey, when we’re on the field, it’s business. I’m trying to get you to a certain level. It’s not personal, so don’t get any (hard) feelings when I’m coaching you.’ And afterwards, he’s going to love them up. He’s going to tell them, ‘You didn’t do this well today but guess what, we have another opportunity tomorrow.’”

Jones claims OU’s receivers are one of the fastest groups to learn and adjust to his coaching style. He likes the variety of play style within the group, whether it be junior Andre Anthony’s speed, Pettaway’s explosiveness or Farooq’s run after catch ability, which Jones compared to that of longtime NFL player Percy Harvin.

Farooq told Jones early on his talent has always been used in the offenses he’s been a part of, but he’s never actually been taught how to play the position in full. Jones believes in a different approach.

“I want to enhance your talent while playing in a good system also,” Jones said. “That can make you more of a deadly player.”

Wanting well-rounded receivers carries over to recruiting, where Jones has seen a surge since taking the job at OU on Jan. 10. Of the 20 commitments the Sooners have landed in the 2024 class, six are receivers.

Jones shows his true colors during recruiting pitches.

“He’s straight up,” Roberson said. “He’s going to tell you how it’s going to be. He’s going to tell you that he’s gonna look out for you. He’s gonna be hard on you, but only to make you better. He’s gonna be there when you need someone to talk to whether it’s the middle of the night, early in the morning or whenever. He makes himself accessible to his players, and that’s communicated in the recruiting process. He wouldn’t have the success he has in recruiting if he wasn’t genuine.”



RAY BAHNER/OU DAILY

OU football passing game coordinator and wide receivers coach Emmett Jones during the Sooners’ spring open practice in March.

His authenticity is what attracted Brenen Thompson to transfer from Texas to the Sooners months after Jones was hired. Thompson, like four of OU’s 2024 receiver commits, attended high school in Texas, where Jones spent 19 of his 22 years coaching.

“He recruited me a lot in high school. And so I had that relationship previously built with him,” Thompson said. “And then (once I got) in the portal, it was all the same stuff. That taught me that this guy was telling the truth. This guy was being genuine. This guy was not telling me something that I wanted to hear, but was telling me what I needed to hear. For me, that was very important.”

Though his recruiting provides a bright glimpse into the future of OU’s receiver room, Jones took the job with the same expectation he had as a young Skyline assistant in 2006: immediate success. Despite a disappointing 6-7 finish in 2022 and anticipated growing pains in 2023, his expectation won’t waiver.

Jones’ high standard of excellence digs deep into his passion for his receivers, which he embodies in his training regimen, relatability and — most of all — his players who display it on the field.

The next step for Jones is translating it into success in the Sooners’ offense.

“This is personal to me,” Jones said. “It’s a process, (we’re taking it) one day at a time, but I didn’t come here to waste days. I came here to help coach Venables win championships and help these kids get to the level they want to go to.”



BOB NGUYEN/OU DAILY

OU football running backs coach DeMarco Murray and redshirt senior offensive lineman Aaryn Parks during the Sooners' spring open practice in March.

BUILDING A DIVERSE BACKFIELD

DeMarco Murray's explosive evolution on the field and rise to coaching

BY JASON BATACAO • JASON.F.BATACAO-1@OU.EDU

In the midst of OU strength and conditioning coach Jerry Schmidt's grueling summer workouts in 2006, an embattled DeMarco Murray often trailed none other than legendary Oklahoma running back Adrian Peterson.

To those that knew him best, Murray was the only redshirt freshman who had the athleticism to keep up with Peterson, but he was also, more importantly, tasked with learning from the superstar running back. Through Peterson's tutelage, Murray quickly bonded with the coaching staff and his teammates.

During drills one day, that leadership training demonstrated itself as Murray and wide receiver Adron Tennell almost

got into a fight. Lagging behind the pack, each player laboring under weighted vests, Tennell was struggling to finish within the allotted time.

If he missed it, Schmidt would make the entire group repeat the drill.

"Get your stuff together or we're gonna do this over again," Murray yelled at Tennell.

"I was mad," Tennell told the OU Daily. "We were really about to fight each other. It gave me a little little momentum, and I made it. Afterward, we didn't even think about that and didn't even worry about what happened in the locker room. We played some video games and suddenly just forgot about

it."

It was in such moments Murray displayed his ability to coach up players and lead with his voice, not only his talent.

Murray, using his wealth of knowledge from his seven-year pro career and four seasons as OU's running backs coach, is now leading Oklahoma's backfield from the sideline instead of the field and attempting to rejuvenate the Sooners from a 6-7 season in 2022.

In four years, Eric Gray, Rhamondre Stevenson and Kennedy Brooks have all landed in the NFL under Murray's coaching. Gray, specifically, led OU's backfield in 2022 — rushing for 1,366 yards and 11 touchdowns — before being

drafted in the fifth round of the 2023 NFL Draft.

As Oklahoma and coach Brent Venables transition to the SEC in 2024, a conference that produced the past two Heisman Trophy-winning running backs, Murray knows the importance of a strong rushing core in title-contending teams.

“For people who know football, that’s where the game is won, that’s where championships are won,” Murray told the OU Daily. “More importantly, that’s your identity. If you can run the football and you have a great group of guys that are physical.”

This season, Murray expects a much improved backfield with sophomore running back Jovantae Barnes and redshirt freshman Gavin Sawchuk at the helm, who each rushed 100 or more yards in Oklahoma’s loss to Florida State in the Cheez-It bowl.

Murray, nowadays, can be seen using the same vocality he once used against Tennell during practice. While generally still forthcoming and humble, the former Oklahoma running back was extremely quiet when he first arrived on campus as a four-star recruit.

“He came in real quiet and didn’t talk to any of us,” Former Oklahoma running back Mossis Madu told the OU Daily. “We were like, ‘Is this dude tryna Mr. Big Time Us or something because he was some Mr. Big Shot in high school?’”

‘Reserved and quiet’

Inside a noisy gym at Bishop Gorman High School in Las Vegas, DeMarco Murray sat quietly with his father, Kevin, on the bleachers during a high school basketball game.

Unbeknownst to Murray, then a high school freshman, the Gaels’ first-year head football coach David White was also in the building, and he was on the hunt for Murray, hoping to introduce himself.

“He was just kind of to himself, reserved and quiet to be honest with you,” White told the OU Daily of his first impression of Murray. “He had a look to him. He looked like a kid that had a little bit of some inner pride, that type of deal.”

After building trust with Murray and the team, the Gaels decidedly lost their first game 7-0 in 2002. White decided to shake up the roster, and moved Murray from outside linebacker to running back, a position he’d never played.

Initially, Murray and his father were hesitant, with no way of knowing White had — like a great running back — a vision for openings others might not initially see. The move ultimately put Murray into the position he’d play and coach the rest of his career.

With the ball in his hands, the former linebacker finally exploded onto the scene, and displayed a loudness in his cuts, confidence and work ethic that couldn’t be found in his voice.

“That next game he ran the ball,” White said, “he all of a sudden had an arrogance in his chest and now that confidence in who he thought he could be really started coming to life.”

From that point, Murray found his mojo and later earned DI commitments from top-notch programs like Oklahoma, USC and Miami. Murray’s once-famous bounce-off-the-wall-and-off-the-backboard dunk is what landed him on the radar of Bob Stoops, and the rest was history.

