The answer came without hesitation. It was emphatic and quickly put to rest any lingering doubts. In fact, Marita Hynes responded with such certitude it was as if she already had sorted through each of her 26 years as a coach and athletics administrator at the University of Oklahoma.

Was 2001-02 the best year in OU athletics’ illustrious history?

“Yes. I honestly believe it was,” says Hynes, associate athletics director and senior women’s administrator.

“This was a wonderful year for our athletics department as a whole. The level of success we experienced in almost every sport is such a great accomplishment. I can’t speak for what happened 40 or 50 years ago, but obviously back then they weren’t competing in as many sports, and they didn’t have women’s athletics.”

After finishing 18th in last year’s race for the Sears Directors’ Cup, presented annually to the best overall collegiate athletic program in the country, Oklahoma hovered near the top 10 for much of the 2001-02 campaign. Final Four appearances by the men’s and women’s basketball teams bolstered the overall efforts, and when the men’s gymnastics team captured the national title in early April, the Sooners moved to No. 10 in the standings.

Although that momentum slowed later in the spring and OU wound up 17th, the effort still represents the school’s best finish in the prestigious Sears Cup race.

“We scored a lot of points, but the final-season flurry of some other schools allowed them to pass us,” says Joe Castiglione, OU director of athletics. “But when you consider the across-the-board success of our athletics program, whether it involves Sears Cup points or not, seven

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of our 20 sports finished in the top 10, and 10 finished in the top 20. Those numbers, by any account, are impressive.”

What those numbers reflect is a commitment that encompasses every person and every facet of OU’s Athletics Department, right down to the smallest detail.

“The whole foundation we’re building for our athletics program is very solid. It’s not like we’re just putting them up on temporary stilts and waiting for them to topple over. We’re putting those bricks in place very carefully, and it’s going to be a solid base. And once you get that, it’s hard to break it down. It just continues to build and grow,” offers Hynes.

“First thing, you hire good coaches. Provide them with the resources they need to be successful, which is to bring in good student athletes. Then look at what we’re doing with facilities. Our leadership, with Joe, President (David) Boren and the Regents, is outstanding. It’s the total package. Add all of those components together, and you can’t help but be successful.”

A bold $100 million capital drive, called “Great Expectations: The Campaign for Sooner Sports,” designed to provide OU with the best athletic facilities available, is the mortar holding those foundation bricks in place. The campaign includes a $79 million renovation of Oklahoma Memorial Stadium, a $17.8 million expansion of its basketball facilities and extensive work on 11 other projects.

“We want to be leaders. It’s important for us to realize we may only have this one opportunity to do it right, to build our facilities in a state-of-the-art fashion,” insists Castiglione. “We recognize our needs, and we have set out to not only meet those needs, but also to exceed those needs. The reality is those needs will change down the road, and we will have already addressed some of those possibilities.”

Two seasons after moving into its new $1.4 million stadium complex, the Sooner softball team captured the 2000 national title. And barely six months later, Bob Stoops did the unthinkable in just his second season as head football coach when he led OU to a perfect 13-0 season and a national title.

The two championship runs set the tone for what became a collective history-making effort this past year.

“When you see other sports at your school like softball and football winning national championships, I think it serves to inspire and motivate all of the athletes representing the Sooners. That was pretty evident in so many of the individual and team performances this year,” says Mark Williams, OU men’s gymnastics coach.

Port Robertson, who served stints as OU wrestling coach and Athletics Department academic advisor for parts of four decades, provided a more historical perspective.

“No doubt about it, the entire Athle-
The University of Oklahoma men’s gymnastics program historically has been a source of pride for the school’s Athletics Department, now more than ever after capturing its fourth NCAA national championship crown this past April.

A year after being edged out by Ohio State on the Buckeyes’ home turf, the Sooners reversed their fortunes against the defending champs by producing a title-clinching performance within the friendly confines of Lloyd Noble Center. In doing so, Coach Mark Williams’ top-ranked squad provided the exclamation point to a memorable year of outstanding athletic achievement at OU.

“We were more prepared this time,” says Williams, at the conclusion of his third season at the helm. “Having the home-court advantage and knowing how close we were to winning last year, I think this team wouldn’t allow its quest to be national champions slip away.

“When we needed them to step up the most—the last three events—I saw a mental toughness in this group I didn’t see last year. They had to dig down to come up with something special, and that’s what they did.”

All-American performances from Daniel Furney, Quinn Rowell and Everett Bierker helped propel Oklahoma to victory, as they were near-perfect on the decisive high bar rotation. In all, 11 Sooners contributed points to the national title effort, and six individuals earned a total of nine All-American honors.

The men’s gymnastics team steps up to reclaim the NCAA national title.

By Jay C. Upchurch