

FOOTBALL PREVIEW
AUGUST 2024
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‘YOU CAN SEE THE DIFFERENCE’

Follow Jackson Arnold’s
journey from the bench
to starting quarterback

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FROM THE EDITOR



ADEN CHOATE/OU DAILY

Boomer mascot in front of Gaylord Family-Oklahoma Memorial Stadium during Walk of Champions on Sept. 9.

Join us to kick off OU's first season in the SEC

Dear OU Daily readers,

New seasons have always been a pivotal point in my life, and I have tried to encounter those changes with anticipation void of expectation, fresh eyes, curiosity and grace.

Now, as I begin my tenure as the OU Daily's fall sports editor and step into my first year covering OU football, I plan to do the same.

Growing up in a hidden town in West Texas, I watched six-man football games, understanding, even then, the power a team or a sport can have on a place. Over time, I have realized that translates everywhere, and I am not lost on what OU football means to the state of Oklahoma and the impact it has on the Norman community.

Transparently, I have felt the pressure of stepping into the role of sports editor while covering a team that is also discovering who they are within a new conference. However, I am thankful for my predecessor Colton Sulley for setting the standard and my assistant sports editors Louis Raser and Daniel Homrok for helping and inspiring me to uphold it daily.

Most days, like the one where I watch this publication hit the racks, I feel the need to tell myself to wake up. The OU Daily has given me opportunities I could have never imagined getting to experience, including this one — the season of OU football and life that I am most excited for.

In this football guide, you can find stories about OU's starting quarterback Jackson Arnold, new defensive coordinator Zac Alley and a game-by-game preview breaking down Oklahoma's first schedule in the SEC. These, among others in the publication, serve as a glimpse of what Raser, Homrok and myself will provide to readers

this season.

Through articles and various multimedia resources, we aim to write stories that are truthful and transparent, prioritize content that is valuable to our audience and produce work that is impactful. While upholding these standards, we will take on OU football's 12-game regular season slate the only way we know how: head-on. Make sure to follow along with our in-depth season coverage on oudaily.com and on our social media pages.

Although I have always loved sports, I inherently understood that it is the players who play them and the people who care about them that make them special. So thank you for picking up our 2024 Football Preview, following our sports coverage and supporting student journalism.

Here's to the stories waiting to be told and to you, the reader, for making it all worthwhile.

See you at the stadium,
Gracie Rawlings



Gracie Rawlings

Sports editor
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COVER STORY



BOB NGUYEN/OU DAILY

Then-freshman quarterback Jackson Arnold before the game against Oklahoma State on Nov. 4.

'YOU SEE THE DIFFERENCE'

FOLLOW JACKSON ARNOLD'S JOURNEY FROM THE BENCH TO STARTING QUARTERBACK

BY GRACIE RAWLINGS • GRACIE.M.RAWLINGS-1@OU.EDU

Jackson Arnold lay on his back gazing toward the domed roof of AT&T Stadium.

Just hours earlier, the retractable covering, supported by 14,100 tons of steel, sheltered the dreams of 73 boys from Denton, Texas, from the clouds looming outside.

It served as a stark reminder of a 15-year-old kid's failures.

"I just got thrown in," Jackson said, thinking about that afternoon in late December.

After getting sacked, cuts decorated his skin, and bruises formed during the game, serving as a lingering reminder of what occurred over the last hour and foreshadowing where he would find himself four years later.

Since starting at Denton Guyer High School that August, Jackson had been the backup quarterback and had thrown just one pass in a varsity game all season. But when Eli Stowers injured a knee ligament during the team's first offensive drive, the freshman had to step up.

Todd Arnold sat among 35,278 spectators, watching as his son took the field in the Class 6A Division II state championship game against Austin Westlake.

"I am looking as they march him out there," Todd told the OU Daily. "They had just converted a fake punt and got the first down, and then Jackson went out there and played the rest of the game. But just like a team should, Austin Westlake tended their defenses years back.

"So, he got hit, and hit. And hit. And hit."

Jackson was blindsided by the Westlake edge rushers and the importance of the moment. The young quarterback had not felt the in-game pressures of Texas high school defenses, he had not taken enough snaps in live situations and he was not ready to lead a team that wasn't his.

After Stowers, who would later commit to Texas A&M, left with an injury, Jackson went 2-of-11, accounting for six of Guyer's 15 total offensive yards; threw two interceptions; and was sacked three times.

In one final attempt at a comeback — or just to avoid a shut-out — Jackson stepped back into the pocket and launched a pass as time ticked off the clock. The ball fell into the hands of an Austin Westlake player, who then raced past the quarterback for a touchback.

There, standing in his opponent's end zone, the quarterback was completely exposed, feeling the weight of the storm he had just weathered between two goalposts.

"I'll never be in that position not to be prepared again," Jackson told his father after the game.

As he watched his son walk away, Todd understood that this was the moment that would make Jackson Arnold.

Not break him.

"That game, that moment, it showed him that sometimes you have to fail," Todd said. "He didn't like it, but he failed, and he learned from it."

The weight of failure — the one he carried since that day — would resurface four years later. After former starting quarterback Dillon Gabriel left for Oregon in December, Oklahoma called on the freshman ahead of its game against Arizona in the Alamo Bowl.

"I felt like I was in the same situation as my freshman year of high school," Jackson said. "It was a similar situation as going into that state championship game. Even then, I was using that as a growing experience rather than looking at it and seeing something negative."

Most things matched up. Jackson was a true freshman playing behind a veteran quarterback and had to prepare



RAY BAHNER/OU DAILY

Then-freshman quarterback Jackson Arnold during the OU football spring game on April 22.

quickly after Gabriel's departure. However, this time he had taken valuable snaps throughout the season, including playing at BYU where he led OU to a 31-24 win after Gabriel suffered a head injury before halftime.

Though he struggled to take care of the ball early in the game against Arizona — throwing three interceptions, two in the first three drives — there were bright spots for the quarterback. Jackson rallied in the second half, finishing 26-of-45 for 361 yards and two touchdowns.

"It's tough," Jackson said in June while reflecting on OU's 38-24 loss in San Antonio. "You don't want your first college start to be in a bowl game against a good Arizona team, but I just kind of treated it as a learning opportunity, using it to grow."

Sitting in the stands of the Alamodome, the same way he had four years prior at AT&T Stadium, Todd thought about what he said to Jackson after the state championship game and understood his message never changed.

"This game does not have to define you," Todd said, meeting the gaze of both the 15-year-old boy in a Denton Guyer uniform and the 19-year-old man in crimson and cream. "But the way you come back from this game will."

'Not everybody is wired that way'

Jordan Johnson dropped his controller and watched Jackson's irritation steam into boiling anger.

The Denton Guyer offensive coordinator had walked by his office countless times, seeing the quarterback playing video games with teammates during breaks or after practice. However, this was the first time Johnson had ever stopped to join him.

"It had been years since I had played Madden, but he played all the time," Johnson recalled. "That day, I ended up beating him, and he got legitimately mad in my office."

Though it was just a game and Johnson was far from a seasoned player, he understood why the high schooler cared. Jackson was, in that moment, and every moment prior to that, the picture of a winner.

"He has an extremely competitive nature," Johnson told the OU Daily. "I always think about some of the biggest games that we played in, I think about how he was before we even kicked off. How excited he would be to play in some of the moments that would later define his high school career. His demeanor in all of that is pretty remarkable."

"I mean, Jackson was born to compete, and not everybody's wired that way."

Seeing Jackson lose in his office that day, Johnson reflected on the only other time he had witnessed the future five-star quarterback falter.

Three years before, the coach had sat as a spectator and watched a freshman in the state championship game. Even from the stands, Johnson could see the quarterback's potential, but the process would take time.

Watching Jackson struggle through four quarters, Johnson never imagined he would become his offensive coordinator in just six months. His hire, for both player and coach, would change their relationships with the game and with each other.

"Watching him go from that freshman on the field at that state championship game to the guy that is leading the Oklahoma Sooners has been such a neat evolution to watch," Johnson said. "But with anything, it didn't just happen overnight."

Jackson would still have to endure another 365 days of sitting on the sidelines, watching, learning and absorbing the game from his least favorite point of view.

Two years spent behind Stowers at Denton Guyer eased Jackson's transition from high school to college, with Gabriel taking on the role of Oklahoma's veteran quarterback.

"He doesn't like sitting," Todd said. "He has made the statement publicly that, 'Not playing sucks.' But during his sophomore year of high school, when he had to play behind Eli Stowers, it was also really similar to his first year at OU. I think it is good to learn from a veteran who has been there for a while, and in both scenarios with Eli, and with Dillon this past year, those are productive situations to be in."

Johnson knew that the sophomore quarterback could have started at any school in Texas, but the offensive coordinator was invested in growing the version of Jackson that would one day lead OU into its first season in a new conference.

While waiting for his opportunity, it was Jackson's mindset and his ability to attack the game, even while getting no playing time, that would inevitably make him one of the most sought-after recruits in the nation.

The growth he achieved from his sophomore to senior seasons turned him from a backup to the No. 1-ranked quarterback in the 2023 class, according to ESPN.

"Jackson was always really critical of how quick, compact and efficient his release was," Johnson said. "One of the biggest things from his freshman year to when he graduated — from both a physical standpoint and playing the position from a technical standpoint — was the improvement of that release."

"If you watch old tapes and break down his motion, you can see the difference. As a sophomore, he had a long, methodical release that even he did not like, and by his senior year, I had never seen a guy who threw the ball that efficiently with that much zip. That work changed who he was as a quarterback."

Over the next two years, Jackson went 28-3 as a starter and

amassed over 7,000 passing yards, 67 passing touchdowns and just eight interceptions. He also rushed for 1,580 yards and 36 touchdowns in his junior and senior seasons, leading Guyer to the 2021 Texas 6A Division II state championship game and a state semifinal appearance in 2022.

Jackson would be named the 2022-23 Gatorade National Football Player of the Year, capping off his high school career and highlighting his perseverance and commitment to the Denton Guyer program.

“He was just a student of the game,” Johnson said. “He learned as much during his junior and senior years as he did when he was a sophomore. Jackson’s high football IQ, his desire to talk about the game and his interest in the X’s and O’s led to him being so well-versed. It was his understanding of the game that set him apart.”

Jackson forged through growing pains and even in moments of humility — whether at AT&T Stadium, waiting behind Stowers or losing in Johnson’s office — he found what fueled him.

“The thing that separates people is their work ethic,” Johnson said. “I saw his work ethic and passion for football and knew it was inevitable that he was going to turn out to be who he is now.”

“There are talented people everywhere. There are physically gifted kids everywhere, but not everyone is like Jackson Arnold.”