“He’s a joy to coach and a joy to be around team players,” Stoops told the OU Daily. “He’s just an all around great guy, and a great teammate to his buddies, very unselfish. You see all the times where he shared snaps and whatnot with Chris

Brown and the first guy hugging Chris Brown after a touchdown was always DeMarco. It just tells you about his character and humility, and so all of that makes for a great coach.”

After committing to the Sooners his senior year, Murray surprised Madu, who were both roommates and backfield mates, with his hushed approach. The player who many of the incoming freshmen compared to Reggie Bush, the 2005 vacated Heisman winner, had explosive tape but didn’t say much.

“That’s kinda how he comes off at times,” Madu said. “After he got to know us, he was one of the loudest ones in the room. That’s what people don’t really know about him. He was always one of the goofiest (players).”

With time, Madu and Murray slowly built a brotherhood during Schmidt’s legendary grueling double summer workouts.

Madu remembers Murray lifting him up during the intense workouts during their redshirt freshman season. “I’m gonna need you today, Marco,” Madu recalls yelling out while running in the summer heat.

That 2006 season, the pair were also able to take in the wonder that was superstar running back Peterson. Before joining OU’s staff from 2007-10, White personally asked Peterson to guide Murray on and off the field, challenging him to become a leader in all regards.

“He was always there to help me out because we needed to,” Madu said of Murray. “We took the time building that relationship and became brothers like that. We always have each

other’s back.”

Murray wasn’t all serious all the time, however. Madu recalls as Murray’s stature grew, so did his sense of humor. Madu and him once joked about his new GMC Yukon — with 20-inch wheels — being a “bumper car” that would deflect other cars off the road like he did to opponents as he sliced through defenses.

When Murray looks back on his collegiate career, which in four seasons tallied 6,718 all-purpose yards, 65 touchdowns and a trip to the 2009 BCS title game, he doesn’t remember the accolades, but his growth.

“I was able to grow in ways that I wouldn’t have if I had gone anywhere else,” Murray said. “Had I been surrounded by any other people, I don’t know what the outcome would have been.

“This place had a tremendous upbringing of who I am and kind of instilled in me my manhood, my workability, my mindset (and) my mental toughness.”

Madu feels the growth Murray made at OU shaped him into the coach he is now. The player who led by example with his work ethic, now he does the same for those he coaches.

“He’s just a good guy,” Madu said. “He can relate to the guys because he’s on the younger side. I also think just being a young Black man who’s been successful in life, he could be someone to look up to and learn something in life.”

‘It’s not always easy’

During Week 7 of the 2011 NFL season, then-Dallas Cowboys running back coach Skip Peete deployed a by-committee backfield against the St. Louis Rams with starting running back Felix Jones sidelined due to a foot injury.

Murray was set to share snaps with Tashard Choice and Phillip Tanner, but he had other plans. He finished the day with 253 yards and one touchdown. It was a glimpse into Murray’s future as the Cowboys featured back.

“I think he did a good job of preparing himself each week,” Peete told the OU Daily. “He put in the time to watch films, study his opponent and basically really knew that opponent like the back of his hand.”

The 2014 Offensive Player of the Year ended his tenure with the Cowboys in 2015, signing a five-year, \$42 million contract with the Philadelphia Eagles before eventually getting traded to the Tennessee Titans, where he spent the final two seasons of his career before he retired after dealing with a knee injury.

Throughout his time in the league, Murray learned about the ups and downs that come in professional football, a first-hand understanding that enriches what he brings to coaching players who hope to literally follow in his NFL footsteps.

Murray’s mentality is to be straightforward with the players in his room, mirroring what he was told when he was being recruited by former Oklahoma assistant coach Cale Gundy: You’re always replaceable.

“The moment you get there (is) the moment they’re trying to replace you,” Murray said of the game on the college and pro levels. “For me, and some people may call it cutthroat, but it’s the same way here. I recruit guys, but the moment you get here, it’s my job to find someone who is better than you.”

While looking back on his career, Murray now says he wishes he had been a more vocal leader.

He’s applying exactly that as a coach, coupling what he learned in the business and on the field to elevate Oklahoma’s backfield. When Peete visited a year ago, Murray had a quote about ball security pinned on the wall, which made Peete laugh given Murray struggled mightily with ball security on the Cowboys.

It all left White — the coach who saw running back potential in a lanky linebacker all those years ago — pleasantly surprised at how much Murray has grown.

“Sometimes you gotta speak up,” White said. “It’s not about the juke you made that night or the touchdown. You got to be present, man, verbally, and lead people. So that was one big thing he wanted to do better, I think he’s doing it now.”

‘DeMarco is an OU guy’

Late one night in 2018, Murray’s phone started ringing during a dinner with his wife, Heidi.

On the other line was Arizona head coach and former Oklahoma assistant Kevin Sumlin, who probed him about joining the Wildcats staff.

After a year in the broadcast industry, the former All-Pro seriously considered joining the Wildcats but was hesitant to make the move 1,618 miles from Nashville to Tucson.

He called White, who was also being considered for the position, and Stoops, who advised him on what it takes to be a coach. If Murray didn’t take the job, White told him he would, compounding the pressure.

“I originally said no,” Murray said he told Sumlin. “He



RAY BAHNER/OU DAILY

OU football running backs coach DeMarco Murray during the game against Nebraska in Lincoln, Nebraska, in September 2022.

said ‘Just come out here and come talk to me.’ So I got on the flight and the rest was history.”

Murray didn’t last long in Arizona, as his then-Arizona redshirt junior running back J.J. Taylor earned 2019 honorable mention All-Pac-12 honors after rushing for a team-high 721 yards (4.9 per carry) and five touchdowns. The next season, Lincoln Riley invited Murray to become the running backs coach at his alma mater, replacing Jay Boulware.

“I knew when it was all said and done I’d end up back here,” Murray said. “I’ve always felt a great connection with this place, with the people. I’ve always admired Oklahoma and the simple life and simplicity behind everything and obviously being close to Oklahoma football.”

Since joining the staff, Murray has made it his mission to diversify the Sooners’ backfield through recruiting, finding players who can catch passes and run explosively. He’s also put running backs Gray, Brooks and Stevenson into the league.

On the recruiting trail, Murray’s philosophy mirrors his playing style: quiet, humble and able to close with a flourish when needed.

“I want great kids,” Murray said. “I want kids, if I leave the building, I’m not worried about them. I don’t want to get the calls. I don’t want to be messed with when I’m not at a building. It’s also (about) the mindset, physicality and the importance of guys who know what they want to get their dreams accomplished.”

After Riley left for USC in 2021, Murray had an offer to join him in Los Angeles and was initially hesitant about staying and coaching under Brent Venables. A call with White reassured him.

“Every time Brent talks you kind of see a shoulder shift in the room,” White said. “I was one of them. I told DeMarco, ‘You wait and watch, that’s what is going to impress you the most.’”

Murray ultimately decided to stay with his alma mater and build the program with Venables.

“Of course (Lincoln) wanted him to go out there,” White said. “But DeMarco is an OU guy and he wants to stay there and work his butt off for his alma mater and keep his family there.”

Murray stiff-armed Riley again last month, winning the recruiting battle for four-star Taylor Tatum, the No. 1 running back in the class of 2024, who chose OU over USC.