‘You don’t even know if this is what you hoped for’

Sitting in the sand on a beach during his vacation, Todd pulled out his phone, shaded it from the bright sky overhead and watched as his son answered questions during media days.

“This is surreal,” he thought to himself.

“You have big dreams for your child,” Todd said. “But do you ever dream of something like this?”

There the quarterback sat, in a gray suit and a crimson tie, cementing his legacy as the face of OU football and the unquestioned leader ahead of the program’s historic first season in the Southeastern Conference.

Since Gabriel’s departure, it became apparent that just as Oklahoma is navigating its transition into a highly competitive conference, Jackson would also step into the spotlight as the new starting quarterback.

The daunting task of proving they belong looms, especially for Jackson, as the 19-year-old has the potential to curate what comes next.

“He can be creative,” Todd said.

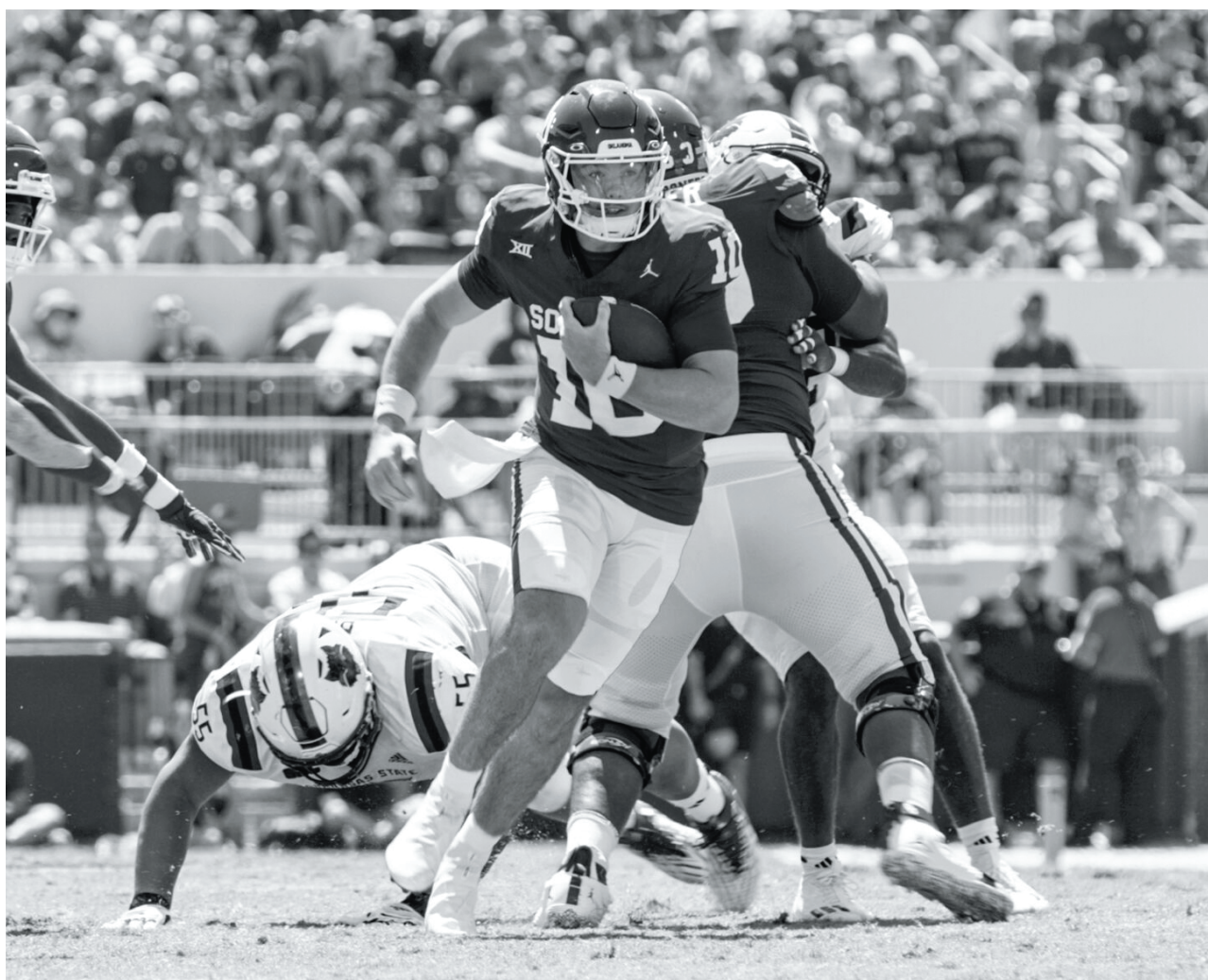
With a fresh canvas comes the expectation of making something worth viewing and investing in. It’s a reality Jackson is embracing as he carves his path ahead of the 2024 season.

“Just block out the pressure,” Jackson reminds himself. “I feel like there’s only pressure if you bring that pressure onto yourself.”

For the quarterback, extra work compensates for the lack of in-game collegiate experience, and he spent the summer learning from quarterback trainers and the OU coaching staff.

That commitment is evident to those around him, especially his teammates.

For every summer day that Jackson worked on routes with redshirt sophomore wide receiver Nic Anderson in Denton, Texas, was another night during fall camp that his roommate, sophomore defensive back Peyton Bowen, noticed he was



AUDREY QUAN/OU DAILY

Then-freshman quarterback Jackson Arnold during the game against Arkansas State on Sept. 2.

gone.

“I’ve seen him grow a lot,” Bowen said. “It has been nice to see. I live with him, so I see like, oh, he is still not home, and I know he is up there still watching film. It is a great feeling knowing that our starting quarterback is doing all that preparation and hard work in the dark that people don’t see.”

Although the work is private, the performance is public, and as Jackson prepares for the season, it is OU head coach Brent Venables who is confident that his quarterback is ready for what is next.

“You have to be able to play within the system and understand that there will be some mistakes. Not everything’s going to go your way,” Venables said. “How you handle those, those tough moments, the challenging moments in the course of a game or course of a season, is ultimately how you’re going to be defined. And Jackson, well, he’s got a great grasp on that.”

Struggles at the Alamo Bowl prompted concerns, but Jackson has proved he knows how to succeed after facing setbacks, and now, the stakes are higher than ever before. With the weight of a storied program and the hopes of a fanbase on his shoulders, the quarterback knows the margin for error is small as he leads OU into a new era.

Developing tough skin, taking one step at a time and loving the game of football have gotten him this far, and it will stick

with him as he encounters the natural ebbs and flows of a season.

“For me, I feel like I’ve learned to be resilient, especially after the bowl game,” Jackson said. “I had that experience my freshman year of high school. It’s different at the college level. There are a lot more eyes on me and a lot more negativity that can be thrown your way. Just being resilient and being able to overcome that adversity was huge for me in the bowl game and will be this fall because we will face adversity.”

Todd knows there will be highs and lows this season. But as he envisions his son stepping out onto the field during Oklahoma’s home opener against Temple, he is reminded that the aspirations once harbored are all possibilities.

“When you are watching your kid in front of 80,000 people, or you see his name scroll across the ticker on ESPN, you don’t even know if this is what you’ve hoped for,” Todd said. “You want them to love what they do and be successful at it, but this, sometimes you just have to pinch yourself.”

For OU football, this dream has quickly turned into a reality, and now it is up to the quarterback to answer the question everyone is asking:

Is Jackson Arnold ready for this?



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OU co-offensive coordinator Bill Bedenbaugh before the game against Baylor in Waco, Texas, on Nov. 16, 2019.

FILE/OU DAILY

O-LINE COMEBACK

OU rebuilds offensive line with transfers after losing key players

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

Oklahoma fans woke up on the morning of the 2023 Alamo Bowl intrigued by how one particular position group would hold up — the offensive line.

Three sacks, seven quarterback hurries and six penalties later, it was clear a long offseason full of doubt and concern awaited. They failed to protect then-freshman quarterback Jackson Arnold during his first career start. They also struggled to create gaps in the run game, resulting in six rushing yards on five attempts in the first quarter.

Months later, the offensive line lost McKade Mettauer and Walter Rouse, who started every game last year including the Alamo Bowl, to the NFL draft.

It was perhaps a rock-bottom for offensive line coach Bill Bedenbaugh since beginning his tenure with Oklahoma in 2013. It was clear with the departures of all five starting linemen — with standout freshman Cayden Green transferring to Missouri serving as the biggest blow — Bedenbaugh was approaching his seemingly most challenging offseason yet.

But before fall camp even started, head coach Brent Venables downplayed concern and expressed his excitement for the group.

Regardless of whether Venables' sentiment was typical coach speak or not, Oklahoma will run out a completely revamped offensive line come the Aug. 30 season-opener

against Temple. Showcasing a position group that was built back up the same way it had been broken down — the transfer portal.

"I feel really, really good (about the offensive line)," Venables said on May 31, three months before OU kicks off its 2024 season. "We've got great leadership there. We got really good ability there, as well. I believe in the players, and I believe in coach Bedenbaugh and the rest of the offensive staff to develop the chemistry and the continuity and the understanding and the fundamentals and the techniques with those guys. I like the group of guys."

OU has 14 former offensive linemen on NFL rosters, which

is tied with Michigan for the most nationally. Bedenbaugh has seen nine of his offensive tackles get drafted since 2015 and four in the last two years.

The idea of his unit being considered a weak spot is unprecedented.

He coached groups that protected consecutive Heisman-winning quarterbacks and cleared the path for standout running backs such as Joe Mixon, Samaje Perine, Rodney Anderson, Kennedy Brooks and Eric Gray. In the five seasons Jonathan Alvarez played for OU from 2014-18, Bedenbaugh instilled confidence and made Alvarez believe the offensive line would be one of the team's strong spots.

"We never went into a season thinking the worst," Alvarez said. "That's just the way Coach Bedenbaugh drilled into us about making the best of a situation. He always pushed us to be the dogs we were on the field, that's what helped us the most come together as a unit."

He believes Bedenbaugh is doing the same for the current group of linemen.

"I know he's already started working on their mindset," Alvarez said. "I know for a fact he started pulling up film from my time of playing just showing them, 'This is historically what I've been able to do for our guys, what I've demanded from my guys and they showed up and did it.'"

"For him, the biggest thing was showing that in the past we've done it, so we need you to find it within yourself to get to that level."

After the reality of Rouse, Mettauer, Andrew Raym and Tyler Guyton — four of OU's starting linemen in 2023 — heading to the NFL draft hit, it was clear Bedenbaugh had his work cut out for him in the offseason.

It became even clearer after Green departed and a few of the linemen who were expected to play frequently in 2024 followed him, including Savion Byrd, Nate Anderson and Aaryn Parks.

His first move in the portal was to grab Spencer Brown from Michigan State, a 6-foot-6, 321-pound tackle with 33 games under his belt. The experience he brings is perhaps his most valuable asset and something that would become a theme for Bedenbaugh's portal targets.