Afterward, Murray celebrated by posting a video on Twitter of him saying “YAMAHA,” a secret word he uses when he lands a big recruit, the meaning of which he won’t disclose to anyone other than former Dallas teammates Jason Witten and Miles Austin.

Nowadays, Murray is shaping Oklahoma’s running back room with the vision that Stoops carried when the running backs coach was a player. And it is now being rejuvenated with Venables, by recruiting tough, physical and versatile runners.

“When I first got the job there were five or six guys who were really good players,” Murray said. “They were all similar. They (had) the same height, they all did the same thing.

“I want to rearrange the room and make sure that you’re not recruiting the same guys every single year. You want guys who obviously can catch more, guys who could run routes, and have different types of runners, but they all bring different things to the table. But, they’re all physical. They’re all smart. They’re all dependable.”

Murray plans on building that with a familial like approach, the same that Venables preaches, which was on display when he invited each player to a pool party before the start of camp. Murray sent each player a text: “Be at my house at one o’clock.”

The next message followed: “Barbecue, Charleston’s or Mexican?”

Murray and the group eventually landed on barbecue. And, while the offseason is now over, Oklahoma’s running backs coach is leading the Sooners out of the pool and into the gridiron of the 2023 season with a renewed mentality.

“We can’t waste a day,” Murray said. “I’ll say a year ago we had a lot of transition, a lot of things happening to where it was stacked against us, but we battled and we had a good year, solid year, obviously not a great year that we’re accustomed to. I believe that we’re gonna have a better year this year.”



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1 oz. liquor

Q How do I keep my drinking under control when I'm tailgating?

A Football season is back, and NOBODY does football like OU fans. As OU moves into a new era with the SEC, the Sooners are set to dominate the Big 12 one last time. OU football is more than just what happens on the field -- it's about the entire game day experience.

Savvy drinkers know how to get the most out of their tail-gating experience without sacrificing watching the game or enjoying the rest of their weekend. If you're starting your tailgate early in the day, you'll want to pay attention to these tips, so you get to watch the game, instead of the bottom of a toilet.

Don't get derailed:

Pre-gaming at the beginning of the day can run you off the tracks before the party train even gets started. Avoid shots and handle pulls, my friends.

Focus on the people:

You're tailgating to have fun, make connections and predict what will happen in the game. Alcohol might be a social lubricant, but at parties, as in life, it's the connections with people that count.

Stay in your zone:

Get a BAC (blood alcohol content) app and figure out how many drinks will keep you at or below 0.05. Use that as your limit for the day. A BAC over 0.05 puts you at risk for a DWI, so be sure to always stay in your zone!

The Sooners are an unprecedented team, and we want to help you be the best fans you can be. Follow these tips to make every gameday memorable!

Eat. Before, during and after consuming alcohol. Food helps to dilute alcohol in the stomach and slows the absorption of alcohol into the small intestines, meaning you have a better chance of staying in your sweet spot (usually a BAC of 0.05 or under).

Drink water. Alcohol is a diuretic, which is why when you're drinking you may have to pee often. This can cause dehydration, a common cause of headaches and hangovers. Pace Yourself. Drinking too much alcohol, too fast, can kill you. It can also lead to blackouts, which prevent you from remembering your experience.

Choose beer instead of liquor. Beer has less alcohol by volume, which can encourage pacing and help you enjoy every aspect of the tailgate and game.

Designate a driver. Be sure you have a sober driver to get you home after celebrating Sooner wins!

Wear sunscreen. We all know the sun can be brutal! Sunscreen can help prevent sunburn and heat exhaustion. Wearing your favorite OU hat can also help protect you from harmful rays and help keep you cool.



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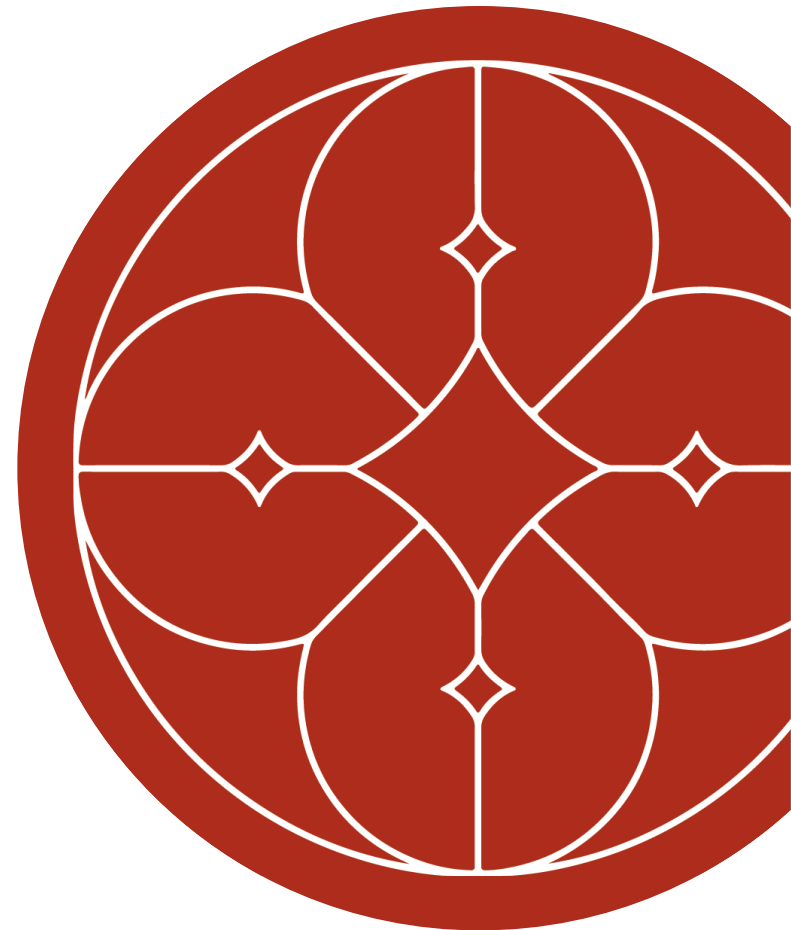
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RAY BAHNER/OU DAILY

Then-sophomore wide receiver Jalil Farooq during the game against Iowa State in October 2022.

ARE YOU READY TO RUMBLE?

Preview the Sooners' 2023 opponents

BY NICK COPPOLA • NICHOLAS.W.COPPOLA-1@OU.EDU

vs. Arkansas State (Sept. 2)

ASU finished 3-9 last season. Coach Butch Jones enters his third season in Jonesboro. Jones faced OU twice as Tennessee's coach in 2014 and 2015, losing both times.

ASU will be led by senior quarterback J.T. Shrout, a transfer from Colorado.

Redshirt senior safety Eddie Smith returns as the only ASU player to record multiple interceptions last season. Junior defensive lineman Ethan Hassler and redshirt sophomore defensive lineman Dennard Flowers both recorded three sacks last season. Senior linebacker Melique Straker returns after recording two sacks and two passes defended last season.

The Sooners won both their previous games against ASU by a combined score of 106-7.

vs. SMU (Sept. 9)

SMU finished 7-6 last season, falling to BYU in the New Mexico Bowl. Coach Rhett Lashlee enters his second season in Dallas.

Sophomore Preston Stone will start at quarterback. TCU transfer Jordan Hudson joins returning senior Jordan Kerley at wide receiver. Senior running back and leading rusher Tyler Lavine returns. Senior defensive lineman Nelson Paulled SMU in sacks.

OU leads the all-time series over SMU 5-1-1.

at Tulsa (Sept. 16)

After going 5-7 in 2022, coach Kevin Wilson replaces Philip Montgomery. Wilson coached alongside Venables from 2002-10 as OU's offensive coordinator.

Sophomore Braylon Braxton starts at quarterback. Redshirt junior Malachai Jones led all returning Tulsa players in receiving yards, while sophomore Braylin Presley transfers from Oklahoma State.

Senior defensive tackle Joseph Anderson returns after leading Tulsa in sacks. Senior safety Kendarin Ray recorded one interception and five passes defended last season.

The Sooners hold a 20-7-1 advantage over Tulsa in the all-time series.

at Cincinnati (Sept. 23)

New Big 12 team Cincinnati finished 9-4 in 2022, losing to Louisville in the Fenway Bowl. Coach Scott Satterfield takes over for Luke Fickell after being Louisville's coach from 2019-22.

Redshirt senior quarterback and Arizona State transfer Emory Jones will start. He'll throw to senior transfer wide receivers Dee Wiggins from Louisville, Donovan Ollie from Washington State and Xzavier Henderson from Florida.

Junior Corey Kiner and sophomore Myles Montgomery return at running back after combining for 482 rushing yards last season. Junior safety Bryon Threats returns after recording two interceptions last season.

OU and Cincinnati have met twice. The Sooners won both matchups.

vs. Iowa State (Sept. 30)

Iowa State went 4-8 last season. Coach Matt Campbell enters his eighth year in Ames.

Redshirt junior Hunter Dekkers starts at quarterback again. Junior wide receiver Jayden Higgins transfers from Eastern Kentucky, while redshirt senior wide receiver Jaylin Noel returns after leading all returning ISU players in receiving yards. Leading rushers senior running back Jirehl Brock and sophomore running back Cartevious Norton also return.

Junior Joey Petersen and redshirt sophomore Tyler Onyedim are the only returning defensive linemen that recorded a sack last season. Senior cornerback T.J. Tampa recorded nine passes defended last season.

The Cyclones have beaten OU seven times in 88 games.



REGHAN KYLE/OU DAILY

Then-sophomore linebacker Danny Stutsman during the game against OSU in November 2022.

vs. Texas (Oct. 7 in Dallas)

Texas is favored to win the Big 12 after finishing 8-5 last season. Coach Steve Sarkisian enters his third season in Austin.

Sophomore quarterback Quinn Ewers will start his second season. Junior wide receiver Xavier Worthy returns after leading the Longhorns in receiving yards. Junior tight end Ja'Tavion Sanders earned All-Big 12 honors last season.

Junior defensive end Barryn Sorrell led the Longhorns in sacks last season. Senior linebacker Jaylan Ford returns after leading UT in interceptions.

The Longhorns hold a 63-50-5 advantage in the all-time series.

vs. UCF (Oct. 21)

Big 12 newcomer UCF went 9-5 in 2022, falling in the AAC Championship Game. Coach Gus Malzahn enters his third year in Orlando. Malzahn coached against the Sooners as Auburn's coach in the 2017 Sugar Bowl.

Redshirt senior quarterback John Rhys Plumlee will start again. Senior wide receivers Javon Baker and Kobe Hudson return after leading the Knights in receiving yards. Leading rusher redshirt senior running back R.J. Harvey is also back.

Redshirt senior defensive end Tre'Mon Morris-Brash led UCF in sacks. Redshirt senior cornerback Decorian Patterson transfers from Middle Tennessee after recording seven interceptions last season.

OU has never played UCF. Sooners quarterback Dillon Gabriel will play his former team in this game.

at Kansas (Oct. 28)

KU went 6-7 in 2022, earning bowl eligibility for the first time since 2009. Coach Lance Leipold enters his third season in Lawrence.

Senior quarterback Jalon Daniels returns after earning All-Big 12 Second Team honors. Junior running back Devin Neal led KU in rushing yards. Senior tight end Mason Fairchild joined Daniels on the All-Big 12 Second Team. Starting wide receivers senior Luke Grimm and redshirt juniors Lawrence Arnold and Quentin Skinner all return.

Senior defensive end Jereme Robinson is back after leading all returning KU players in sacks. Junior cornerback Cobee Bryant earned All-Big 12 First Team honors last season.

OU leads KU 80-27-6 in the all-time series.

at Oklahoma State (Nov. 4)

The Cowboys went 7-6 in 2022, losing to Wisconsin in the Guaranteed Rate Bowl. Coach Mike Gundy enters his 19th season in Stillwater, the longest tenure of any active Big 12 coach.

Oklahoma State's quarterback battle is undecided between redshirt senior Alan Bowman and redshirt freshman Garret Rangel. Senior wide receiver Brennan Presley returns after leading OSU in receiving yards.

Junior Collin Oliver led the Cowboys in sacks last season. 2022 Big 12 Defensive Freshman of the Year Kendal Daniels returns as a sophomore safety.

OU holds a 91-19-7 series lead over OSU. Barring a deal between the two, this is the last Bedlam football game.

vs. West Virginia (Nov. 11)

The Mountaineers went 5-7 in 2022. Coach Neal Brown enters his fifth season in Morgantown.

Junior quarterback Garrett Greene will be WVU's starter. Sophomore running back C.J. Donaldson Jr. led the Mountaineers in rushing touchdowns last season.

Junior defensive end Sean Martin led all returning WVU players in sacks, while redshirt senior cornerback Malachi

Ruffin led WVU in interceptions last season.

The Sooners lead the Mountaineers 11-3 in the all-time series.

at BYU (Nov. 18)

Big 12 rookies BYU went 8-5 last season, winning the New Mexico Bowl against SMU. Coach Kalani Sitake enters his eighth season in Provo.

Redshirt senior and Pittsburgh transfer Kedon Slovis is BYU's starting quarterback. Redshirt senior Keanu Hill, redshirt junior Kody Epps and redshirt sophomore Chase Roberts all return at wide receiver. Redshirt senior running back Aidan Robbins arrives from Louisville after rushing for 1,011 yards last season.

Junior defensive tackle John Nelson led BYU in sacks. Linebackers Max Tooley and Ben Bywater both led the Cougars in interceptions.

BYU beat OU in their two previous matchups.

vs. TCU (Nov. 24)

13-2 TCU didn't win the Big 12, but went to the national championship where it fell to Georgia. Coach Sonny Dykes enters his second season in Fort Worth.

Former OU quarterback and redshirt junior Chandler Morris is TCU's starter. Senior wide receiver Savion Williams returns alongside senior tight end Jared Wiley. They're joined by transfers JoJo Earle from Alabama and JP Richardson from Oklahoma State.

Senior outside linebacker Johnny Hodges and senior cornerback Josh Newton received All-Big 12 honors last season. Redshirt junior safety Bud Clark led TCU in interceptions last season.

OU leads the all-time series over TCU 17-6.

DEFENSIVE LINE EMBRACES COMPETITION, CAMARADERIE

Sooners ready to prove themselves on the field and rise above past season

BY LOUIS RASER • LOUIS.D.RASER-1@OU.EDU

One of the most intense battles Oklahoma's defensive line endured over the offseason was centered around a mini basketball hoop in a pool.

It happened during a cookout at defensive tackles coach Todd Bates' home, which he hosted with defensive ends coach Miguel Chavis. One of many team-bonding experiences the unit has endured, including watching the horror film "Insidious: The Red Door," where their fear led to a disturbance in the theater.