Prior to Brown's arrival, 11 of OU's 15 offensive linemen slated to be on the roster were freshmen. Troy Everett and Jacob Sexton were the only ones with starting experience. Everett has since suffered a leg injury that required surgery and his availability is questionable for the start of the season.

While Bedenbaugh saw how crucial Brown's experience would be, Brown saw an opportunity to develop under a proven coach at a place where some of his idols — Trent Williams, Lane Johnson and Orlando Brown — got their start.

"I felt like the best coach in the business is Coach Bedenbaugh, so I wanted to be coached by the best and keep the tradition going," Brown said. "There's a track record with offensive tackles who they put out year after year after year. When you bring up offensive linemen, you gotta bring up Oklahoma."

After Brown, Oklahoma picked up North Texas transfer Febechi Nwaiwu, USC transfer Michael Tarquin, Washington transfer Geirean Hatchett and a late addition from SMU transfer Branson Hickman to bolster its offensive line. The five additions have started a combined 98 career games.

But as OU learned last season, chemistry plays as big a part as anything when it comes to the offensive line. The Sooners frequently shifted its starters and threw out different



OLIVIA LAUTER/OU DAILY

Then-sophomore offensive lineman Jacob Sexton during Walk of Champions on Oct. 21.

combinations in an attempt to find the five guys that meshed well together, rather than the five best players.

Despite the lack of experience playing together, the early parts of building chemistry went smoothly.

"I feel like I've adjusted well, I don't think it's been too difficult," Tarquin said. "(The main thing is) developing the relationship with a new group of guys ... and I feel right at home with the guys on the team."

Their relationship with each other off the field has been stressed more than anything.

"Sometimes it is tough, but I really feel like we've done a really good job as a unit of sticking together and getting to know each other," Sexton said. "A lot of times people kind of separate and stick with their groups of class, but that hasn't been the case at all this time around."

"We hang out on the weekends a bunch. We try to plan little fishing trips, food spots — we love to eat — just bonding moments."

Last season, Sexton took over when first-round draft pick Guyton went down with an injury late in the season before eventually earning the starting job over the now-Cowboys

rookie tackle.

Yet even last season's impressive stretch didn't hand Sexton a starting job entering fall camp, according to Venables. Last year, Bedenbaugh had nearly all of his spots filled well before the season-opener. This year, no starters have been decided as of the first week of August.

"I think it's appropriate to say that," Venables said of whether all five spots on the line are up for grabs. "We don't have 50 guys to choose from, but I love the group of guys."

Bedenbaugh had a tall task this offseason of revamping his unit by proving he can recruit impact players from the transfer portal. The offseason is now over, and the questions that have lingered for eight months following OU's dismal Alamo Bowl performance are ready to be answered.

"You gotta cut out the noise and just focus on what we can control, that's what Coach Bedenbaugh always talks about," Sexton said. "I know everybody's been putting in extra work to make sure we're not going to be a weak spot on the team. We want to be the leaders of the offense."



DILLON BALLARD/OU ATHLETICS

Fifth year tight end Jake Roberts played at the University of North Texas from 2020 to 2022.

'RIGHT WHERE WE LEFT OFF'

OU offensive line reunites transfers Roberts, Nwaiwu under coach Littrell

BY GRACIE RAWLINGS • GRACIE.M.RAWLINGS-1@OU.EDU

In an era of change, Jake Roberts and Febechi Nwaiwu are clinging to what is constant.

For Roberts and Nwaiwu, life looks different than it did six months ago, but common threads remind them of the parts of their past that still live in the present. Connections to the coaching staff, the city of Norman and each other have kept them anchored and given them outlets of opportunity since arriving at the University of Oklahoma.

"It is a blessing," Roberts said after practice. "I am playing for my dream school, and every step of my career has led me here."

As a Norman native, the 6-foot-4, 252-pound tight end's

hopes of playing for OU grew with him, following him through childhood, to Norman North High School and even to the University of North Texas and Baylor. Ranked a three-star in high school, Roberts had 27 receptions for 286 yards and two touchdowns in two varsity seasons, but he did not receive an offer from OU, and instead committed to UNT.

For the 18-year-old, the decision to attend North Texas meant letting go of the dream he had harbored since adolescence. However, five years later, Roberts finds purpose in his winding path back to Oklahoma.

At UNT he would meet Seth Littrell, and play for Oklahoma's new offensive coordinator from 2020-22. In three seasons

under Littrell, Roberts would catch 43 passes for 541 yards and three touchdowns. After the coach's departure, the tight end would transfer to Baylor for the 2023 season before returning to Norman to reunite with Littrell during his last year of eligibility.

"It's been awesome," Roberts said about getting reacquainted with the offensive coordinator. "He's the same guy, we're running a lot of the same stuff and it is good to be back with him. We just kind of picked up right where we left off."

Roberts missed most of the spring because of an injury but has recovered and been back for OU's fall camp.

"Everything is going good and it is good to be back out

there,” Roberts said. “It has been a long time coming, and there has been some adversity that you don’t always expect, but it is good to be back out there with the guys flying around.”

Now, Roberts hopes to make an impact in the tight end room. After OU lost tight end Brayden Willis, who caught 39 passes for 514 yards during his senior season with Oklahoma, to the NFL draft two years ago, they have struggled to find a replacement. Then-redshirt senior Austin Stogner, who now plays for the Atlanta Falcons, was meant to fill that role last season, but after playing 709 snaps, the tight end recorded just 17 catches for 196 yards.

For many players on OU’s roster, Littrell and his offense are new, but for Roberts, familiarity with the coach has allowed him to understand his system even after being sidelined with an injury.

“He is really laid back,” Roberts said. “He is a man of few words, and he doesn’t say a ton, but his words are meaningful, and he’s a really personable guy. Our relationship was really strong at UNT and that has carried over to being back home.”

The connection with Littrell was not the only one that Roberts carried with him to Norman. After playing with Nwaiwu during the 2021-22 seasons at North Texas, the two have found a spot in the same offense once again.

Nwaiwu, a 6-foot-4, 339-pound offensive lineman from Coppell, Texas, redshirted in 2021 but found success under Littrell’s offense in 2022. He played in all 14 games and made 12 starts for UNT. Helping North Texas build the No. 25-ranked rushing offense in the nation, Nwaiwu was also named a second-team freshman All-American by The Athletic.

“There are a lot of differences and a lot of similarities,” Nwaiwu said about transferring to OU. “I feel like over here there are a lot of high-class guys and it is very intense. I feel like Seth still has the fire in him. He is still managing practice, still bringing that physicality, and he runs similarly to when he was at UNT.”

The offensive lineman is having to get acclimated to a new school and is also working to find where he fits in a position group that added five transfers in the offseason. However, time spent outside of football during the summer and getting to install the offense during fall camp has allowed him to see the offensive line’s potential.

“We have gotten so much closer, and I think that has been the biggest thing,” Nwaiwu said about his connection with the offensive line from the spring to the fall. “This summer was really big for us. We have a lot of new guys but I think that honestly helps because it is new people meeting new people. This summer we spent a lot of time together, a lot of time watching film, eating and working out with each other, so our O-line group is pretty tight.”

Roberts and Nwaiwu’s journey to Oklahoma has included years spent together and a season spent apart, but winding up back where they started —together and with Littrell — just makes sense.

Although it took time to get to this point, both players have an appreciation for the foundation that allowed them to get here and are looking forward to building what is next.

“North Texas teaches you how to work extremely hard,” Nwaiwu said. “But you know what they say, Oklahoma is just a little bit different.”



BRENDALL VARGAS/OU ATHELETICS

Redshirt junior offensive lineman Febechi Nwaiwu played at the University of North Texas from 2021 to 2023.



JENNA BURRESS/OU DAILY

Redshirt senior wide receiver J.J. Hester during spring practice on April 2.

READY FOR A BIGGER ROLE

J.J. Hester aims to be the 'next-man-up' after multiple injuries

BY GRACIE RAWLINGS • GRACIE.M.RAWLINGS-1@OU.EDU

Robert Spears-Jennings remembers watching an 18-year-old version of J.J. Hester at Booker T. Washington High School in Tulsa.

Hester was, at the time, the standout wide receiver in the state who had turned down an offer from the University of Oklahoma to become Missouri's highest-ranked recruit in the class of 2020.

Now, five years later, he is back where it all started.

In more ways than one.

"I've been seeing that '918 J.J.' that I've known since high school," Spears-Jennings, who played at Broken Arrow, said while referencing Tulsa's area code.

The four-star recruit finished his career at Booker T. Washington with 69 receptions for 1,404 yards and 13 touchdowns. After, he looked to get off to a strong start with the Tigers. But after redshirting his freshman season, the 6-foot-4, 202-pound wide receiver could not find a groove during his second year in Missouri and transferred to OU in 2022.

The opportunities seemed endless. Hester was coming to the place he felt most comfortable, the state where he played the most football and was getting a fresh start after a second-year slump with Missouri. However, a broken foot during the 2022 season and another in 2023 quickly slammed his comeback aspirations.

During his two years with the Sooners, the redshirt senior has appeared in nine games and made one catch for 13 yards, but OU's 2024 fall camp has told a different story.

"Right now, I am feeling 100%," Hester said after practice. "It took me a while to get back to this, but overall, it has been going great and it's just good to be back on the field."

Though his playing time has been limited, Hester now has a shot at breaking into the rotation with the position group currently dealing with several absences. Senior wide receiver Andrel Anthony is still recovering from a season-ending knee injury he suffered last year, and head coach Brent Venables confirmed that Jayden Gibson would be out for the season after reportedly injuring his knee during fall camp.

Gibson played in all 13 games during the 2023 season, tallying 14 receptions for 375 yards and five touchdowns.

With Anthony working his way into shape and Gibson out, players like sophomore Nic Anderson, Purdue transfer Deion Burks and senior Jalil Farooq will have to step up, but Hester also has an opportunity to fill in the gaps.

"The only thing that has held J.J. back is some injuries in his past," Venables said. "So, he's fought through that. I mean he has had a broken foot twice back-to-back, but he's been fantastic. He's long, he's really fast, he's got a tremendous catch radius, he plays tough, blocks well and then he's an excellent special teams player."

"So, again, his growth and development, other than the injuries, is exactly what we thought we could potentially get out of him. So he's going to have a real role for us."

Hester started by stringing together good days and turning those into productive weeks. Now, well into the beginning of

the season, he has been feeling good since the spring and is embracing his first truly healthy fall since he got to Norman in 2022.

From talks with wide receivers coach Emmett Jones to embracing new offensive coordinator Seth Littrell's strategy, Hester has adopted the next-man-up mentality and is looking to do whatever he can to put the team in a position to succeed.

"I am looking forward to making a big impact," Hester said when talking about what he can do in the wide receiver room. "When one man goes down, the next is up. That is what our coach preaches a lot, and he has everybody ready to go."

Spears-Jennings is glad that the two are back in the same state, this time playing for the same team, but to the defensive back, it is also evident that Hester has returned to his true form on the field.

"He's been showing himself," Spears-Jennings said. "He's getting back into his groove, and he is showing everybody why he should be fighting for the starting spot."

The last four years have proved to be a time of hardship for Hester as he moved schools, recovered from injury and found where he fits in a talented wide receiver room. Now, it is evident in the face of those challenges, perspective and appreciation for the sport have been earned.

"I am just going to keep going," Hester said. "Go here, go there it doesn't matter, I am willing to do anything for this offense."

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FILE/OU DAILY

Wide receiver Charleston Rambo smiles as he scores a touchdown during the Sooners' season opener against Missouri State on Sept. 12, 2020.

CHECK OUT OU'S 2024 OPPONENTS

Teams, coaches and players to look forward to this season

BY DANIEL HOMROK • DANIEL.J.HOMROK-1@OU.EDU

vs. Temple (Aug. 30)

Stan Drayton is going into his third season as Temple's head coach after the Owls finished 3-9 last year.

Forrest Brock and Evan Simon are expected to compete for the starting quarterback position. Running back Joquez Smith returns after rushing for 325 yards last season.

The all-time series is tied at 1-1 between these two programs.

vs. Houston (Sept. 7)

The Cougars went 4-8 in their debut season in the Big 12. Head coach Willie Fritz will replace Dana Holgorsen in 2024.

Houston returns quarterback Donovan Smith and leading rusher Parker Jenkins. A.J. Haulcy is also back for his junior season after leading the Cougars in tackles last year.

The Sooners lead the all-time series 3-1 over Houston.

vs. Tulane (Sept. 14)

Tulane finished 11-3 last season and is coming off a loss to Virginia Tech in the Military Bowl. Jon Sumrall enters his first season as head coach.

Oregon transfer Ty Thompson and Kai Horton are competing for the starting quarterback position, and leading rusher Makhi Hughes is back for his sophomore season after recording a team-high seven touchdowns last season. Jesus Machado returns for his senior season after leading the Green Wave in tackles in 2023.

Oklahoma holds a 2-0 all-time record against Tulane.

vs. Tennessee (Sept. 21)

The Volunteers finished 9-4 last season and defeated Iowa in the Citrus Bowl. Head coach Josh Heupel will return to Norman for the first time since being fired after the 2014 season.

Former five-star quarterback Nico Iamaleava starts for the Volunteers during his sophomore season. Transfer wide receiver Chris Brazzell II and transfer tight end Holden Staes are expected to be a crucial part of Tennessee's passing game.

OU leads the all-time series versus Tennessee 3-1.

at Auburn (Sept. 28)

Auburn went 6-7 last year, falling to Maryland in the Music City Bowl. Hugh Freeze returns for his second season in charge.

Freeze is bringing starting quarterback Payton Thorne back with him. True freshman wide receiver Cam Coleman is expected to provide a spark within the receiving corps. New defensive coordinator DJ Durkin takes over a defense that was ranked fourth in the SEC in points per game last season.

OU leads the all-time series 2-0 over Auburn.



FILE/OU DAILY

Safety Pat Fields tries to avoid being hit by an LSU player during the Peach Bowl on Dec. 28, 2019.

vs. Texas (Oct. 12)

Texas is one of the favorites to win the SEC after going 12-2 and reaching the College Football Playoff last season before falling to Washington in the semifinals. Longhorn's head coach Steve Sarkisian is back for his fourth season.

Quinn Ewers returns at quarterback for the Longhorns and is predicted as third on ESPN's race for the 2024 Heisman winner. Sophomore CJ Baxter is looking to take over at running back, and transfer wide receiver Isaiah Bond is expected to lead a talented receiver corps. Sophomore linebacker Anthony Hill Jr. also returns after ranking second in tackles last season.

Texas leads the all-time series against the Sooners 63-51-5.

vs. South Carolina (Oct. 19)

South Carolina went 5-7 last season. Former OU assistant head coach for offense Shane Beamer enters his fourth season as the Gamecocks head coach.

LaNorris Sellers is expected to be the starting quarterback, and former Arkansas running back Raheim Sanders is expected to make a splash for the Gamecocks. South Carolina returns leading tackler Debo Williams and third leading tackler DQ Smith to anchor the defense.

The game on Oct. 19 will mark the first matchup between the two teams.

at Mississippi (Oct. 26)

Expectations are high for head coach Lane Kiffin and Mississippi this year after finishing the 2023 season with a Peach Bowl victory over Penn State.

Jaxson Dart is ranked fourth on ESPN's potential Heisman winner list, and leading receiver Tre Harris is back for his senior season. Mississippi added former Oklahoma safety Key Lawrence in the transfer portal last offseason. Trey Washington will return after leading the team in tackles last season.

Mississippi won the only game between the teams in 1999.

vs. Maine (Nov. 2)

Maine went 2-9 in 2023. Head coach Jordan Stevens enters his third season as head coach of the Black Bears.

Anthony Harris is expected to be the starting quarterback, and Jamie Lamson returns at wide receiver after scoring six touchdowns last season. Defensive tackle Izaiah Henderson is also back after leading the team in sacks last season.

This will be the first matchup between OU and Maine.

at Missouri (Nov. 9)

Missouri has momentum heading into 2024 coming off an 11-2 season last year and a Cotton Bowl win over Ohio State. Coach Eliah Drinkwitz enters his fifth season as head coach.

Quarterback Brady Cook is back for his senior season, and Missouri also returns wide receiver Luther Burden III. Former

Oklahoma wide receiver Theo Wease Jr. and former OU offensive lineman Cayden Green are both expected to be key pieces to Missouri's offense.

Oklahoma leads the all-time series 67-24-5 against its former Big 12 rival.

vs. Alabama (Nov. 23)

Alabama lost in the College Football Playoff semifinal to Michigan last season and is set to kick off its first season under new head coach Kalen DeBoer.

Jalen Milroe enters his second season as Alabama's starting quarterback, and Jam Miller and Justice Haynes are expected to anchor the running game. Malachi Moore is looking to lead the Alabama defense after recording 52 tackles last season.

The Sooners hold a 3-2-1 all-time advantage over Alabama.

at LSU (Nov. 30)

LSU finished 10-3 last season and defeated Wisconsin in the ReliaQuest Bowl. Head coach Brian Kelly is entering his third season with the Tigers.

Garrett Nussmeier is expected to replace 2023 Heisman Trophy winner Jayden Daniels at quarterback. Mason Taylor and Kyren Lacy are expected to lead LSU's passing game after losing Malik Nabers and Brian Thomas Jr. to the NFL. Junior linebacker Harold Perkins Jr. returns after recording 75 tackles and 5.5 sacks in 2023.

LSU holds a 2-1 advantage over OU in the all-time series.



PHOTOS BY OLIVIA LAUTER/OU DAILY

OU football co-defensive coordinator and linebackers coach Zac Alley during open practice on April 12.

THE ‘WHY’ TO VENABLES’ ‘HOW’

Zac Alley brings ‘fountain of youth and knowledge’ to OU’s defense

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

A young Zac Alley sat in front of a split-screen TV with Madden, a football video game, on one side and his favorite show playing on the other.

His father, Kendall, sat and watched as Zac would accurately predict what play his opponent would run, counter it in the best possible way and ultimately build a laughable 84-7 lead. He’d often been able to guess what play his opponents were going to run which is why he won multiple Madden tournaments as a kid and ultimately why he’s become one of the young rising minds in college football.

Years later, Kendall and Zac sat at lunch together ahead of Boise State’s matchup with Colorado State in 2020. Hours before Zac’s fourth game as a co-special teams coordinator, Kendall asked him what he should look for from the stands.

“The first time they punt, their center snaps it and spins it a yard and a half to the right,” Zac told his dad. “I’m going to walk the two linebackers up on the right and we’re going to block the punt.”

Sure enough, less than a minute into the game, Zac’s vision came to life. Boise State blocked its first of three kicks that game — each run back for a touchdown — accounting for 21 of its 51 points.

“He studied special teams just like he studies offenses and defenses,” Kendall said. “That’s the kind of stuff he’s always had a knack for. He’s good at anticipating what you’re thinking. He’s pretty good at just down and distance, ‘I’ve done my homework, I think they’re gonna do this,’ and he’ll defend it pretty well.”

Zac, alongside his co-coordinator Winston Venable, was ultimately named Special Teams Coordinator of the Year by FootballScoop in 2020.

He entered that role with minimal experience coaching special teams. In spring, he stepped into the role of OU defensive coordinator and linebackers coach with plenty of knowledge of defense. So what exactly is Zac Alley capable of in leading OU’s defense in 2024?

Zac reunited with head coach Brent Venables after working for him for seven years as a student and graduate assistant at Clemson from 2012-18. The two will lead a talented Sooners’ defense, and the hopes of a successful SEC defensive debut will rest on the shoulders of the 30-year-old’s understanding of the game.

“Wherever he’s been he’s molded his units into better versions,” Venables said in a statement after Zac’s hire. “And he’ll do the same here.”

Hail Marys, interceptions and chaos fill a typical 12-year-old’s game of Madden, but Zac was more concerned with schemes, formations and alignments.

Zac has always enjoyed thinking strategically, often trying to answer the “whys” of things. Madden is where he had an opportunity to first use that thought process, and it also laid the foundation that established his understanding of football.

From there, it kept growing.

“It wasn’t hard to figure out early that he had a knack for it.”

Kendall, a member of Clemson's 1981 national championship team, said. "He could see things that even I didn't see after having played football. I tell people I'm a kindergartener compared to his level of football knowledge. He really understands it at the deepest level of anyone I've ever been around.

"We can watch games together and he'll tell you what play they're going to run (as soon as) they break the huddle."

Bob Witman, Zac's high school coach at Charlotte Country Day, typically didn't allow players to call blocking schemes until he met Zac. Witman called the plays, and if an adjustment was needed to be made, Zac, who played center, would be able to notice and change it.

When Zac was serving as a student assistant at Clemson, one of his father's friends, a high school football coach, came to their house and discussed a unique play he picked up at a college football camp. About half an hour after he left, Kendall noticed his son drawing in his notepad and asked what he was doing.

"Trying to defend that play he talked about," Zac responded.

His internal desire to break down the game led to outward success, and his already extensive knowledge of the game would lead him to an internship with the Carolina Panthers.