"I felt bad for the (other) people in (the theater)," redshirt senior Jonah Lauulu said. "Because we had guys screaming (in there)."

Lauulu says the newcomers have brought the group closer together. The unit has put an emphasis on camaraderie, while embracing the position battles they'll face after adding six transfers and five freshmen.

The young defensive lineman knew how close-knit the room would be from the recruiting stage.

Bates introduces recruits to his family as early as he can, to preview the bond they'll experience on OU's defensive line. Bates knows he'll have achieved the right comfort level when they're willing to sit on his carpet.

"When somebody sits on the carpet, they've gotta be comfortable."

Comfortability also applies to learning the playbook, which Bates, Chavis and defensive coordinator Ted Roof brought with them from Clemson after arriving in Norman last season. OU returns 10 defensive linemen from last year's unit, leaving over half of the group new to the playbook.

In an effort to familiarize them, Lauulu and other returners have held players-only practices and film sessions in addition to working on non-practice days.

"You're only as strong as your weakest link," Lauulu said. "If 10 out of 11 people execute the play, you can still end up (giving up) a touchdown."

The extra effort has been predominantly led by Lauulu, senior Reggie Grimes II and junior Ethan Downs — three of the group's leaders. Downs is OU's lone Preseason All-Big 12 honoree after leading the team in tackles for loss (13.5) and tying Grimes for the team-high in sacks (4.5). Downs' production in 2022 was good, but he knows he'll need to improve this year for the unit to make strides.

"For us to be at our best, he needs to have a better year," Chavis said. "He knows that. And he's excited. He's a guy that rises to the challenge."

When Tennessee transfer Da'Jon Terry arrived at OU, the returning defensive linemen didn't go into specifics of the disappointing 6-7 season in 2022, but the message they delivered to the newcomers was clear:

"We're not gonna feel like that again this year. So everybody come in ... ready to work everyday with a hard hat on."

"We're Oklahoma. We're not supposed to be losing games like that."



REGHAN KYLE/OU DAILY

Then-redshirt senior defensive lineman Jonah Lauulu during the game against Oklahoma State in November 2022.



REGHAN KYLE/OU DAILY

Then-redshirt sophomore defensive lineman Ethan Downs during the game against Baylor in November 2022.

The Sooners allowed 30 points per game in 2022, third most in the Big 12. A specific weakness came on third downs, a down they played the eighth most snaps in the country on and allowed a 40.9% conversion rate, seventh in the Big 12.

Bates claims a contributor to OU's struggles to get off the field on third and fourth down came from a failure to close out plays. He witnessed his guys struggle to fight off blocks or wrap up ball carriers, but not be able to finish the tackle, two main focuses OU will have during its fall camp.

"(We had) a lot of missed production," Laulu told OU Daily of OU's defensive struggles. "We left a lot of sacks and (tackles for loss) on the field, so we have to make sure to finish off those plays. ... Just watching film, that was probably the biggest thing (I saw). (We need) to make sure we actually finish that play strong in a positive position."

The improvement not only needs to be drastic, but it needs to come quickly. The Sooners are entering their final season in Big 12 play before moving to the SEC, a conference with no shortage of size, strength or talent in the trenches.

"I think top to bottom this is the best talent you'll see week in and week out from any conference in college football, let alone (on) the offensive and defensive lines," Kentucky offensive lineman Eli Cox said of the conference at SEC Media Days. "You could go down the list of every SEC team and every one of them probably has an NFL draftable defensive tackle, if not multiple."

"Especially guys on the edge, the pass rushers, the Will Andersons, the Jalen Carters and that's just two guys who were first round picks from the SEC that played defensive line last year."

Chavis and Bates brought in five freshmen from the class of 2024, including five-star and consensus No. 1 player in Missouri Adepoju "PJ" Adebawore. However, they're not building the

unit for the future, they're in win-now mode.

All six of the defensive linemen OU added from the transfer portal are redshirt seniors. Rondell Bothroyd transferred from Wake Forest where he leaves behind the seventh most sacks in program history.

Trace Ford is a two-time All-Big 12 honorable mention from OU's Bedlam rival Oklahoma State. Jacob Lacey recorded two sacks in four games last season with Notre Dame, while Terry and Utah State transfer Phillip Paea bring 10 years of experience as premier run stoppers.

Bates and Chavis have accomplished what OU boasts about its program: competitive depth. While they're satisfied with the experienced players they've gotten and the resumes of each, they've made it clear that no one has solidified their spot as a starter yet.

"(We) worked really hard to assemble a room that is both highly experienced and competitive," Chavis said. "The guys know there's going to be some different lineups going up against ones, twos (and) threes. Play your (assignment). ... We gotta get guys thrown in the fire. We gotta see who can play under pressure. And the only way you do that is to put them in there."

"We're going to mix it up. Ain't nobody got a job. Ethan Downs was second team All-Big 12 last year, ... he's got to go out and prove it. Rondell Bothroyd started at Wake Forest and he's a phenomenal player. And PJ Adebawore was a five star. Yep. Go prove it. The left tackle at Texas doesn't care how many stars you have. You've gotta go prove it every day."

When Chavis approached sophomore R Mason Thomas to ask what he's accomplished as a player, Thomas' answer was indicative of the entire defensive line's mentality:

"Nothing."

The competition that comes with OU's depth is a crucial part of Bates' preparation which is aimed toward playing a 15-game season, consisting of 12 regular season games, the Big 12 Championship and a pair of contests in the College Football Playoff. In order to do so, he wants to have six defensive tackles capable of playing "winning football."

"Anytime I've been a part of a team where we've been at our best, that guy who's running out there first ... has to look over his shoulder," Bates said. "He knows if he slips up, you've got somebody that's capable to go in there and play at a high level and you've got multiple guys that can do it. That's what I feel like we're building towards right now."

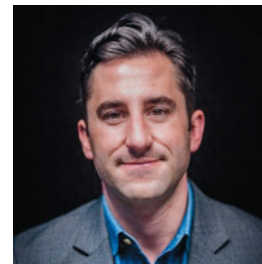
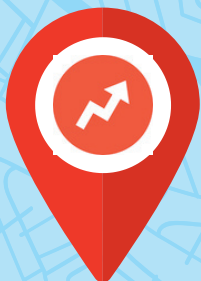
Bates and Chavis brought in the guys they needed over the offseason. They've flooded the Sooners' defensive line with experience and matched that with a star freshman. The group they've assembled has built a tight bond through pool basketball and horror films, but their competitiveness on the field isn't lost and will be crucial to improving upon a disappointing 2022 campaign.

"Anytime you introduce anyone, whether it's a transfer or high school player, it changes the dynamic of the room," Chavis said. "And so it's really cool because I'm trying to get every guy to be great individually, but also to be great as a room. It's fun navigating that. ... I don't have a guy in my room right now (who's) not uber competitive, who doesn't see the challenge and doesn't understand the expectation (and) who hasn't worked really, really hard this offseason since January. So it's fun. And we're excited."



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REGHAN KYLE/OU DAILY

Redshirt senior defensive lineman Da'Jon Terry during OU football local media day in August.