Before then-Panthers head coach Ron Rivera went to scout DeAndre Hopkins ahead of the 2013 NFL draft, he called his friend Kendall to ask if Zac would tell him about the Tigers' star receiver. Zac, only a sophomore at Clemson at the time, told Rivera in an hour-long phone call everything he needed to know about Hopkins.

After attending the workout with Hopkins, Rivera possessed an accurate, in-depth profile of the receiver and also saw a potential new scout.

"Your kid knew everything there was to know about this guy," Rivera told Kendall. "He hit it dead on. Anytime he wants to scout for us, he can."

'He's like a father figure to me'

Shortly after his hire in 2012, Venables spent some of his first days as Clemson's defensive coordinator locked in the film room with Zac for up to nine hours a day.

Here, Zac picked Venables' mind and grew fond of his defensive scheme while the new defensive coordinator gained trust for Zac's ability to break down the game.

"That's when Zac would listen and pick up on what (Venables) was thinking," Kendall said. "He really loves BV's strategy. I wouldn't say Zac has copied everything BV has done, but there's no question that BV's system is the basis of how he wants to run his defense."

Zac's time at Clemson started with him shuffling chairs, making copies and assisting the graduate assistants. As Venables recognized potential in Zac, he piled on more responsibilities. The young defensive savant's ability to process the game quickly was evident early and as a result, he was given a headset, a rarity for a student assistant.

Zac was tasked with drawing what happened on every play, and he was able to hand the play sheets to Venables at half-time, allowing the defensive coordinator to make adjustments.

Zac's keen and efficient analysis of the game not only helped Venables and Clemson make second half adjustments, but it also carried over to his time as defensive coordinator at Jacksonville State. JSU allowed just 119 second half points compared to 156 first half points in 2023. Zac's immediate adjustments led the Gamecocks to surrender 54 third quarter points, less than 20% of the 275 points they allowed

in total.

During his time with the Tigers, he was also responsible for breaking down film on recruits, deciding if the rest of Clemson's staff should consider the young talent. He didn't say a lot in film rooms with the rest of the Tigers' coaches, except on Sundays, when he entered the building as the most prepared person in the room.

"He had already watched a lot more tape than we had on Sunday, when we came in and started getting ready for the next (game)," Dan Brooks, Clemson's defensive tackles coach from 2009-16, said.

It had been six years since Zac last sat in a film room with Venables, but with added experience and knowledge that will only aid him in the Sooners' defensive coordinator role, Zac can lighten the load for OU's current head coach even more than he did at Clemson.

Venables' familiarity and faith in Zac has already allowed the head coach to roam around OU's spring practices more, rather than staying in place working with the linebackers.

"My biggest reservation for Brent being a head coach is being able to put things down and go be the head coach," Brooks said. "He's got a comfort level with (the linebacker) room. He needs to have trust (in who's coaching that room), and I know he does with Zac because they've been around each other enough, he knows it's going to be done right.

"(At Clemson, Zac) could go run a drill with the MIKE linebacker while Brent's doing something with the outside linebackers. It was like (Brent) had an assistant linebacker coach because he had been around him enough."

As a defensive coordinator with Jacksonville State, Zac used his knowledge from Venables as the basis for his defense while also expanding that arsenal.

On Jacksonville State's first defensive play of overtime against Kennesaw State in 2022, Zac drew up a unique blitz that led to a sack and game-sealing fumble recovery. When Kendall asked where his inspiration for the blitz came from, Zac referenced a random 2015 game when Clemson ran it.

Venables' defense has always been the basis of how Zac runs his, but OU's coach is more than just a mentor on the field. In a 2021 interview, after he had been hired as the youngest coordinator in the Football Bowl Subdivision by Louisiana-Monroe, Zac was asked what he learned from his time with Venables.

"Everything," Zac said. "He's like a father figure to me. ... I try to imitate him in all the things I do because he's been successful."

Less than a month after his hire, Zac stood in front of the OU defense to deliver a passionate message in winter workouts.

"We're gonna have details in what we do," Zac said. "How we start, how we finish, everything that revolves around this defense; the discipline, the toughness, the things that we hang our hat on. It starts right here."

Sound familiar? It should.

Though many of Zac's tendencies look awfully similar to that of OU's head coach, his demeanor in practice is where he stands out. Zac has plenty of passion evident through his coaching style, but it comes across in the form of explaining things in a calmer manner than that of Venables' fiery persona.

"There's nothing we did on the field or off the field that he couldn't tell us why (we did it) and why it will work," one former player said.

And Zac's "why" could be the perfect complement to Venables' "how."



Co-defensive coordinator and linebackers coach Zac Alley during open practice on April 12.

"When Coach V is yelling at you, chewing you out and not really giving you an explanation, you can go to Coach Alley and he'll really break it down," OU linebacker Danny Stutsman said. "He's always behind the 'why' and not so much the 'how.'"

'He really understands and relates to us'

Quae Drake would often peek through the window of the Jacksonville State weight room upon entering the facility at 6 a.m. to see Zac at the tail end of his morning workout.

It's a routine he started when he was in ninth grade, after receiving a workout regimen to help him recover from a leg injury. By the time Kendall woke up each morning, Zac had already left for his workout.

He carried this habit over to his time with the Gamecocks and was consistently the first person in the facility and often the last.

Soon enough, Zac had created a ripple effect.

"It made me want to go harder for him," Drake said. "He motivated me to get up and come in early because I know he was out there early and (spending) late nights trying to have a great plan for us that week, doing all he could to help us be successful and showcase our skills. It makes you just want to play hard for him. ... I wanted him to be successful, too."

His youth and energy are two of the things that stood out to Drake early on. While some may view him being half the age of his OU predecessor Ted Roof as a disadvantage, Zac has proven his top-tier knowledge of the game time and time again, and his youth is what allows him to easily connect to his players.

Shortly after he was hired at Louisiana-Monroe, he joked in an interview with the News Star about his ability



BOB NGUYEN/OU DAILY

Co-defensive coordinator and linebackers coach Zac Alley during OU's spring game on April 20.

to connect with players through online classes, which many coaches can't do.

"Most coaches have never seen an online class," Zac, who was 27 at the time, said. "Just the ability to connect with them on that level is good, and it's fun to get out there and compete with them in the drills."

Now three years later, he is the youngest OU defensive coordinator since 29-year-old Venables took over in 1999.

"He really understands and relates to us," Stustman said. "It's good to go to him because he knows exactly what we're thinking."

During the week leading up to Jacksonville State's bowl game, Zac took every senior on the defense out to eat. Just days ahead of what ended up being the program's first-ever bowl win, football was not a topic of conversation. Because for Zac, it is about more than the game. They chatted about life and what it might look like after

football, with the young coach giving advice on how to handle certain situations and genuinely caring about what each of his players had planned to do next.

Drake's goal was and always has been to go to the NFL. While deciding where to transfer after the 2022 season, he knew to reach his goal he'd need more experience at WILL linebacker, which many coaches didn't want to offer him because of his lack of experience at the spot.

Zac not only gave Drake the opportunity to play a less familiar position and boost his draft stock but also helped develop the redshirt senior into the Gamecocks' leading tackler.

Drake only had one other requirement before transferring to Jacksonville State — he wanted to be the first person in his family to get a master's degree. Zac promised him he could do that, and he is on track to fulfill his wish. "He cares, man, and you can feel it," Drake said. "You're

going to feel his passion and his love for each and every one of you. Everybody in the room is going to feel it."

As co-special teams coordinator at Boise State, Zac put together presentations loaded with statistics and examples of NFL players whose careers began with special teams.

"It was an eye-opener for these young college kids to learn about the importance of special teams and the impact it can have on their future in going to the NFL," Winston Venable, who coached special teams alongside Zac, said. "When you do that with passion, excitement and detail like Zac did, it naturally creates a buy-in."

Zac and Venable crafted a scheme full of pre-snap movement, twists and deception — which he now uses to lead his defenses — while also giving players the freedom to be creative.

Special teams, an aspect of football that sees a touch-back on nearly every kickoff, has been minimized by new rules at the professional level and is often looked down upon as a spot for backup receivers and defensive backs, ultimately became a hot commodity at Boise State under Zac and Venable.

"Guys were fired up to play special teams," Venable said. "We made it a culture that guys wanted to be a part of. That was a strength that (Zac) had."

Everywhere Zac has been, his knowledge has impressed those around him.

It led him to an unfamiliar role as Boise State's co-special teams coordinator, a unit that ended up ranking 15th nationally in kick return yards, seventh in punt return yards and leading the country in special teams touchdowns.

It also led him to a bigger role as Louisiana-Monroe defensive coordinator. The Warhawks have had a bottom 10 scoring defense each of the past five seasons with the exception of 2021 — when Zac was at the helm of the unit.

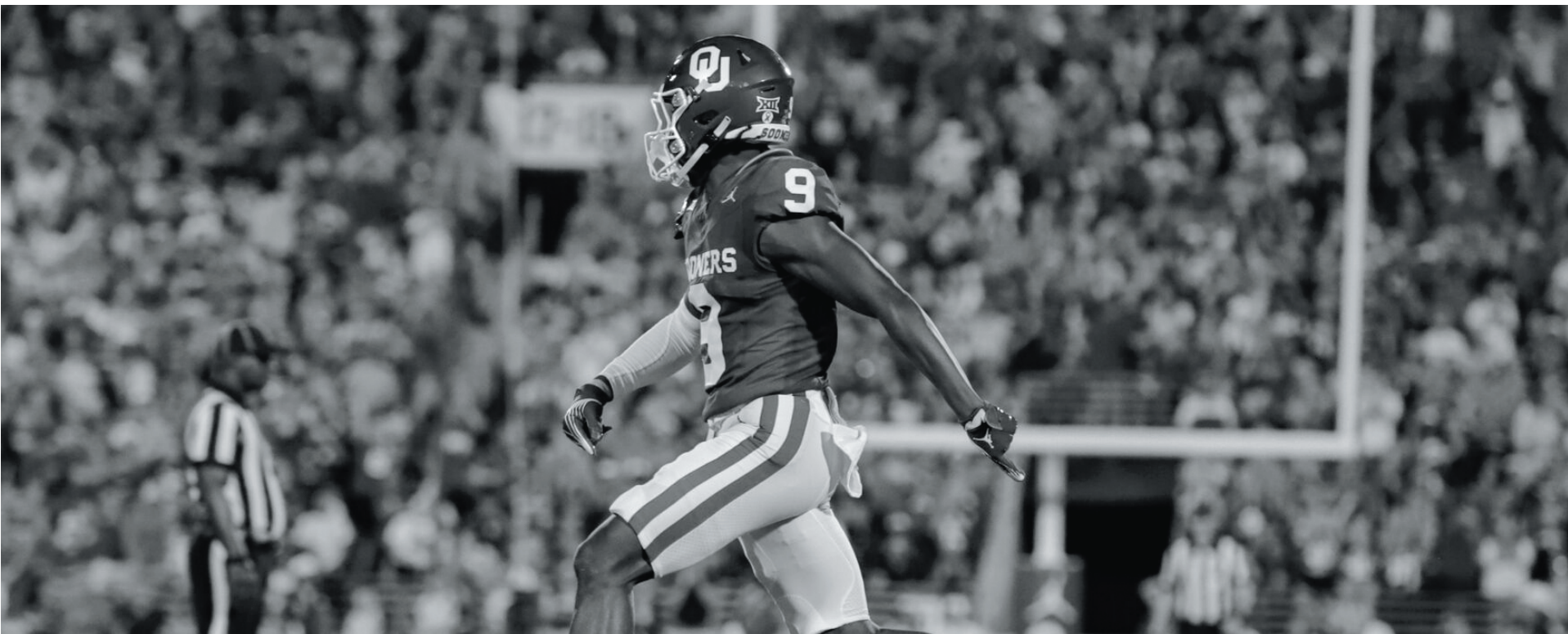
It even brought him to his most recent stop with Jacksonville State. The Gamecocks had allowed 28.4 points per game the year prior to Zac's arrival, compared to 21.2 points in 2023, which ranked 33rd nationally, despite defending more plays per game than any other team in the nation.