ON THE ROAD TO ALL-AMERICAN

Da'Jon Terry brings size and aspirations to match

BY LOUIS RASER • LOUIS.D.RASER-1@OU.EDU

From the moment he shook Da'Jon Terry's hand, defensive lineman Jonah Laulu imagined lining up opposite the 6-foot-3, 321-pounder during practice. The thought alone was enough to deter him from ever doing so.

"When we're doing individual drills, I already made it a statement that I'm not going against Da'Jon," Laulu said. "I'm not doing (any) drills with him."

Terry's size is what convinced him to step away from the basketball court to play football during his senior year of high school. It's also what attracted the Sooners — the Big 12's second-worst run defense in 2022 — to the redshirt senior when he entered the transfer portal on May 26.

It didn't take long for the largest member of Oklahoma's defensive line to make his impact felt on the run game. The late transition to the sport, however, provided him with difficulties rushing the passer. After spending two seasons in the Big 12 with Kansas, Terry transferred to Tennessee to use his strengths more adequately in the run-heavy SEC but has kept it a goal to refine his pass rush skills.

"When you're a big guy like (Da'Jon) and you play with effort and play low leveraged like he does, you should do well in the run game. Pass rushing is an art, it doesn't come as natural. You have to use your hands a lot, work your body, shoulder rotation, inside foot turn, and being so big

it's hard to do those things," former NFL defensive end Marcus Howard, who's worked with Terry the past two seasons, said. "That was the big thing we worked on and I think he picked a lot of it up and he's greatly improved."

Through emphasizing the pass-rush part of his game, Terry has grown confident in his ability and transferred back to a more pass-heavy Big 12 to showcase it.

"This year, I'm going to show everybody that I can rush the passer along with stopping the run," Terry said. "That was the reason why I came back to the Big 12, a pass (heavy) conference.

"And, honestly, I'm going to be an All-American this

year.”

Terry has worked alongside Howard, a First-Team All-SEC honoree in 2007 with Georgia, to pursue his aspirations. Howard credits the big games as the driving force for his All-SEC nod, including a three-sack performance with a fumble recovery touchdown that led him to the 2008 Sugar Bowl MVP.

“You have to come out of the gate (playing) hard,” Howard said. “Your teammates and coaches have to see you playing fast and playing hard from the jump. And (Da’Jon) has to show up at the big-time games.

“The Red River (Rivalry), he has to show up at that game.”

From Baker Mayfield and Mark Andrews’ go-ahead 59-yard touchdown in 2017 to CeeDee Lamb’s three-touchdown showing in 2019, the game is seemingly a precursor to the award. After conceding 585 yards of total offense en route to its worst shutout loss ever — a 49-0 Red River blowout — in last season’s matchup, Oklahoma could use a standout game from Terry in this year’s rendition of the rivalry.

Terry will have his work cut out for him to achieve All-American status. After struggling to find the field during his first three seasons, Terry started seven of the Volunteers’ 13 contests in 2022, compiling 16 tackles, 3.5 for a loss, and two sacks. His production was decent but doesn’t live up to the All-American standard he’s aiming for with the Sooners.

For Terry, coming out of the gates strong is especially important. After missing Tennessee’s spring practices, he transferred to the Sooners after theirs had already concluded.

Though he didn’t arrive until June 2, Terry’s first two months of learning the Sooners’ defense have been seamless.

“He’s a guy that so far has been a tremendous teammate, a guy that has come in here and put his nose down and gone to work,” defensive coordinator Ted Roof said of Terry. “That’s the thing that stands out, obviously he’s got a lot of experience, but his learning curve had to be really fast to catch up with the guys that were in the system last year, but he has done that and he’s accelerated that.”

Head coach Brent Venables expected a smooth transition from the moment he first spoke to Terry.

“I fell in love with him the first time I spoke to him, and then every conversation (after that) it was more of the same,” Venables said. “Every conversation I had and every question, well beyond the field, I just wanted to find out who he was as a human being, as a leader, as a young person chasing his dreams, as a teammate, that was important to me as well and to us. We haven’t done a whole lot yet on the field with him but he got all the other stuff right from a transition standpoint.

“Being a summer guy, he doesn’t have a resume with us yet when it comes to the playing and the improvement and all that kind of stuff but he’s all those things I just said. And that fits the mold of what we want. His focus and his toughness and his ambition will make that group better.”

Terry credits Venables, a defensive-minded head coach, along with defensive tackles coach Todd Bates’ NFL-grooming track record with defensive tackles as the primary reasons he chose OU.

It was a match made in heaven, as Bates was looking to



REGHAN KYLE/OU DAILY

Associate head coach Todd Bates during the Sooners’ spring practice in April.

add experience and size, two boxes Terry checks, to a defensive line often pushed around last season.

“(We needed) help right now from guys that can come in and play right away, and (he) answered the call,” Bates said of what attracted him to Terry in the transfer portal. “DJ has really come in here and put his head down and just grinded. When you come into a new place, even if you’ve played (a lot of) ball, the last thing you want to do to win that locker room is to come in talking a bunch, and (he) came in working a bunch.

“When you work out, it normally does. It’s going to work out for him because of how humble (he’s) been, and (he’s)

come into a room that’s embraced him.”

Terry has found his footing with OU in a couple of months with the team, and fulfills one of the primary weaknesses that led it to a disappointing 2022. He now approaches the season with high expectations and a desire to prove his ability as a pass rusher, an NFL talent and a force on the Sooners’ defense.

“I’m here right now so I can chase my dreams (of) pursuing the NFL,” Terry said, “And I know people might not think I can be an All-American, but I’m going to show them, I’m going to be an All-American.”



BOB NGUYEN/OU DAILY

Sooners fans during Party at the Palace, a pregame festival held on the lawn north of the Gaylord Family-Oklahoma Memorial Stadium.

TAILGATING RETURNS TO LINDSEY

Fans can look forward to new policies and festivities ahead of SEC move

BY COLTON SULLEY • COLTON.M.SULLEY-1@OU.EDU

As thousands dressed in crimson navigated toward the Oklahoma Memorial Stadium on Saturdays in the fall of 1988, a popular spot for fans to park was a certain house at Chautauqua Avenue and Lindsey Street.

A student who lived there, Joseph Harroz Jr., and his buddies

would charge fans \$10 to park their cars there, which included use of their pony keg.

Thirty-five years later, Harroz said one of the few downsides of being OU's president is not being able to tailgate. And while it won't change his own game day experience, per an

announcement by the university on Aug. 15, he intends to change that for others starting this season.

Tailgating will return to Lindsey Street this fall — specifically to Lindsey's south side between Asp and Jenkins avenues on the front lawn of OU's residential colleges directly across from

the stadium. The change is part of a broader series of game day changes the university is implementing and evaluating ahead of its move to the Southeastern Conference in 2024.

“I was here from ’85 to ’89 and so most of our games lasted about 30 minutes,” Harroz told the OU Daily of his college days when Barry Switzer helmed the Sooners. “And then we’d go over to (the old) O’Connell’s and they had a massive trough iced down with tons of beers and you’d go there and drink beer at halftime and never (go) back into the game because we’d already hung 50 on ‘em most of the time.”

One of the many upsides of Harroz’s current job is being able to make final calls on decisions like the one announced Aug. 15.

While OU is set to announce a more comprehensive tailgating expansion next season, Harroz says this first step is an important one in a longer plan to compete with, and even surpass, SEC schools.