Zac has helped improve every unit he's led. He has now taken over the Sooners' defense, one that has been mostly categorized by mediocrity since the day Venables left the defensive coordinator position.

This year, however, Zac will have plenty of talent to work with, highlighted by the veteran core of seniors Danny Stutsman, Billy Bowman Jr. and Ethan Downs and complemented by rising stars like former five-star recruits Adepoju Adebawore, Peyton Bowen and David Stone.

The wit of a Madden expert turned defensive guru, combined with OU's plethora of defensive talent, makes for an exciting upcoming season in Norman and the potential to reinstate OU as a top level defense with Zac Alley at the helm.

"(OU is) getting a fountain of youth and knowledge," Venable said. "I think they're getting that next up-and-coming name in college football."



AUDREY QUAN/OU DAILY

Then-sophomore defensive back Gentry Williams during the game against Iowa State on Sept. 30.

‘I’M READY TO GO’

Gentry Williams steps into leadership role after injury-plagued season

BY DANIEL HOMROK • DANIEL.J.HOMROK-1@OU.EDU

Gentry Williams displayed flashes of stardom throughout 2023.

During his first season starting at cornerback, Williams recorded 30 tackles, four tackles for loss and three interceptions. Only one thing was holding him back.

Due to an ongoing shoulder issue, he missed three of OU’s 13 games during his sophomore campaign. After the season, Williams underwent shoulder surgery ahead of his junior year.

“It was a tough moment,” Williams said about his injuries. “Obviously I want to do what’s best for the team. I’m back and excited to play with my brothers.”

Now entering the Southeastern Conference, Williams knew he needed to rehab and get healthy ahead of the Sooners’ 2024 season.

Over the summer, he relied on strength and conditioning coach Jerry Schmidt to guide him back into form, prioritizing building muscle and getting his weight up to 190 pounds. With last season’s frustrations behind him, Williams has embraced the much-needed reps during fall camp.

“Mental toughness,” Williams said when asked about responding after injury. “Every football player has had something not go their way. I’ve had my surgery and my rehab. I’m ready to go.

“If I make more progress every day, then I’m doing something good. That’s been my mindset and that’s gonna continue to be my mindset this season.”

Now fully healthy, Williams is able to focus on new challenges in the SEC and the grueling 12-game regular season slate that awaits him and his teammates.

Oklahoma enters 2024 with many key defensive pieces like senior linebacker Danny Stutsman, senior safety Billy Bowman Jr. and senior cornerback Woodi Washington returning, but Williams has still taken on a leadership role during fall camp.

This has helped players like cornerback Dez Malone learn at a high pace since arriving at OU from San Diego State during the offseason.

“Gentry is another guy that’s great,” Malone said. “He’s a guy that really studies the game. He’s a guy I try to sit next to and ask questions because he’s very smart. He’s looking real good too.”

With OU’s defense expected to be vastly improved this year with Williams and returning talent, expectations are high.

In the third year of head coach Brent Venables’ tenure, people are searching for the defense’s overall theme, but Williams is breaking things down day-by-day as the season moves closer.

“I’m confident in the work we have to do every single day,” Williams said. “We’ve got to take it one day at a time. It’s what can we do to be better today and where our feet are.

“Take the feedback that we’re doing good at practice and take the feedback that we’re doing bad at practice. You’re not

gonna have a perfect practice, but you’ve gotta aim to be perfect every single day – and I think that’s what we’re doing a really good job of.”

After a 6-7 season his freshman year and the ups and downs of last year, Williams hopes that his prior experiences can help the younger defensive backs prepare not only for collegiate football but also for the times they will inevitably struggle.

For Williams, a leadership role means listening, interpreting and reiterating advice from players like Bowman Jr. and Washington rather than doing it all on his own.

Alongside Williams and Washington, Venables has been impressed by the versatility of other players during fall camp. Depth options like Kani Walker, Malone and Jacobe Johnson could all step up in a big way.

“We have a handful of players that there will be no drop off when a guy goes out,” Venables said. “That’s not across the board, but there’s a handful of guys that can get in the game and go do what you need them to do.”

Williams is looking to make up for lost time at fall camp while setting his sights on a new season that begins on Aug. 30 against Temple at Gaylord Family-Oklahoma Memorial Stadium.

“He’s got exponential growth and potential ahead of him,” Venables said about Williams. “He’s a super conscientious guy. He cares about his opportunity and is locked in and focused. I’m excited to see his growth.”



ADEN CHOATE/OU DAILY

Senior defensive back Billy Bowman Jr. during SEC Media Days on July 16.

‘ELEVATING THE STANDARD’

Billy Bowman Jr. passes up draft to double down for SEC debut

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

Billy Bowman Jr. sat alongside his father in head coach Brent Venables’ office one day removed from Oklahoma’s 69-45 win over TCU on Nov. 24.

The safety was undecided on his future as he prepared for a meeting with OU’s head coach and Billy Bowman Sr. He was weighing whether to enter the 2024 NFL draft or return to the Sooners for one final season.

But the conversation was quick.

Venables emphasized the importance of Bowman Jr.’s potential return and the progress he could make if he stayed. On the walk back to the car from the Barry Switzer Center, five words cemented the player’s future in Norman.

“Dad, I’m not done yet,” Bowman Jr. said.

In the season that followed, Bowman Jr. finished with six interceptions — three of which were pick sixes — and tallied the most interception return yards in OU history. He also had 63 total tackles and four deflections, garnering him First Team All-American honors from CBS Sports.

Under Venables, who has helped guide defensive backs A.J. Terrell, Isaiah Simmons, Jayron Kearse and others to

the NFL, Bowman Jr. received draft grades as high as the second round, according to Bowman Sr. If he had decided to declare, he likely would’ve become the first OU safety to be selected in the NFL draft since Delarrin Turner-Yell in 2022.

But the elite draft prospect was in search of more.

Four years ago, Bowman Jr. considered committing to Texas out of high school, and was tempted to leave with Lincoln Riley when he was hired at USC in 2021. As OU’s spring game approached, Bowman Jr. was expected to step on the field as the unquestioned leader of OU’s secondary.

“Billy has given himself wholeheartedly to this university and this football team,” OU safeties coach Brandon Hall told the OU Daily in December. “Billy was very adamant about wanting to come back feeling his best football will be ahead of him. He also felt like he could be a better leader and a mentor.”

For Bowman Jr., the draft was questionable but Oklahoma was certain.

The Sooners have everything Bowman Jr. wants: a

family-like atmosphere, a coach who pours into him daily and a program that provides opportunities to improve his craft on and off the field.

“Perfection is not attainable, so you can never get enough of it,” Bowman Sr. said of his son’s mentality. “You’re never gonna get there, but you can try to get there. ... He loves the process and always trusts it and does whatever it takes.”

When Venables asked Bowman Jr. to grow as a vocal leader last season, the junior safety stepped up. It’s why, with one more season, he believes he can help the Sooners improve.

And most of all, he knows he has all the tools to get there. “You can’t get enough development,” Bowman Sr. said. “There were some personal things in there (with his decision). Obviously, getting a degree and being legendary where you are at. The NFL is not going anywhere. If it doesn’t equal out, the job is not finished yet. ... He felt that the job wasn’t done yet.”

'He's a damn lion'

Shane Tolleson remembers watching Bowman Jr. sit to the left of his desk every day, absorbing film.

Bowman Jr.'s demeanor was the same as it is now: stone cold, focused and determined. He often asked the former Denton Ryan High School defensive coordinator to rewind the video, gauging every step of a play from start to finish.

"He did not have to tell you that he was good," Tolleson said. "When a lion walks out of the trees, he doesn't have to tell you he's a damn lion. When he comes out from the trees, everyone knows that's a lion. You better watch out because that is Billy Bowman Jr."

Bowman Jr.'s talent has spoken for itself throughout his career, but Venables and OU's coaching staff needed more from him following a 6-7 campaign in 2022. Now, the safety has become multifaceted from his play to his leadership, and has affected the game and his team on every level.

"Everyone talks about Billy's skill set, which is true," Hall said. "Let's be honest though, you don't make the tackles, the assists, the (pass breakups) and the interceptions he's making unless he's running to the ball each and every snap. The football gods, so to speak, they reward you for your effort."

"You can call the team up and break the huddle, and nobody's gonna listen to a word you say. But, Billy man, he's earned that right. He's earned that right as a player. He's earned that right because of how he practices, not just how he plays. And I think he's starting to see that he can make an impact and change the game in that avenue as well."

"Mediocre people don't like high achievers, and high achievers don't like mediocre people."

SHANE TOLLESON,
FORMER DENTON RYAN
HIGH SCHOOL DEFENSIVE
COORDINATOR

In high school, Bowman Jr.'s leadership showcased itself in similar fashions. He was always the first in the gym and the last one to leave.

A week before a playoff game in 2019, Bowman Jr. and his teammates were working on drills. Tolleson

was crunched on time,

due to playoff game prep, and Bowman Jr. went up and said "No, coach. We have to do that again."

Tolleson then instructed the group of players to repeat the drills. It was in those small moments that Bowman Jr.'s vocal leadership first began to take root, eventually allowing him to flourish at Oklahoma.

"If you're not all-in, he doesn't connect with you," Tolleson said. "Mediocre people don't like high achievers, and high achievers don't like mediocre people. He doesn't mess with them."

Bowman Jr. finished his high school career as a four-star recruit, holding offers from Oklahoma, Alabama, Texas, Georgia and LSU. He was Denton Ryan's two-way star, hauling in 86 receptions for 1,207 yards and 15 touchdowns on offense and one interception in his senior season.

When looking back on his freshman season, Bowman Jr. sees the flaws. But Pat Fields, a former OU safety from 2018-21 who helped mentor the young defensive back, remembers a young, skinny Bowman Jr. leading the pack, imperfections and all. There, Fields witnessed his slow but

steady immersion of his on-field talents with his growing knowledge and leadership of the game.

"The perfect way to sum him up and his work ethic is like Kobe (Bryant)," Fields told the OU Daily. "I would imagine that the same way he's working now is like the same way he was working as a freshman, but I think with time he's evolved, and he's just now seeing some of the fruits of his labor."

In 2021, Fields and Bowman Jr. would travel to Midwest City, 30 minutes from campus, and eat at TEZ WINGZ, a hole-in-the-wall chicken restaurant. There, Bowman Jr. would sit down with Fields, asking questions ranging from life to football.

In Bowman Jr.'s eyes, he was soaking in the knowledge of someone who knew the game and the position. However, the then-senior safety was learning his own lessons from the talented freshman.

"As crazy as it sounds, I feel like in some ways us older guys were learning from Billy," Fields said. "The thing that's funny with Billy (is he) was always the one elevating the standard. In a lot of ways, he was teaching us."

Three years later, Bowman Jr. has solidified his role as one of the top safeties in the nation, stalking offenses like a prowling lion, reading the quarterback like it's his prey and jumping at passes like he's going in for the kill.

Although it wasn't always that way, the lessons learned from Fields and a strong foundation implemented by Venables and OU's coaching staff have taught him how to hunt.

Without Venables' knowledge and commitment to Bowman Jr. and the safety's own passion for the game, he might be playing elsewhere.

"Venables came and just stamped that environment of family," Tolleson said. "I think he kind of set it up to a whole new level. (Billy's) looking to be cared about, and if he knows you love him, he's gonna play his balls off for you."

'Do I go to USC with Coach Riley?'

In December 2021, days following Riley's surprising departure to USC, Bowman Jr. mulled over his future at OU.

The former four-star recruit had to decide if he should stay or go after his initial reason for coming to the university was leaving for Los Angeles. According to Bowman Sr., Riley was one of the lone reasons Bowman Jr. decommitted from the Longhorns on Oct. 7, 2020, and joined the Sooners less than a month later.

In one season under former defensive coordinator Alex Grinch, Bowman Jr. played as a combo nickelback, safety and cornerback, garnering 22 total tackles, two pass breakups and one forced fumble. The plan after that season was to move Bowman Jr. to offense so he could play wide receiver in 2022.

"He has so many skill sets," Bowman Sr. said. "He was a freshman, and he was doing too much. ... Knowing that, he never had a chance to be great. He was good at those things — playing on offense and defense — but he never got great at anything because of that."

Those decisions, spearheaded by Riley, left Bowman Jr. lost in who he was supposed to be and struggling under a coach who was doing the same.

"He kind of felt Lincoln was gonna do it, like everybody else knew he was gonna do something that was not right,"

Bowman Sr. said. "When we played Oklahoma State, something was not right."

Those questionable feelings were confirmed the night of the Sooners' loss to the Cowboys.

"Dad, I knew it, I knew it," Bowman Jr. said following Riley's surprise departure, and in that moment, his once solidified future in Norman melted away.

"He came to me and asked, 'Do I get in the transfer portal? Do I go to USC with Coach Riley?'" Bowman Sr. said. "I told him he's never done anything because someone else has done something. He needed to wait it out."

So, instead of entering the portal like former OU quarterback Caleb Williams, receiver Mario Williams and others, Bowman Jr. waited.

And Venables entered.

The defensive-minded coach previously helped Clemson win two national championships and had units ranked in the top 15 in total defense eight seasons in a row. Bowman Jr. was one of the first players to enter Venables' office, and there the then first-year head coach laid out his vision for the player's future.

No more moving around the field, Venables proposed. He would play solely as a strong safety.

"I want to start off by saying I can play whatever position on the field," Bowman Jr. said. "But by them coming in and saying that, 'We're gonna stick you at strong safety,' that helped me gain some assurance and reassurance that I could do this and I can play this position at a high level."

In the same vein as his 2023 meeting with Venables, Bowman Jr. made an immediate decision. The Denton, Texas, native called home and said, "He reminds me of Coach Tolleson. I'm staying, Dad. I'm staying."

"The Venables connection, me and him are very similar," Bowman Jr. said. "That's how we're connected, and I'm a guy who doesn't say much, but when I get out here, I'm intense and yelling all the time. I'm demanding perfection from others and from myself. I feel like that's how we connect."

The proof is in his play, and since Bowman Jr. has solely focused on a single position and a defensive strategy, he has tallied nine interceptions, 122 total tackles and three touchdowns.

"He waited it out and look at what happened," Bowman Sr. said. "He has a defensive minded coach and (he's) playing defense. (I knew he was) going to be in a great position. That's where we are now."

From the moment he was hired, Tolleson knew the type of impact the OU head coach would have on Bowman Jr.'s life. That's why he believes, long after his career is over, Bowman Jr.'s relationship with Venables will continue to pay dividends.

While the safety's sights are currently on the NFL, his knack for coaching has become clear. During drills, the junior safety can be seen shadowing Hall and co-defensive coordinator Jay Valai, and those close to Bowman Jr. know that days spent learning on the sidelines in practice might turn into a game-time reality.

"I don't know Brent Venables as a person," Tolleson said. "But, I'll tell you this. What I do know, with all my heart, I believe that Venables serves the same God I do. I believe just like I would die for Billy Bowman Jr., I believe Venables is going to take care of Billy Bowman Jr. way past football. He just punched a ticket to be on the Venables coaching



OLIVIA LAUTER/OU DAILY

Then-junior defensive back Billy Bowman Jr. during the game against BYU on Nov. 18.

coaching tree coattail for the rest of his life.

"I think Venables doesn't know what he really has. And, I think Billy Bowman Jr. doesn't know what he just got."

'The ability to see beyond tomorrow'

Following the completion of OU's first open spring practice, Bowman Jr.'s eyes were glued to the exit of Oklahoma's Everest Indoor Training Center.

But a throng of media members stood in his way, gathering around the All-American safety in his first media appearance since the Alamo Bowl. In between questions, he anticipated a gathering in OU's Barry Switzer Center.

During OU's spring camp, Bowman Jr. led film studies with OU's defensive backs, particularly freshman safeties Jaydan Hardy, Michael Boganowski and Reggie Powers III. They went over film from OU's practices, even comparing them to tape from Bowman Jr.'s previous seasons.

Bowman Jr. not only leads by example, but — in his own words — he passes down the OU standard. During OU's

open spring practices, Bowman Jr. could be seen coaching up players and holding tackle dummies next to Hall.

"Whenever he speaks? Listen," Boganowski said during OU's newcomer media availability in March. "It's almost like he's a coach. I thought he was more of a quiet guy, but since I got in the room, he's actually a pretty vocal leader."

If you ask Bowman Jr., there's more to improve on ahead of the Sooners first season in the SEC. The Sooners defense was inconsistent at best last season, allowing just over 250 yards through the air and 138 rushing yards per game.

The senior safety thinks progress starts with his leadership.

"I'm still getting better at knowing what everybody next to me is doing," Bowman Jr. said. "I know what it was like to be as a freshman. You come in here from high school, you used to dominate everything, and you come in here and things don't go your way. I've been watching film with them probably after every practice. It's not just clicking right away. It's a process."

Notably, another part of Bowman Jr.'s future off the field was set into stone in December. The junior safety proposed to OU softball's star center fielder Jayda Coleman, who he's been in a relationship with for more than four years.

Coleman has become a superstar at Oklahoma, in some ways outshining her fiancé. She's one of the best softball players in the nation, tallying 13 home runs and 44 RBIs in the 2024 season. Coleman has also been a primary catalyst for OU's four straight Women's College World Series championships.

According to Bowman Jr.'s mother, Keeley, the pair pushes each other with their individual greatness. Coleman's play has even led Venables to joke that she has "Better BallSkillz" than Bowman Jr. in a post on X.

"They're just inseparable," Keeley said. "They know what it takes to be an amazing athlete, and they push each other. I think both of them have helped each other grow into the people that they are just because they know what it takes. They're probably each other's biggest fan and biggest support system."

His commitment to Coleman and Oklahoma, in Fields' eyes, is another element of his growing character.

"I could rave about Billy all day," Fields said. "Nowadays, guys care a little bit more about followers and money. Billy, he could have left for the NFL but I think he's very, very intentional about doing things."

"Sure, he's great at football, but who he is as a man is the most impressive thing. The way he carries himself, he respects everybody and works hard."

Bowman Jr. is one of the five remaining players from OU's 2021 recruiting class, which had 16 overall commits.

A lot has changed for Bowman Jr., but he hasn't. He's the same player, just with revised expectations.

"What they say is right. ... Once you come into college, the same people are not going to be there when you leave," Bowman Jr. said at the Alamo Bowl. "Being here shows the loyalty we have for this school, for this program, for these teammates and coaches. But going into my senior year, obviously I want to finish out on the right note."

His development has served as an example, and more success is on the horizon in 2024. But as Bowman Jr. takes Owen Field next season in the conference that just means more, he will stand as a reminder of how far someone can go, if they stay in the same place.

"He has the understanding of, 'OK if I want to be a first rounder this is what I need to be doing as a freshman,' and he was doing that years ago," Fields said. "That's the scary part. Because a lot of guys, they can't be intentional, deliberate and diligent on something for a long span of time."

That's why he stands out the most because I think he just has the ability to see beyond tomorrow. He's always working. He's present at the moment. He's imagining something he wants to be, putting in the work and paying the lease for it every single day."

That is not Bowman Jr.'s focus, though. Each day is a new one, with different challenges and expectations.

Like his father always tells him, he's keeping his feet where they are.

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separating alcohol fact from fiction

1 drink = 12 oz. beer, 4-5 oz. wine, or 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 is moving into a new era with the SEC and the Sooners are set to dominate. 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, so 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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DILLON BALLARD/OU ATHLETICS

TCU transfer defensive lineman Damonic Williams.

‘WE JUST HATED EACH OTHER’

Transfers Williams, Hickman set aside rivalry to find common ground at OU

BY GRACIE RAWLINGS • GRACIE.M.RAWLINGS-1@OU.EDU

There is a fine line between love and hate.

Damonic Williams and Branson Hickman have proved that over the past three months.

“We just hated each other,” Williams said, glancing at Hickman across from him after OU football practice.