“It’s really a step on the way to our move to the SEC,” Harroz says, looking back fondly of his experience as a student, of his vision for tailgating. “But the second step is going to be, as we go through this year, we’re further studying what schools in the SEC do and analyzing the assets that we have to make sure that as we go into the SEC, as we go into not this football season, but the next football season, that what we have is hopefully the best in the SEC.”

Harroz and other university officials have been engaged with OU Athletic Director Joe Castiglione and the city of Norman since the Sooners announced their move, evaluating every expansion option campus offers. OU’s president and Norman Mayor Larry Heikkila lead ONE Norman’s steering committee, aimed at guiding the Sooners’ transition to the conference.

SEC commissioner Greg Sankey said he was encouraged by Norman’s Chamber of Commerce’s trips to the conference’s towns to study ways to enhance the city’s tailgating plan.

“The game day atmosphere on our campuses is really special,” Sankey told the OU Daily in a 30-minute sit-down at SEC Media Days in Nashville. “Oklahoma has an incredible fan base, great facilities and I would anticipate they’ll meet the SEC standard of excellence for tailgating pretty quickly.”

Before OU instituted its “Walk of Champions,” which was rerouted to Jenkins Avenue last season to better accommodate fans, tailgating was allowed on Lindsey Street. For years, fans have advocated for its return.

Norman Chamber of Commerce President Scott Martin, who’s involved in examining everything from economic development to marketing strategies related to the SEC move, also sees a need for increased tailgating in the city.

“We have worked with the university and I think they’ve acknowledged that they’re going to have to improve tailgating opportunities,” Martin told the OU Daily. “It’s something that a lot of other universities do really well and we have good tailgating, but I think we agree we’re going to have to up our game a little bit and make sure it’s even better, more thoughtful, well planned and available for fans.

“(OU officials are) intentionally looking at what they can do to improve tailgating and make it bigger and more fan friendly.”

Over the past several years, tailgating has become an event itself, separate from the games being played inside college football stadiums around the country. Harroz cited future SEC foe Mississippi and its 10-acre tailgating area, known as The Grove, as inspiration.

While the athletic department offers its input to Harroz and other interested parties, Castiglione said decisions about tailgating aren’t up to him but he’s excited for what’s to come this



BOB NGUYEN/OU DAILY

Sooners fans gather near a tent during Party at the Palace in November 2022.

season and in the future.

“There’s been a lot of good conversation about how we can continue to expand space for tailgating,” Castiglione told the OU Daily in July. “There was a time when tailgating was just OK, but in the last 20 years it’s taken off and it’s as good as anywhere in the country. We just know that we need more space and more fans.

“There are a lot of tailgating people that don’t have tickets to the game, it’s a social atmosphere. And that’s great, that’s what we want to be able to accept. And of course you have new fan bases that are coming, some this year, who are coming to experience it.”

When the Sooners’ 2024 gauntlet of a conference schedule was released on June 14, second-year coach Brent Venables indicated on the ESPN+ release show he wanted to see vehicles on “every patch of grass” on campus.

Venables envisions a more robust game day experience overall when the Sooners enter the SEC and believes going to games should be an event.

“I want an amazing game day environment,” Venables told the OU Daily. “I love the idea of families creating lifelong experiences and memories that take them back to all those special moments along the way. And having an environment and an opportunity that blends into the campus community is part of that. And that’s how I see it, but I’m the coach.

“They don’t necessarily ask me all those things, but I want just this amazing, connected, family vibe when you pull up to Norman, Oklahoma, on a game day. Before you ever get to the stadium, immediately know this must be game day and this is different. And I want that for everybody, I want people to take pride in that.”

Harroz told the OU Daily he’s committed to looking at every inch available on campus. One of OU’s strengths, he says, is its

available space for tailgating expansion.

He also emphasized his vision for making sure OU is prepared to compete in all aspects of athletics, including fan environments, when it gets to the SEC.

“We know this is important,” Harroz said. “It will be special and our goal is to look at every blade of grass and figure out what’s the right footprint for this and we’re blessed to have a bunch of land and that’s not something that everybody has and so we have a good number of options that are out there.

“From the Duck Pond all the way over to the land right between Campus Corner and the university to two ovals to the land we have along (Lindsey Street). We have so much real estate and then we have the parking lot at (the Lloyd Noble Center). We’re going to have the new softball stadium, which frees up the other real estate that exists there.”

Besides returning tailgating to Lindsey Street, one of the things Harroz is most looking forward to ahead of the 2023 season is the chance to indulge in comprehensive fan polling. Starting this season, the university will survey folks tailgating on campus, but also experts and professionals in the space to create the best possible experience in 2024.

With three times as many people expected to travel to Norman for SEC games, safety during game days and cleanliness afterward have also moved up Harroz’s priority list. The OU Police Department’s staff has declined amid a lack of competitive pay as the university continues to grow its student population, the OU Daily reported last October.

“It’s a big operation. What it was in the ’80s is not what it is now,” Harroz said. “So you have to scale up and fortunately, we’ve spent a lot of time around event production. It’s an event. What takes place in the stadium has its event management team, but so does tailgating. You have to know what your ratio is of people to the existing porta potties and you have to make sure you have enough police officers.

“We think about game day management. There was a time when you really just thought about what was inside of that stadium, and then it became what’s inside of the stadium, plus what kind of security do you have outside before you go in? But now it really is the entire experience, which tailgating is a critical part of.”

From reflecting on his tailgating memories as an OU student to collaborating with city officials, experts and Castiglione, Harroz thinks fans will react positively to the expansions he decided on for this season.

Think of it, he emphasized, as a building block for what is to come.

It’s the initial piece of what Harroz, who ultimately green lit the school’s “There’s Only One Oklahoma” rebrand last spring, envisions tailgating on campus becoming. It’s also part of Norman’s plan to increase fan engagement, boost revenue and create one of the best college football game day experiences in the country.

“This is a change but it’s not the final change,” Harroz said. “We’ll see something even bigger and more exciting as we head into next year’s football season.”



Junior linebacker Danny Stutsman during spring practice in March.

VENABLES, LINEBACKER AT HEART

Defense strives to meet high standards under intense coaching

BY JASON BATA CAO • JASON.F.BATA CAO-1@OU.EDU

In the quiet, dejected Clemson locker room following its 49-28 loss to Ohio State in the 2021 College Football Playoff Semifinal, a battered and bruised James Skalski sulked quietly to the side while he thought about his future.

A half earlier, the fifth-year Tigers linebacker was ejected after hitting then-Buckeyes quarterback Justin Fields in the ribs with 5:57 remaining in the second quarter, a tackle that caused Fields to receive two shots in the injury tent.

As Skalski looked around postgame, he locked eyes with Brent Venables before receiving a surprising proposal from the then-Clemson defensive coordinator.

“I have a spot for you next year if you want it,” Venables, who’s now entering his second season as OU’s head coach, said with a smile.

Skalski, with one season remaining due to COVID-19 eligibility, replied almost immediately: “I’ll take it.”

“I couldn’t turn it down, I love playing for him,” Skalski told the OU Daily, while reflecting on his memory from the 2021 CFP. “It’s like a loyalty thing. I remember I hadn’t really even thought about coming back to that point.”

Loyalty, grit and toughness define Skalski’s relationship with Venables. Unsurprisingly, Venables is building the same relationship with his linebacking core at Oklahoma as he did with Skalski at Clemson, which helped the Tigers win two national championships in 2016 and 2018.