Over the past two years, Williams, who played on the defensive line for TCU during the 2022 and 2023 seasons, and Hickman, who played center at SMU from 2020-23, would make the annual 40-mile trip to play at one of their respective home stadiums. There, it was evident that in the ways that Oklahoma has Texas, TCU and SMU have each other, and the

century-old feud stood prevalent in both players’ lives.

The linemen had grown accustomed to being in close proximity, but the cross-city road trip was fueled by the passions of a position battle and the ramifications of rivalry.

Now, almost everything has changed.

Before getting picked up in the transfer portal, the two players faced each other once a year in Fort Worth or Dallas. Since arriving in Norman, they are constantly meeting in the middle.

“I am just glad we are on the same team now,” Williams said. “We are both here and getting to go against each other in

practice every single day.”

Despite Williams and Hickman deciding to leave TCU and SMU in the offseason, their individual decisions to come to Oklahoma reflect who they are, as people and players.

As Williams, who grew up in Torrance, California, and committed to TCU in high school, walked into Gaylord Family-Oklahoma Memorial Stadium on the day after Thanksgiving last year, he felt immediately drawn to the university.

Williams ignored the appeal, for the time being, and focused on his team’s last game of the regular season. Despite TCU’s year-long struggles and 69-45 loss to OU that day,

the 6-foot-2, 320-pound defensive tackle stayed focused on his role, reflecting on the team's previous trip to the College Football Playoff Championship.

But after deciding to transfer in April, the No. 10-ranked defensive lineman in the portal, according to 247Sports' composite ranking, reflected on his trip to Norman in the fall.

"I remember when I was at TCU and playing against OU, this just felt like the right place to come to," Williams said. "On my first official visit here, my mom was like, 'Either you're going, and I am going with you, or I am just going to go by myself.' So, that was already a deciding factor. What drew my mom here was the family-oriented environment, and for me, it was the same thing, but it was also what I could do in this defense."

TCU ended the year 5-7, tying its lowest record since finishing 4-8 in 2013, but Williams was coming off his best collegiate season yet. After tallying 33 tackles, five tackles for a loss and three sacks, he earned All-Big 12 Honorable Mention and honorable mention Big 12 Defensive Lineman of the Year honors.

"I am just glad we're on the same team now. We are both here and getting to go against each other in practice every single day."

DAMONIC WILLIAMS,
OU DEFENSIVE LINEMAN

During his two seasons with the Horned Frogs, he had 60 total tackles, 9.5 tackles for a loss, 4.5 sacks and one forced fumble. He also received True Freshman All-American honors in 2022.

Now, Williams joins an OU defense ranked No. 31 in rushing, just behind Texas and Iowa State in the Big 12, but one that struggled in pass defense, ranking 109 nationally by allowing opponents to throw an

average of 250.8 yards per game.

However, Oklahoma head coach Brent Venables has already seen the impact that the new defensive addition can have on the line heading into a new season in the SEC.

"He likes to work, and likes to compete," Venables said. "Dom's done really nice, he's fit in well. I think the number one reason he's fit in well is because he's had humility and respect for the work and respect for the guys around him. He's come here in great shape, and he's worked really hard all summer. He's not on a ventilator trying to learn what we want him to do, both scheme-wise and fundamentally."

Williams' feelings toward Venables are mutual, and although he knew the difficulties of starting over and having to build relationships with his teammates and coaches from scratch, he is excited to do it in the place that beckoned him just nine months prior.

"It has been amazing," Williams said about working with Venables. "Out of all the head coaches I've met, he is most definitely the best one. He is just such a hands-on coach, and not a CEO-minded head coach where they are just watching practice. He is in practice, he is chewing people out for doing the wrong thing."

"There is just something I love about this place."

There is something Hickman loves about it too, and his admiration for the university and the program was sparked in the same place — Oklahoma's stadium.

As he walked through the tunnel before the kickoff of the



BRENDALL VARGAS/OU ATHLETICS

SMU transfer offensive lineman Branson Hickman.

second game of the 2023 season, he looked up, seeing the waves of crimson, and there it hit him.

"Wow, this is big time, this is real college football right here," Hickman said when reflecting on the moment.

The decision to transfer was not easy. After spending four years at SMU, a school just 25 minutes from his hometown in McKinney, Texas, entering the portal meant leaving the relationships built and the time spent there behind.

But the opportunity to work with OU's offensive line coach Bill Bedenbaugh and the idea of building back up a group that added five transfers in the offseason was compelling enough for the center.

"Coach Bedenbaugh is one of the main reasons why I came here," Hickman said. "He has a proven track record. He puts guys in the NFL and has guys succeed in college, so it is like why would you not come play for Coach B."

Hickman, who is 6-foot-2 and 301 pounds, was ranked 12th on 247Sports' interior offensive lineman transfer list. Since 2022, he has had 1,079 pass-block snaps, an 81.7 run-block grade and allowed just one sack and two quarterback hits.

Not only is the center one of the most talented players at that position in all of college football, but he is also a veteran who offers experience, knowledge and leadership to the offensive line.

"Branson, again, he's been a leader for a long time," Venables said. "He's going to bring a wealth of ability and fundamentals and technique, and he's an incredibly bright guy. He's already graduated, but the level of intelligence that he'll bring to the table has helped him with the transition."

Although Hickman could not imagine that he would be playing in the stadium that left him in awe a year ago, he has used this opportunity to challenge himself and others around him.

"It is not easy," Hickman said of the challenge of integrating so many new faces on OU's offensive line. "But nobody said it was going to be easy, and it helps going through summer together. We were put in a great position to work really hard and get together. ... The biggest thing is being around each other outside of the facility and building those bonds."

For Hickman, forming relationships extends beyond the offensive line and even to his former rival, Damonic Williams.

After transferring, both have made time to reconnect with the rivalry now behind them, and each has hopes to improve their respective offensive and defensive lines ahead of their first seasons with Oklahoma.

"Me and Dom didn't like each other much back in the day," Hickman said with a smile on his face. "But we built a pretty good relationship over the summer, and it is good to go against a familiar face every day who is also a really good player."

Now, as the two face off across the line of scrimmage, their desire to compete and win is the same as it was a season ago. However, they are no longer working toward an individual goal, and instead, have found a common one.

Proving everyone wrong.

"All of those doubts about our O-line, y'all can just stop that," Williams said. "I am telling you, this defense and this offense are going to be something surprising."



BOB NGUYEN/OU DAILY

Then-freshman defensive lineman Adepoju Adebawore sacks the quarterback during the game against Tulsa on Sept. 16.

‘HAVE YOU SEEN THAT GUY?’

Adepoju Adebawore sizes up to match SEC offensive linemen

BY GRACIE RAWLINGS • GRACIE.M.RAWLINGS-1@OU.EDU

The August sun beamed down on Adepoju “PJ” Adebawore’s 6-foot-4 frame as he stood on Oklahoma’s rugby field, a place that had become both a proving ground and a sanctuary for the sophomore defensive end.

Here, everything felt different.

Adebawore had faced the brutal training of OU’s fall camp once before and was seasoned by a year of college football. He looked noticeably different too, his frame bulkier and more pronounced in the sea of the Sooners’ 120-man roster.

Standing in the same place where he had struggled just a year ago, he now carried himself differently. He had mentally and physically outgrown the freshman version of himself.

The Big 12 version of Adepoju Adebawore.

“It is night and day,” Adebawore said when talking about how much has changed since last year. “There is just a better understanding. There is less thinking.”

In the absence of the thoughts that once consumed his transition to Oklahoma, Adebawore has had more time to eat and put on weight.

Last season, the defensive end weighed in at 240 pounds. As he headed into a conference with offensive linemen whose average weight is 314 pounds, Adebawore knew he had to change his physique.

“I was eating to put more weight on, so I could hang around

more with the bigger guys,” Adebawore said. “It was about eating, lifting, taking it serious, having no off days and being committed to my goal.”

The relentless cycle of eating to gain, while consistently pushing his body to the limit as a student-athlete, began to take its toll. With each pound gained, Adebawore found himself increasingly repulsed by the thought of a dinner table — a once enjoyable act now reduced to a necessary evil.

Now, looking back, only the occasional post-practice burger sounded appetizing to Adebawore, with everything else only representing what was necessary.

“When you eat so much, there is really nothing good



JENNA BURRESS/OU DAILY

Then-freshman defensive lineman Adepou Adebawore and then-sophomore linebacker Jaren Kanak during the game against SMU on Sept. 9.

anymore,” Adebawore said. “Honestly, it was annoying. It was a grind. I didn’t like nothing. ... I could eat anything for the most part, I just had to do it, stuff myself.”

After several months of working with OU’s nutrition staff to gain weight, Oklahoma head coach Brent Venables got Adebawore on a scale. Then, he reached for his phone, looking to get a picture to send to defensive ends coach Miguel Chavis.

There Adebawore stood, as the scale read 260.

As the defensive end entered fall camp weighing 20 more pounds than he had a year ago, he had achieved the first of many goals. With the added weight, he could now shift his focus to refining other aspects of his game, fully aware that his sophomore season — and Oklahoma’s debut in the SEC — would bring a slew of new challenges.

Coming off a solid freshman year where he played in all 13 games for OU and had six tackles, three tackles for loss and 1.5 sacks, Adebawore has been mentally preparing for the grueling 12-game regular season slate that awaits — something sophomore safety Peyton Bowen has seen make a noticeable

difference in his teammate’s game.

“I think PJ is going to be a really excellent player,” Bowen said. “He has got the physique, he gained some weight and put on some pounds, and he’s an animal. I can see that he is getting that mental side as well, and I think he is in for a breakout year.”

The five-star prospect coming out of high school has had to adjust to the college game, learning how to live up to the new physical standards that have been set for him and the expectations that he has established for himself.

Just like Bowen, senior Danny Stutsman, who watched Adebawore all last season while playing behind him at linebacker, is excited for what’s next.

“Have you seen that guy?” Stutsman asked. “It’s hard not to be amazed by him. You see some of these pass-rush moves that he does throughout practice, you watch the film and you can’t teach that. The way he moves, how fluid he is with his motions, it’s amazing.”

Adebawore has fully leaned into the offseason the same way he has been invested in new defensive coordinator Zac Alley’s

system since he was hired in January.

In the spring, the defensive end had just 15 practices to absorb everything Alley was trying to teach. Now, with the beginning of fall camp underway, Adebawore has embraced every opportunity to learn and improve before the start of the season.

“I think he is a great communicator and is really good at explaining,” Adebawore described Alley. “I also think he is really good at setting guys up for success.”

Oklahoma’s conference and Adebawore’s physique have changed, but the expectations — both personal and collective — have stayed the same.

As the sun dipped below the horizon at the rugby field, it was clear that this was not just another fall camp but the beginning of something much bigger for both Adebawore and the Sooners.

“The pressure is there, but we’re all for it,” Adebawore said.

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