Venables’ deep passion and admiration for the position is rooted in his early playing days at Kansas State. He then ascended to the coaching ranks throughout the years, but his militaristic but loving approach hasn’t wavered since being hired at OU.

Since joining Venables staff as a graduate assistant on Jan. 22, Skalski has seen the same relationship blossom with the linebacking core at Oklahoma. Following a disappointing 6-7 campaign in 2022, Venables and the Sooners will need the likes of returners Danny Stutsman, Jaren Kanak and Justin Harrington to improve, as well as Indiana transfer Dasan McCullough and former Division II prospect Konnor Near to perform in order to turn the defense around.

Last season Oklahoma’s defense ranked 122nd out of 131 teams in the FBS. It was also 106th in stopping the run, which OU hopes to improve on in 2023.

“(Venables) doesn’t change,” Skalski said. “I think that’s what makes him who he is. There’s a standard you have to be at ... and if you’re not there, he’s gonna let you know. I think a lot of our guys didn’t really know what that standard looked like, and it takes time to adjust to that standard. It takes time to build the different aspects of that standard, mentally, emotionally and physically.



Sophomore linebacker Dasan McCullough during fall camp in August.

BOB NGUYEN/OU DAILY



REGHAN KYLE/OU DAILY

Graduate assistant James Skalski during fall camp in August.

"If it was on a scale from 1 to 10, he's 12 all day every day ... that's his connection. He's an LB all day every day, so that's his love."

On the practice field, Venables can be seen taking part in the drills as if he's about to become the first head coach to suit up on the football field. During the first week of OU's practices, Venables, donning a slick backwards hat, howled at Near for reaching "too far right" on a tackle drill.

His verbal issuance was an example of how demanding he is of his linebackers on the field. Venables' critiques extend far off the turf, into his players' everyday life.

Teddy Lehman, a former Oklahoma linebacker from 2000-03, experienced Venables' mania when he worked under Bob Stoops. Initially, Venables appeared talkative and kind when Lehman attended the Sooners' high school junior day, hosted by programs to get an early start in the recruiting process.

The former Detroit Lions' linebacker was surprised to find Venables even knew his name, let alone offered him to play in the crimson and cream. A good first impression soured on Lehman, however, as Venables quickly dropped the hammer.

For Lehman, it was like he was looking into the mirror, but the mirror emphasized all of his greatest flaws like a radio on max volume.

Venables questioned Lehman's entire existence during his time at OU. If he didn't stand right while in stretch lines, take notes a certain way, sit with the right people at lunch or sit in the right place while watching film, Oklahoma's coach called the linebacker out on every specific detail.

"My initial thought was this guy fucking hates me," Lehman told the OU Daily. "He thinks I'm horrible and he has singled me out to try and get me to leave. Those were some of my initial thoughts. Life was hell. It was miserable. I avoided him at every cost, I didn't want to see him whenever I was in the facility."

Finally, during his freshman season, Lehman left no room for Venables to find criticism. He started sprinting to the bathroom and sprinting back during team meetings, so the then-defensive coordinator couldn't question him for taking too long.

"Try and critique me now," is how I basically thought of it," Lehman said. "It's not like I instantly was the perfect player but

it made me a thousand times better. And, as soon as I adopted that mentality it paid off. I think that's the only thing he's waiting on with guys. Some guys will get it and some guys don't."

Through Venables' guidance, Lehman finished his career at Oklahoma as one of the leaders in the linebacking core. Once he made it to the NFL, Lehman missed Venables' coaching because no professional coach was as hard on him.

"I think the mentality switch was that I wanted to be able to sleep at night," Lehman said. "I wanted to be able to make it through a day without worrying about everything that I was doing, and how it's going to be used against me. Honestly, it was survival."

What helped him most was seeing the mentality of former OU linebacker Rocky Calmus. Calmus served as one of the main leaders on the field and Lehman followed suit.

A similar relationship has been born in Norman ahead of the 2023 season between Kanak and Stutsman. The linebacking duo are best friends off the field and a pair of leaders on it.

They show their relationship on Twitter and other social media platforms with humorous videos. What's changed under Venables is that Stutsman and Kanak have found ways to balance being humorous while still leading the team.

"Danny would be the first one to admit that 17 months ago he wasn't capable of leading, and he's in a much different place now," Venables said at Big 12 Media Days. "The whole team follows Danny, his emotion, his work, his action. He's a doer and a giver."

In similar ways, Venables has fostered a relationship with Stutsman — through honesty, toughness and care — and Skalski remembers the same sort of relationship built with him on the Tigers. Not only did he love Venables' in-your-face coaching regimen, but the then-Tigers' defensive coordinator helped him when he needed him most.

Skalski's father, John, died unexpectedly during his freshman year and he needed emotional support from Venables. John was mowing the lawn on Oct. 14, 2016, when he had a heart attack.

The moment changed Skalski's life forever, and Venables served as a father figure from that point forward. His

relationship with Venables made Skalski want to stay with him all six years of his college career and now on staff with the Sooners.

Nowadays he'll be right by Venables' side assisting with tackle dummies and giving linebackers the same stern, verbal guidance like Venables once did with him in South Carolina.

"He (was a) shoulder to cry on," Skalski said. "From that point forward, I think my relationship with Venables changed forever, because he wasn't just a coach to me anymore. He was a mentor and sort of a father figure."

"He's like that with everybody. But it just felt like, for me, personally, it's what I needed so badly, and I'm so thankful that I was there in a place like that surrounded by a man like that. So from then on, ... we always had a passion for the game that we bonded over."

While Venables' philosophy has produced many All-Americans in his time with the Sooners and Tigers, what he does on the recruiting trail is even more important. The Sooners' head coach will look for ways to measure if a player has that look in their eye.

"He's looking for people that are really serious about getting better," Skalski said. "He loves people that have that look in their eye, man. They're about their business, and they're about their work, and they want to be great. When you commit to a guy like V, that is the feeling and that is the connection when he kind of looks you in the eye as a recruit. You know he's about his business."

In 2022, Venables brought in freshman linebackers Phil Picciotti, Lewis Carter, Taylor Heim and Samuel Omosigho to add onto the culture he built with Stutsman and Kanak. When Omosigho spoke to the media at the Sooners' local media day on Aug. 1, he lit up when talking about Venables and the linebacking core.

"BV was a big part of it because he's obviously BV," Omosigho said of why he chose Oklahoma over programs like Florida and Auburn. "This whole culture here and the environment here (is great). It's like it's a big school, but it has a small school environment, which I really like. ... It was a no brainer."

"I want to go be the best football player I could possibly be. (I'm focused on) how much I can impact on the field, how much I can impact off the field, how much that can help this unit become a better Oklahoma team."

With a new system in place, the importance of the linebacking group will stay consistent for Venables as OU transitions into the SEC. Their maturity, both off and on the field, reflects how the defense performs every game.

Venables preaches the details in perfection and that's how he finds the best of the best when it comes to his former position.

"Learning a defense is like learning a language," Lehman said. "If you become fluent in that defense, then the communication between a linebacker that makes all of the calls on the field and the defensive coordinator is almost seamless. You basically can be an extension of that coach on the field."

"It took me a while to see the benefit in that. He is as difficult of a coach to play for as you can find. ... You're expected to know everything, to be able to function at a flawless level. Like every tiny little mistake is treated as if it could be the difference between winning a national championship and not because it is the difference."



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